Hermione Granger and the Past Picture Imperfect
by Numina

Summary

Complete work, marked to make graphic chapters skippable. Chapters with graphic sex will be marked at the beginning, and have notes at the end containing any pertinent plot information that would be missed by skipping it.

It is 2019 and Hermione is returning to Hogwarts as a widow, ostensibly to teach, mostly to try and escape her bafflingly persistent life. What she finds will help her want to go on living, while throwing into question whether she or those dearest to her will survive.

Notes

I own none of the characters or settings of the Harry Potter Universe. I'm making an effort to keep to canon, but there are probably a few serious clangers due to ignorance. In places where I know the books and movies diverge, I generally choose the books.

See the end of the work for more notes


Homecoming

Chapter Notes

I wrote this in response to becoming a widow, finding comfort (or lack thereof) in fantasy and memory, and trying to figure out what it means and what matters when your life story falls apart halfway through. The result is understandably tedious, maudlin, probably preachy, and in general a terrible abuse of a fun, lovely, sexy medium. I don’t mean to set this up as an authoritative explanation or example for anyone else, and this is not meant to be therapy for anyone but me. There are long stretches of melancholy with no comfort. If you’re into that, Hi! I’m Numina and this is my mess.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Home again home again Hermione thought as the boat rounded the bend and Hogwarts loomed into sight. It was a bluntly antagonistic thought, like many she’d lately struck against the hard surface of her composure, just to see if it made a dent, performing quality assurance on her functional facade. Because, of course, home was still the little cottage in Devon. Still. Even if work at the ministry had kept her away more nights than most. Still. Even if she’d gotten it shuttered the previous afternoon while Rose and Hugo were with their Potter cousins for one last massive sleepover before start of term. Even if she’d left all the cats and keys and relevant papers up the hill at The Burrow with Mother Weasley. Even if they’d only moved in there when Ron’s father had taken ill, somehow forgetting to move away again after he’d recovered, and had lived there less time than they’d lived at Hogwarts as children.

Still. Even if Ron’s heavy absence there hadn’t lessened in a year, growing heavier with each passing holiday and milestone. Even if she wasn’t so much abandoning her life as abdicating it after a long and wearying siege.

Surely, at the sight of the wrong building, her officious truthfulness should jump in to insist that actually the cottage was home. Some part of her heart should break to think that it wasn’t. She tried the thought again. Homecoming. It made no impact. She tried it again, home again, this is your home now, your old life is gone, willing any landmines of homesickness to pop off immediately or forever hold their peace. She’d had quite enough of letting the crying fits sneak up on her. They were completely normal and appropriate, of course, and (according to everything she’d read) impossible to really manage, but they were still messy and painful and frustrating and entirely not the sort of thing she’d ever let have its way without a fight. She didn’t like bullies. But her big brain just stared silently back at her as familiar and distant and implacably unknowable as the great castle upon its hill...which was as good a home as anywhere else, apparently.

Well alright then. That’s that.

She leaned against the iron rail and tried to catch the scent of the forbidden forest for no reason but to summarily dismiss her ruminations. She ought to at least try to enjoy herself, she knew. The boat ride was as close as she liked to come to a splurge, though all in all it was a sensible splurge and not exactly a treat. She was bringing so many books and furnishings to set up her office and quarters that it would have been comparably expensive to have union elves apparate it all, and the barge goblins were happy to include her cargo in the price of her passage. She sighed and had a go at appreciating the late August flowers that flanked the lazy river. They were very pretty, she decided, or rather,
knew she ought to decide. Her knowledge of flowers was that they were pretty, in some quality or
dimension that hadn’t always been invisible to her. She leaned on such recollections fairly constantly.

The expense was doubly worth it to avoid the train, though she admitted it only to herself. She
wasn’t ready to brave the fond memories (or her children’s sense of independence) by taking the
Hogwarts Express with them. Not yet. One thing at a time. It wasn’t really cowardice, she reasoned.
Since she had never in her life been a coward, her new emotional allowances were just a brave
exploration in the uncharted territory of cowardly behaviors. She touched the locket around her neck
automatically and thought fondly of Ron, who would have appreciated those spurious mental
gymnastics like no one else, would have loved how his death had managed to be such a bad
influence on her. She smiled. It stung. She decided to take a turn around the deck.

It was mostly a delivery barge, ponderously and soothingly slow when it was running above-water,
with the ability to submerge and zip along improbably like the knight bus, picking up items and
passengers bound for Hogwarts in all sorts of far-flung places in a matter of days. It was owned and
operated by a few Gringotts goblins who had specialized in property-protecting and capacity-
manipulating magics. They’d gone into business for themselves after Minister Shacklebolt (and
Hermione, as his successor) had reformed much of the wizarding world’s regulations on their kind.
Despite the impossible capaciousness of the hold, there were very few passenger cabins and
amenities aboard “The Golden Galleon”. Most of the trip had been made overnight to avoid straining
the ironically named barge’s limited charms. But the view was nice enough.

There were three other passengers with whom she had taken breakfast below that morning. The first
was a younger, taller, talkative witch named Beasley Bolger who was also beginning her first year of
teaching. Hermione had braced a bit at first to learn that Beasley’s specialty was Divination, but
quickly found out that they shared a distaste for the dubious nonsense of certain seers that had driven
Hermione away from study in her third year. Miss Bolger was an avid student of the astrological
methods taught by Professor Firenze before her, and had written a dissertation on combining
astrology and arithmancy. Apparently Firenze had endorsed Miss Bolger for the job. Hermione liked
her, though somewhat passively. Professor Bolger’s highly technical field was her only real
conversational topic once they’d exhausted commiserations about the trials of curly hair, and it fell
largely out of Hermione’s areas of academic expertise or early morning patience. Still, it seemed
auspicious to meet another new teacher that she felt confident she could get on with as equals, even
with professor Bolger being quite a bit younger and lacking in life experience.

The other two passengers were a student and his older brother, Dorian and Anglen Krowse. Dorian,
a second year Slytherin, had a nervous disposition which, Anglen explained, had made their parents
fear that he would be a poor fit at Durmstrang, but which also might have made it difficult for him to
live too far from home by himself. Their mother, Kallida Krowse was a gifted transfigurationist and a
long-time acquaintance of Minerva McGonagall, had arranged to send one son to Hogwarts as a new
student and another in some capacity as a chaperone, and Anglen had been given an interview that
ultimately placed him as an assistant to Ms. Pince, the librarian, who had begun to need a sturdy and
diligent helper as the years drew on.

Hermione didn’t get much of a sense of Dorian; a slouchy round-faced boy in that awkward phase of
adolescence where his arms didn’t fit his body, and who kept to himself except to occasionally pluck
his brother’s sleeve and murmur something to him privately. But Anglen was an affable young man;
stocky, soft-spoken, and fairly good looking in a heavy-browed way that reminded her of her dear
old fling, Viktor Krum, though this didn’t exactly endear him to her. Krum was the kind of pleasant
memory that lately made her feel enormously old and impossibly tired at the tender age of thirty-nine.
The long-term haul of widowhood was just like that, apparently. Pleasant memories tended to land
with a leaden thump and lie unmoving like a sodden stack of muggle photos, making no impact on
her carefully composed getting-on-with of things, but feeling like a burden all the same. She felt an
abstract hope for the young man’s success and tried to be pleasant, but couldn’t work up much else to be engaging over weak coffee and toast.

Not for the first time, she doubted if she’d made a wise choice deciding to accept a teaching position, and as Potion Master of all things. It had been so kind...no, empathetic really, and savvy...of Minerva to offer it to her the week after Ron’s funeral. It certainly had helped her save face in her decision to step down as Minister of Magic after such a brief and wildly successful (if not uniformly popular) tenure. *To be there for my children* was a far more plausible excuse if she’d actually be staying within a hundred miles of her children, after all, and it had kept her from needing to admit, publicly, just how destroyed and absent she was inside, under the thick bunker of bravery and motherly devotion. She hadn’t had to let anyone see her admit defeat. It had been a brilliant tactic, but perhaps a poor strategy. How could it possibly be fair to the children of the wizarding world to foist a miserable shell like her on them and expect them to learn anything? Potions had never been her strongest subject in any case, and even with several blissfully distracted months of furious study to get up to speed, she felt woefully unprepared. But that die had been cast, and with the traversing of a river, even.

When they reached a bend that came nearest the castle, the boat captain worked a complicated displacement charm that hopped them into the massive Black Lake with hardly a splash, and they arrived at the same dock that the first-year boats would be using again in two days time. It looked so much different in daylight than she remembered, cheerfully weedy and quaint. They were greeted by a squad of elves in smart red uniforms and tidy gold-trimmed caps reflecting the house affiliation of the current headmaster. Most of them set to work right away once the goblins had opened the heavily enchanted hold, popping in and out to take the stores of supplies for the year to the kitchens and classrooms of the castle. Another two kindly-looking elves bowed to the Krowse brothers and helped them with their trunks, chatting like solicitous friends as they lead them into the castle to get settled. Hermione noted with warmth that they called both boys “Mr. Krowse” as casually as any other adult at the school might, rather than the more fawning “Mr. Krowse sir” at the end of every utterance as they would have felt obliged to do when Hermione had been a student.

The new professors’ bags were last to come off, and the by-far-eldest of the attending elves, sporting a neckerchief and wearing a wheel-shaped pin on her uniform cap, stepped forward to greet and escort them. She was rather tall for an elf, and stood very straight.

“Greetings, Professor Bolger, Professor Weasley. I am chief porter Happy. The headmaster’s regrets that she cannot greet you herself. There was an urgent matter that needed attending, but she should be back shortly. I’ll be happy,” the elf chuckled very slightly as she said it, “to help you get settled in, and to communicate to the cook staff whether you would like lunch at the main table or in your quarters.”

“Thank you so much, Happy.” Hermione offered her hand, which the chief porter accepted without a wince, “I think unless Professor Bolger has a strong preference for company, I’d rather eat lunch while I unpack, and then maybe have dinner in the great hall?” she directed this mostly as a question to Beasley, who nodded assent and answered in a ramble pocked with pauses.

“I’m told I’m to be quartered in the old tower...and....I would like so much to change out of my travelling clothes before I eat...but...I’d be loathe to climb those stairs twice before I’ve gotten my bed and chair and nightstand and books and telescope set up the way I like them...so...I think Professor Weasley has the right idea.”

“Excellent!” Happy said it with such earnestness that Hermione envied her, “Professor Bolger, this is Passik, he’ll bring your bags along and help to direct your belongings. Professor Weasley, would you come with me?”
“It’ll be Granger, actually” Hermione tried to sound casual, unreeling the decision she’d replayed a dozen times in her head, “My legal name is Granger-Weasley, but I’ve always used Granger when publishing, and I think it will embarrass my children less if I’m not constantly reminding people that their mother is a teacher at their school.”

Happy took the news in stride, “My mistake, I beg your pardon, Professor Granger. Thank you for telling me, I’ll make sure the rest of the staff are informed.”

Hermione noted with relief that the elf hadn’t shown even a flicker of an inclination to degrade and torture herself for a small bit of mix-up, “That’s kind of you, I do appreciate it. Shall we to the dungeon then?”

Happy blinked, “The headmistress said you could have your choice of quarters. You needn’t stay near the classroom unless you wish it. Professor Slughorn didn’t. Those rooms haven’t been used in quite some time,” she beamed, ”though the staff does keep them just as tidy as the rest of the castle.”

“I...I see.” Hermione did her best to reconsider the options, though she was hungry and travel-weary and really not at her cognitive best. But she thought of trying to live in any of the cozy, airy, winsomely detailed quarters that the castle contained, of arranging her life as a widow in those heedlessly companionable and charismatic spaces, and felt more certain in her initial choice, “I think I prefer it, all the same. It’s what I’ve been planning on, it’s where I think of the Potions Master living....help me get my head into the role. And it just...suits me right now.” Right down to the ground she thought.

The elderly elf nodded cheerfully and lead the way.

Chapter End Notes

I will try very hard to put notes at the beginnings of chapters that contain elements that might be triggery that are not clearly warned about elsewhere. If you have a specific trigger that you would like me to tag for, *please do* leave me a comment. I will not make public any personal-trigger requests.

And thank you again.
To get to the dungeon from the dock, they had to go up one level and then down two, and she assented to going the long way around while Happy updated her about where things were and how to get anything she might need. The halls of Hogwarts were deserted except for the occasional cleaning-squad elf trotting about in short sleeves and aprons. Even so, every room and corridor swam with memories, none of which, thankfully, made any attempt to drag her under. The voices and images that clung to every stone let her glide along untouched, like the stranger in the crowd, the widow after the wake.

When they finally got to the dungeon door, Happy pressed it open with an ease that belied her spare frame and crinkly skin. It slid back as silently as a curtain. The hinges didn’t creak ominously, and there was no rush of sepulchral air as Hermione had been anticipating unawares, as if believing that the room had gone unopened since her old potions teacher had abandoned it, or perhaps inhabited it, in death.

The room was still, but far from stagnant. On the contrary, something about the heavy wood and stone, all buffed to a dull sheen by much time and many cleanings, seemed to actively absorb all sound, and perhaps all dust and dank and contagion as well, leaving a space that was cool and still and neutral. It was just as she remembered it, though perhaps lacking some of the adolescent dread, and it eased her aching heart and it’s jumpy fear of being touched, soothing like a cold compress of clean, solid silence. The enchanted window in the far wall was dark and showed only stone. Even the gargoyle basin beside it was silent and dry and seemed to wait, agape.

She recognized that watchful feeling, remembered it, the ineffable vigilance of a blank canvas, a still pond, or a wary snake. It had been there decades ago, her very first potions class: that solemn active listening. At the time it had been masked in the vulture-like gaze of their acerbic teacher, whose patience was ever that of a circling raptor and whose demand for obedience and excellence was absolute. Maybe there was some charm on the room and always had been, some enchanted rarefaction meant to keep alchemical reactions from picking up extraneous energies. Or maybe its walls had simply absorbed his will to make students attend and respect discipline, becoming psychic resonators of his bitter war against chaos and ignorance.

Whatever it was it lingered like an odor in the bare and odorless classroom, unstoppering vivid memories as surely as any other scent of home might: the many times she and Harry and Ron had talked there, and the times that they had childishly refused to talk; Malfoy’s sneering, Nevil’s floundering, and Professor Snape’s spare stentorian pronouncements with the occasional flourish of poetic, pointed cruelty. It stirred the old familiar nausea and blaze of defiance up her spine at the memory of one particularly piercing analysis, echoing for days and years, “insufferable know-it-all”. She recalled the acuity of her old yearning to be in the future, beyond her problems, done with childhood, spurred on by the Professor who had made her feel like she would try and succeed only with extraordinary effort and at her peril. Completely new to the nostalgic mix was a perverse giddiness simmering like a suppressed sneeze...the marvelous awareness that the old dread and passion and loathing were real, live, spontaneous feelings, feelings that weren’t like the numbing grief or alienation or abstraction that had so hollowly hounded her. Her revived anamneses rushed to fill the disused capillaries of her sense of self. She was from someplace, and it tingled so much it almost hurt.

She tried to suppress a manic gasp, and it came out as something like a hiccup.

Happy looked just a trifle startled, then nodded in a matronly way, “I shall go tell the kitchen staff to
bring you your lunch immediately, Professor. Your packages should already be in your quarters, through there,” she pointed at the door at the far left corner of the room, “here’s your key. I’ll be back before dinner to see if you need anything moved about or any other arrangements. If you need me before then just say my name, or say ‘I need a porter’ any time to summon some of my team,” she tapped the little gold wheel on her hat with her name carefully etched around the rim and smiled conspiratorially, “and we’ll be with you in an instant.”

“Thank-” Hermione began, but Happy had already apparated away with a sharp snap. She sighed, gathering her wits and reluctantly shaking off her reverie, hoping it wasn’t all a placebo of novelty. Or nostalgia. Or hunger. She stretched her aching back. It was getting on to afternoon and they’d had breakfast very early on the boat. “Lumos” she murmured, lighting her wand to cross the room. She ran a hand over the surface of her old spot as she passed it on her way to her new chamber door.

The lock ground loudly enough to echo, and the hinges cracked like the spine of a book before pivoting smoothly. Apparently they’d been regularly oiled by the elves but never used, and the door had been locked tight for quite a long time. She had never seen those rooms before. The door opened on a spacious and lofty stone chamber with a cold fireplace along the same wall and rows and rows of mostly-empty bookcases lining the sides. Several pieces of furniture stood covered in sheets, and those she could guess at were likely an armchair, a chaise, and a writing desk. The luggage and packages containing her own belongings were indeed piled neatly in front of her, shoulder-high and with the footprint of a dinner table. Beneath these, in the middle of the floor, was a wine-red area rug, worn to the texture of silk. On the wall opposite was a wide archway that lead into a square antechamber that held single doors on each wall.

Curious as she was to see the rest of it, she felt barred against stepping more fully in. This room felt more vacant and less vigilant than the classroom behind her, but it still had a distinct air of being owned, and not by her. She braced herself and took a step forward anyway. The ghost of Severus Snape could just learn to cope with having a boarder. Intrusions were the stuff of life, and she meant to be getting on with it.

She stepped gingerly around her things and crossed to the archway. The door directly beyond lead to a somewhat peculiar bathroom. A gargoyle-shaped shower-head sat halfway up the right wall, perched over a stepped semi-circular stone tub that was sunken into the floor a good four feet and which was large enough for several people. It didn’t really resemble a bathtub at all, and had probably been something else when the castle had been built. The left wall had a porcelain sink and towel rack, but no mirror, and the wall across the way opened into a small water closet that was plainly a retrofit.

The rooms to the right and left of the bathroom were identical to each other in size, each about half the size of the main room if one deducted the width of the bathroom. The only thing that designated the one to the left as the bedroom was the presence of a queen-sized bedframe of scrolled ironwork. It stood against a tapestried portion of wall across from a looming armoire of dark polished wood. The tapestry behind the bed was drab with age and medieval in its technique, but seemed to depict a standing wizard doing...something. Their hands were raised, and there was some other shape beside them, and the border looked to be hashed with runes, though none of it was anything Hermione could make out on cursory inspection in a dimly lit room. The other room was completely bare except for a small pot bellied stove that had been disconnected from its chimney, and a few more empty bookshelves. She hadn’t had time to really consider what she’d do with that room before she heard a loud crack of apparition from beyond her front door.

Returning to the classroom she found a bright-eyed elf with a smart red apron across his front and a clean white chef’s toque perched on his giant ears, laying out a tray on the large desk at the front of
the room: a bowl of soup, a large thermos, and a plate of small, richly stuffed sandwiches piled high enough for three people.

“Oh, that’s lovely, thank you so much.”

The elf bowed appreciatively, “You’re quite welcome, Professor. My name’s Wooly, and if you ever need a kitchen elf…”

“I’ll call. And if you ever need anything, I am in your debt. You’ve just saved my life.”

The elf’s face turned from taupe to coral and he twiddled his fingers nervously, abashed but not displeased, “Well then, um, yes. I’ll be back to clear up later.” and he vanished with a crack.

She brought her desk supplies over to sort through while she ate. The wooden armchair was broad, heavy and hard, and she made a mental note to find a cushion for it. She popped a sandwich into her mouth and pondered the room from that angle, desks and chairs arrayed at attention. The novelty was pleasant. She sat back and tried to fix the empty seats with a glare like the one her teacher had used, certain she couldn’t even come close. He’d been teaching almost twenty years by the time he was her age, and she fancied his misanthropy had been like a rare port by then, aging in the cellar as it had. Hers was grape juice by comparison, but showed a lot of promise.

She tasted the thermos. It seemed to be tea, but it was so sweet and milky that it might as well have been cocoa. After a few more sandwiches and some of the creamy, peppery soup, she began to feel drowsy, and remembered that the bed had no mattress or linens. She thought of calling for a porter, but Happy had said she’d be back soon, and they were all probably quite busy. She wondered if she should move the bed to a different spot, to make it more her own, and began planning for the bits of furniture she knew she’d brought, mentally shifting them about in her suite of rooms like sheep jumping a fence. She was only briefly aware that her mind was drifting before she nodded off completely.
Dreams of Living

Thanks for the comments. I appreciate the feedback.

She dreamed of a pool, dark and greenish and freezing cold. It had stone steps down, just like the strange tub in his bathroom, but it extended into the distance and downwards endlessly.

She stepped in.

Her foot went instantly numb and the hem of her robe caught fire. She watched, barely interested, as the flames licked painlessly up her thighs, her waist, up over her head until she was completely bare. She saw her naked body in the icy green mirror about her ankles and felt no reaction. She could see the scars of war, the marks of birthing, the familiar constellations of moles and freckles, the pouches and bunches of encroaching middle-age, and it meant nothing, told no story, just a gibberish of flesh, a ruin carved with forgotten language.

She moved in another step and froze to her mid-shin. The fine hair of her legs caught fire and burned upwards with the same roaring gust of tepid flame, until all her hair and scars of living were gone. She regarded her reflection with the same indifference, noting clinically how strangely huge and dark her eyes looked in her naked head.

She took another step, embracing numbness up to her mid-thighs, and her skin blazed away like so much blank newsprint, converted to fluttering soot. Her reflection became gorey and hard to make out as blood and bits of viscera dribbled into the water, the red looking black against the green. This is supposed to be a nightmare, she realized with detachment. She was supposed to run away, jerk awake, thank her stars that it hadn’t been real. That seemed like a lot of bother over a little blood and fire.

She took another step, and the water touched her gristly unmade pelvis, and in a flash all the rest of the substance of her was gone, utterly. But she could still feel the numbness in her legs and her hollow and aching heart, still see the empty water and hear her own bland thoughts rattling about in her own bland head, though the mirroring water showed nothing to hold them. Then the fear began to creep in. Why did she still exist? Shouldn’t she be dead?

She trembled and begin to cry, the beginning of yet another helpless weeping jag that solved nothing. Tears fell from nowhere and shivered the blank water. What would happen if she plunged in? Did it even matter? Did it count since some part of her knew it was just a dream? Was she too damn stubborn and sensible and stupid to die of it?

Despairing, she let her legs collapse. The numbness rushed up her sides and swallowed her. And then she was under the water, deep in the green, thirteen years old and tethered to the bottom of the lake as bait for someone brave who probably wasn’t coming. Shapes of merpeople flitted about in the middle dimness, in pulsing amniotic silence, menacing and hungry. She looked around her and saw Ron, still as a corpse except for his red hair billowing in the green water, his eyes and lungs closed by the stasis spell keeping him safe. And she realized that she’d broken her stasis, she wasn’t asleep the way she ought to be, and she was drowning awake forever, and Victor wasn’t coming to save her, and Ron would never wake, the fish would be at him soon, and just as she started to panic,
just as her heart started to pump water relentlessly into her lungs, two slender limbs wrapped around her from behind, dark and slimy and ribbed like a leech, a hard and mercilessly numbing jaw clamping down upon one side of her neck.

She woke in the chair, her neck screaming at her for letting her head loll unsupported for Merlin-only-knew how long. The thermos was still in her hand but the dishes had been cleared away. Had Happy come and gone as well? What time was it? She stretched and felt cramps and sore spots blossom along her numb legs and back and buttocks. She flicked her wand at the faceted glass pane hung on the bare stone wall.

“Zenith Miria!”

The room was laved in the soft pink light of sundown as the dungeon window showed her the western horizon outside Hogwarts, just as the ceiling in the great hall was enchanted to show the sky.

Bollocks she thought. Then, remembering that her children were nowhere in earshot, said it aloud. Then, remembering that she was in the most intimidating classroom in the school, her classroom, and that she was a Gryffindor who feared nothing, goddammit, she said it again, much louder and with authority.

Pushing herself up from the chair, she shivered briskly, sleep having let the chill of the dungeon seep into her bones. Several more aches volunteered their existence. She stretched, remembering being thirteen, remembering being able to fall asleep on a pile of books and a library bench and wake up as fresh as an over-achieving daisy. She sighed, saying to the locket that rested under her robes “you’re lucky you don’t have to get any older, my prince”. And she set about seeing if she could at least get her desk arranged before dinner.

Brisk work snubbed the residual unease of the dream as it wheedled for her attention, shutting it down with the stone-faced officiousness that only aggressive desk-arranging could communicate to a petitioner. She couldn’t indulge every existential horror and memento mori that flung itself into her path. They were simply too numerous, too earnest, too intractable, too insatiable. Her feelings in the wake of Ron’s death were like the lake in her dream; bottomless, endless, and so absolute that they were functionally meaningless. They would remain so no matter how frequently or earnestly she tried to ford them or bail them or swallow them down...and she had tried. Their missives would remain obscure and hostile no matter how compassionately and perceptively she applied herself to addressing them, and she had, repeatedly. With all her enormous contempt for unfinished business and her considerable genius, she had tried. It was pointless. The only mental skill that came in useful was her well-honed ability to compartmentalize, to sort and hide thoughts and feelings for a more convenient time. That and her almost vengefully diffident nihilism regarding the greater meanings of life and death (particularly Ron’s and, by extension, her own) were her most necessary tools. Consequently, the possibility of suffering had long since ceased to bother her, despite it’s aggressive and pestilential campaigning.

It had happened, after a long spate of despair and suicidal longing, that the thing to finally lift her beyond the hourly seizures of furious grief was the dawning realization that either everything mattered or nothing did, and that there wasn’t enough practical difference between those two possibilities to bother agonizing over them. It was not the sort of gnostic nihilism she was eager to confide to anyone else, or that she expected anyone else to hear without looks of pity and concern, but it was enormously freeing. It meant she could stop the whirling pillory of her mind as it struggled obsessively to define the meaning of life in the face of death: Either it mattered that Ron had lived, and it went on mattering despite the fact that he’d died, or neither fact had ever mattered and never needed to. It allowed her to self-define and self-justify without reliance on the fickle and (to her grief-fogged mind) unreadable values of love and beauty and purpose that continued to swarm her in
masses as clamorous and unwelcome as the rage and grief and despair. It either didn’t matter or it
did, and it wasn’t about to change for her or anyone else in any case. Nothing to interrogate, nothing
to fix, nothing to find or do but just get on with things until she didn’t anymore, the clear paradox
making it forgivable that she hadn’t solved the entire conundrum of the mortal universe in a year.
Life was absurd in all its wonder or wonderful in its absurdity, and the difference was negligible on
the scale of human life and/or death. She would just do the best she could, which was turning out to
not be much.

It wasn’t a perfect form of coping. Things crept up and spilled out along the edges all the time. But it
was a more functional than agonizing limitlessly over the moral calculus of culpability or the
insoluble utility of faith in a cold and/or cruel universe. She’d always been something of a
disinterested agnostic before. Death hadn’t made her an aggressive atheist exactly, but it had certainly
crystallized her indifference to the question. There were no answers to find in digging into dreams
and nonsense. Certainly it was disturbing that she felt no alarm at the thought of her own death, no
fear in the face of symbolically obliterating herself in her nightmares, no compunction about
nihilistically obliterating herself in her waking life, no alarm at surrendering her life-long belief in
action in favor of a passive and perpetual reactiveness instead. But it was far better than wallowing in
the subconscious dark; better than pointless horror, and longing, and despair. Better than life. She
didn’t believe in life anymore, the way she didn’t believe in monsters under the bed. What was living
but slower-dying, really?

She closed a heavy drawer on her heavier stash of empty parchment, summarily closing a mental file
marked *yet another dream about living*, and headed up to the great hall to get on with things.
Dinner was lovely, if a bit less formal than Professor Granger had expected. Other teachers and staff had been arriving in dribs and drabs by all manner of means all afternoon, and to help assure that everyone was able to have a hot meal whenever it was convenient to them the kitchen staff had set up a tempting buffet on the dias where the staff and guests usually ate, and diners were encouraged to sit anywhere they pleased. Hermione considered taking her old seat at Gryffindor table, but a warning pang in her gut forestalled her. Meals had always mattered so much to Ron, and even when her course load had split her away from him during class, she always counted on seeing him in the same place three times a day, back when she had pined after him like...well exactly like the besotted schoolgirl she’d been. If she sat down there, that dogged piece of her brain that just didn’t understand, the one that refused to comprehend that sometimes the people most essential to the functioning of your universe just aren’t coming back, would get all excited, and would be plucking at her the entire meal asking if Ron were there yet. Fortifying herself with her new hobby of intruding on things once forbidden, she crossed the hall to the Slytherin table and sat down facing the room, straight-backed and smiling inwardly. The pantomimed daring took the edge off her valid, natural, normal (yet maudlin, she chastised herself) sentimental impulses.

A few small groups were already dining, and making enough cross-chatter that the great hall didn’t feel too terribly deserted. There were several faces she didn’t know, or only vaguely recognized from someplace else. Anglin and his brother were seated farther up the Slytherin table, but they seemed engaged with one another and she didn’t want to disturb them. Dear old Professor Flitwick seemed to be holding court for a boisterous tour group at Ravenclaw table. By his side was a lovely older woman with a dashing smile and flossy white hair who was, as far as Hermione could tell, a little person witch. From the carrying conversations, she deduced that the adults clustered around (most of them of average stature) were the couple’s children and grandchildren, who were there to celebrate his wife’s birthday. When Professor Flitwick got up on the table and used a red rose to conduct his family in a rousing chorus of “Happy Birthday dear Elodie/Mama/Gamgam” Hermione’s heart seemed to swell until she couldn’t swallow her food. She did her best to channel the feeling into happiness for their happiness, rather than grieve for moments she and Ron would never have. Her composure held, but it was a near thing.

Thankfully Professor Bolger arrived just then, dark curly hair tied up in a purple scarf, rolled sleeves revealing surprisingly muscular forearms for a young woman with such a soft, round face and scholarly mein. She was flushed pink and beaming.

“Don’t you just love a good challenge?” she bubbled, burrowing her fork into her tiny avalanche of masala and rice like she was rescuing survivors.

Hermione felt herself smiling fondly, though her last bite of chicken pot pie was still wedged just above her collar bones. She nodded, thinking I certainly did once, but I’ve been a bit destroyed just lately and don’t really love anything the way I used to. But no. She utterly refused to be done-in by poor timing. By every objective measure, she wanted very much to make a real friendship with Beasley, that nothing could be healthier than to make new friends. Just because the emotional mechanisms for real enthusiasm and connection were offline, and trying to reach out to anyone was like trying to push a pile of bricks from ten feet away using only a nine-foot rope, she would not submit to defeat. She was a Gryffindor and a genius and a witch and a...a...politician, for Faust’s sake. She hazarded her best recollection of a conspiratorial wink, trying to fake it until she could make it.

“And just what have you been up to, Beasley?”
“Oh Hermione!” she gushed, “I re-arranged that room! Completely! I’ve hated those stupid poufs for years! Godawful things. Terrible for concentrating. I’m glad I was up in the high tower because I think I must have sounded like a cartoon witch, cackling like that as I chucked them. My old classmates would have a good laugh at that, old Batty Bolger going barmey in the belfry,” she gave a smile that was partly a self-conscious wince before bursting with enthusiasm again, “Chairs, Hermione! There’s going to be real chairs! With backs and legs and everything!”

Hermione grinned, “Oh dear. I do hope Professor Trelawney’s ghost doesn’t come back to predict coincidental vengeance on you.”

Professor Bolger covered her mouth, trying not to laugh through her food, “I do feel just a little bad. She really was such a lovely, odd person. We disagreed about everything and then some, and I was a condescending jumped-up little snot to her more than a few times, but she was never cruel to me in return.”

I guess war really does change people Hermione thought, nodding sympathetically and holding her tongue. No reason to speak ill of the dead. She let Professor Bolger rattle on about the magical mural of stars she meant to put up on the ceiling, the proper baskets of tools at every table, and star charts that could be marked and wiped clean between uses. Hermione smiled and nodded in the right places, tucking away quite a lot of her pie before Beasley seemed to reach a natural stop. She nodded and wiped her mouth, determined to reciprocate like a real live human, “I haven’t had to do nearly as much. I’m not sure any of the desks in the potions classroom even could move if I wanted them to, and Professor Snape’s old apartments are rather bare.”

Professor Bolger cocked her head to one side, abundantly interested, “Who?”

Hermione blinked, stunned, trying not to stammer in disbelief, “Severus Snape. He was potions master here before Slughorn resumed the role. Hero of the second wizarding war. He’s…” her voice caught a little on the familiar admonition, “…in Hogwarts: A History.”

Beasley blushed deeply, abashed, but shrugged amiably, “Oh I...I’m fairly hopeless at history. Always mooning off into the future, me. Good old batty Bolger, hah.”

Hermione couldn’t quite keep the look of shock from her face, but she waved a hand and spoke lightly, trying to pretend the bottom hadn’t just dropped out of her stomach, “Well, drop in some time, I can tell you all about him. Fascinating guy. Bit of an oddball, but we can all relate to that, can’t we?” she chuckled, her insides roiling. It hadn’t even been thirty years. We fought a war. She stifled a completely disproportionate desire to grab Beasley and shake her until her brains rattled. She bolted up, “Well, this was delicious, but I’ve got so much planning to do, and I’ve got to snag someone to see if I can get a mattress onto my bed before all this lovely rich food puts me into a coma. See you at breakfast!”

She barely waited for Professor Bolger’s nod of assent before sweeping away out of the hall, her robes billowing. She practically ran down to the dungeon, feeling far more wrung-out and fatigued than a simple hour around other people should have left her. She hurriedly locked herself behind the classroom door, then the apartment door, then the bedroom door. As soon as the heavy slab of English wood was fixed with its iron latch behind her, she braced her back against it and sank to the floor, grateful for the deep, solid chill of the silent room as she sobbed.

We fought a war...
It was a pretty good cry. Hermione mostly rated them by how she felt after. It lost marks for keeping her curled in a ball for so long that her back had started to ache again, and for turning her whole face into an appalling marinade of tears and drool and all other sorts of gooey grief-slime. But when it finally passed she felt ready to clean herself up and get back to work. So, pretty good.

She went to the main room and got her package of towels and linens, taking a washcloth into the bathroom and dropping all the rest beside the armoire. As she de-sludged her raw face, she listed all the things she needed so she wouldn’t have to be pestering the elves all night. When she finally felt more like a human than a giant hay-feverish wad of hamburger, she stepped out into the antechamber and clearly said “I need a porter”.

Two elves apparated immediately, and a third a half-second later, jostling into the other two. They recovered to attention swiftly and all barked “Yes, professor?” in crisp unison. The overall effect was kind of inspiring.

“I’ll need a mirror for the bathroom if there’s one available, and a mattress for the bed, and a cushion for the chair in the classroom, if you haven’t just got a nicer chair someplace. I’d like someone to look at hooking up the stove in the...lab? And if you could, possibly, if there’s a spare one about, I seem to have forgotten my copy of *Hogwarts: a History.*”

The trio nodded smartly and vanished.

She got her package of quilts, and her suitcase, and headed into the bedroom to begin unpacking. She worked carefully and steadily, listening gratefully for the loud cracks that indicated the heavier work was being handled by competent, diligent, well-compensated staff. She clung to that, the simultaneous knowledge that she was being helped, and that her past life, her work to end elf slavery, had actually changed other's lives for the better. She didn’t want to preen, just to trim her ever-creeping sense of nihilism back to a manageable level, to feel like something real. Not even twenty-five years later, and there were people who were born before the war even ended who didn’t know the people who gave everything to save their world. Or maybe not, she chastened herself. Maybe Beasley was the exception. She was a diviner, after all. Maybe even muggle-born...she’d used the word “cartoon”. But even so…

One of the elves popped in behind her just as she was putting herself off-balance with another pang of doubt, and it made her jump.

“Oh I beg your pardon, Professor. I popped in too close there, didn’t I. I’ll do better next time. Please don’t tell Happy, she’d be so disappointed in me.” The elf in the porter’s cap was very short, young, and slightly blue-tinged. He was clutching a familiar volume to his chest.

“It’s alright…” she glanced at the pin on his cap, “Pozzy. I really appreciate your diligence. It must be utter madness today.”

He bowed slightly, “Not at all, Professor. A pleasure. Here’s your book.”

It was the latest edition, the largest yet, boasting several new appendices on the wizarding history of magical creatures, and a lengthy new foreword by a modern wizarding historian named Nikita Kalil.

“Everything else is set. Would you like the house staff to make up your bed? Or put a fire in your
grate in the morning?"

“No thank you. I’ll manage.”

With an odd little salute that she suspected was his own innovation, he popped away and the room was silent again. She cast around a moment for someplace to put the book down while she made up her bed, muttered “forgot to ask for an end table…” and settled for leaning it against the armoire. She made her bed with care, doing the same sequence of corners by herself that she and Ron had always done together at home.

*Home.*

There it was, that stab. She sighed testily, wondering how thoughts could so reliably insist on sneaking up like assassins, as if they had thoughts and plans of their own. She let the pang of homesickness for her bed...their bed...have a couple of thin tears, but nothing more. She’d warned it to speak up on the boat, after all, and really hadn’t anything left to give that night. She made a sternly sarcastic mental note to be properly devastated first thing in the morning, packing away her stressors for the evening, trying to think of something comforting.
Ritual Burial

Chapter Notes

Kind of a short and aside-y chapter, so probably better as a weekend bonus. :) More on Tuesday.

She laid out her quilts, deciding it was cold enough to use them all and layering them in the customary way. “All ritual is magic” she said, impersonating Mother Weasley’s bracing sing-song in the way that had always made Ron smile. It was the first thing the Weasley matriarch had confided in Hermione after Rose was born. Hermione had originally planned to have her in hospital, but Molly had convinced her to lay-in at The Burrow, pointing out that Witch obstetricians could make house calls in the blink of an eye, and that her bedroom was laden with all the charms and spells that had helped keep her and her babies safe through four regular births, one breach, and a set of twins. Fleur had lain-in with Victoire, and Ginny had lain-in with James, and both openly campaigned on Molly’s behalf about how wonderful it had been. Eventually Hermione had assented, though she’d kept up with her muggle prenatal regimen. And it had been a lovely time.

Not all the magic or medicine in the world could keep birth from being a stressful, messy, occult affair, but there were indeed spells for much of the pain and danger. As soon as she and Ron had arrived to stay however-many-days it took for Rose to finally make her appearance, Molly had (figuratively) grabbed Ron by the ear and told him in tones of prophecy and avowal that he was going to learn to cook for the mother of his child. She’d sounded testy, and Ron had bleated a bit, but it gave Daddy and Granny someplace to put all their nervous energy instead of fluttering around Hermione being insufferably solicitous.

Over the next four days, Ron’s mother had taught him how to make a proper omelette, a proper sauce, how to braise meat, saute vegetables, season a broth, roast a chicken, mix up a quick bread, and bake a pie. It was apparently an old Weasley family ritual, this education of new fathers. Arthur’s mother had done it for him when Molly had lain-in with Bill. And Molly’d done the same to Bill, Percy, George, and even her most-beloved Harry when their firstborns had come along. From the throne-like master bed upstairs where she’d sat, big as a house and inclined to fret whenever she wasn’t reading, Hermione could hear her husband and mother-in-law rattling and scolding and laughing and yelling, and felt wrapped in love, stroking her enormous belly and telling her imminent child that the world she was joining was a wonderful place. As an added bonus, Ron had taken to cooking like a kraken to housekeeping (that is to say, with extreme facility and unforeseen natural giftedness, if one manages to survive the first month in the house with it), and Hermione had seldom cooked dinner since. Food always had been his mistress, she thought with a fond smile.

She’d told Mother Weasley how brilliant she thought the Weasley family rituals were as she’d held the family’s newest member to try to feed. Rose, in what would become something of a signature trait, had already begun overthinking it. Molly had, with Hermione’s permission, put one finger on the little button-chin and pulled the rosebud mouth a trifle wider, letting the littlest Weasley get a better latch and begin eating with gusto. “That’s the way with families, my love,” she had murmured, partly to Rose but mostly to Hermione, “Not all magic is ritual, but all rituals are a little bit magic.”

When her new bed was set in her customary way, Professor Granger peeled down to her underthings and snuggled down to crack a book before sleeping.
The Sleeping Princes

Dear Reader it began history is a living thing. Personal, national, geological, magical, on every scale it surrounds us, looms over us, makes us what we are whether we realize it or not. Even as we make greater and greater advances in our understanding of that blank canvas of history, time itself, our most fundamental tool for understanding the paintings and patterns wrought upon it remains the one you hold now in your hands. For although truth can exist without observation or reckoning, stories must be told to survive. Histories must be breathed if they are to live, lest they decay into mysteries.

Hermione’s eyes began to blur, though she wasn’t sleepy or bored. The foreword, though quite a bit flowerier than she’d have expected from anyone in the same field as the coma-inducing Professor Binns, was not losing her. Her eyes were just painfully dry, and her nose was freezing cold. There was an icy draft leaking down the front of the timeworn tapestry at the head of the bed, no doubt from some crevice in the wall that was the reason it had been hung in the first place. She turned aside to warm her nose and felt her ear become uncomfortably cold. She scooted to the other side of the bed with a huff, but the thin fall of cold air simply pooled invisibly upon the head of the bed and seeped beneath her bunker of quilts. She got out her wand and commanded the bed to move out from under the draft. “Leviosa!” The bedframe refused to move, the iron probably imbued with some magical resistance.

She groaned. She hated being cold. This was the sort of thing she could have asked Ron to handle, and he’d have gotten out of bed in the middle of the night for her, dragged it away from the wall, with her in it, and then come back to bed, still warm as a box of kittens, to cuddle up next to her and be praised for his heroism. She could see the crooked, sardonically self-important smile he would give as he flexed those strong, wiry arms that perpetually resisted acquiring mass, and the boyish love that would light in his eyes to hear her laugh at him and call him her prince, her knight, her daring savior. She sighed, savoring the bitter-sweet tang of his illusory presence. Happy collages of memory always seemed to bring him close to her for a fleeting moment, tantalizingly close.

Compelled, she reached out a hand under the covers to beg him to stay even as he faded and her head began to ache with the chill. She drew the hand back and clutched her locket, cursing mildly, reflexively, knowing Ron would never want her to miss him so much, but would be insufferably flattered that she did, all the same.

She cursed again in earnest, saving her place with the Gryffindor bookmark Rose had made her. More stoic than patient, she put her bare feet on the unbearable floor, letting the chilly air clamp down on her naked skin. In a hurry to be done she grabbed a leg at the foot of the bed and pulled, hard. It took two more vigorous yanks of increasing force and desperation before the iron edifice condescended to grate along about four inches. Figuring she needed at least two more of those to get the headboard clear of the draft and frantic for the work to keep her warm, she braced into the task and hauled as hard she could.

Yank, yank, scraaaaape.

Yank, yank, scraaaaape, thud.

Thud?

The bed had moved away from the tapestry, but then part of the tapestry had moved away from the wall, pinned to the headboard on one side by something behind it. Gathering one of her quilts around
herself in a makeshift robe, she summoned her wand to her hand and bade the light at its tip to intensify as she went to inspect, holding everything together awkwardly.

In the dark behind the tapestry was a slender slat of something, like a board painted black and stapled along the edge. Her mind wasn’t making sense of it so she put out a hand, and as soon as she touched it she realized it was a painting. She snatched her hand away and pulled the quilt more snugly about herself.

“H-hello?” she stammered quietly. One could never assume, in Hogwarts, that a painting wasn’t listening or preparing to speak. But if it were that sort why would someone hide it there? To spy? To punish? Could one punish a painting? What could a painting do to deserve that? When it stayed silent she put her hand to it and again and slid it out from behind the bed frame and tapestry.

It was a large canvas, almost as tall as she was and wider than her arm was long, but it was fairly easy to grip and move, being unframed. The image was very dark, its subject poorly lit. She couldn’t see it properly until she’d gotten it all the way out, leant it against the wall, and taken several steps back, pointing her wand at it defensively.

It was him. Professor Snape. He was seated in the dark and half turned away from the viewer, but his profile was unmistakable. The chair he was seated on was plush amber velvet, and the texture was beautifully rendered to look soft and inviting. Yet his hips were perched right at the edge of the seat, his posture erect, his face lowered and curtained by his dark hair, his arms bracing against the arms of the chair as if chained. He was wearing his typical black cassock, tight against his spare frame and buttoned up as if against a storm. Hermione’s eyes were still dry and blurry, but she was fairly certain that not a single element of the image was moving, though the pose was quite lifelike, laden with drama and implied energy. Unlike every other painting of a former headmasters of Hogwarts, this one seemed like a lifeless muggle painting, its subject unable to move or speak or (like most headmaster paintings at that hour) doze contentedly. She pondered it. It brought back so many feelings about the opaquely bitter man whose shoes (and quarters) she’d come to fill. It occurred to her that, in the painting, he was only about as old as she stood looking at it. And nearly as stuck she thought wryly. Like Ron, he’d died before age forty.

“Professor? Professor Snape, it’s Hermione Granger. Can you hear me?”

The figure stayed completely still, hovering right on the edge of action. Hermione sighed, satisfied that the painting either was just a remarkable mundane work, or that the subject was sufficiently static to be left to its own devices for the night. As much as he had terrified her as a child, she refused to be disturbed by this mystery. She’d aged enormously in the past year alone, and it had ratified in her a mordant entitlement to be “too old for” things like bad wine, boorish men, or anything that struck her as too much work or too late an hour. She was certainly too old to be frightened of things that barely went “thud” in the night.

All the same, she didn’t want him peeping out at her room while she slept. She was so accustomed to the idea that paintings were, in some sense, alive, that it seemed as foolish to leave him spying in the dark as it felt rude to leave him exposed to the chill. She thought about sliding the canvas back behind the tapestry, or turning it to face the wall, but that seemed inhospitable. No amount of practicality could shake her peculiar feeling of obligation. Veterans had to stick together, after all.

Bracing up to hop back into bed quickly, she whipped the quilt off her shoulders and slung it over the canvas, covering it completely and feeling like she’d torn a tangible chunk of warmth from her body to do it. Then she sprinted the three steps to the bed in her panties, dove in, and curled herself about in the copious remaining blankets until she was snugly cocooned. She gripped her locket tight, whispered good night to her husband, extinguished her wand with a word, and fled into sleep.
She woke in the dark. The room was pitch black and windowless, admitting neither light nor time. She lit her wand and debated snuggling back down with her history book and letting the timeless quality of the room be her excuse for sleeping all day, but she remembered the painting and decided it was worth getting up for, whatever time it was. The quilt was still draped completely across it but she found herself tiptoeing to the armoire to get dressed all the same, wordlessly bidding the clever magic sconces to glow softly. She thought of going out to find her watch, but felt oddly shy of the sound of the door. She chose jeans and one of Ron’s old jumpers for warmth, figuring she could throw her robes on over them for...whatever meal happened to be next in the day. She didn’t even know. What would she actually say to anyone if she’d slept all day? She thought of all those unfamiliar faces at dinner, and they seemed to eye her disapprovingly.

It was as she finished dressing that she felt her motivation to engage with the day abandon her utterly. It had taken to doing that, suddenly and randomly. It was maddening. Even as a child she’d had the most remarkable self control: uncanny stores of energy and patience that she could channel pretty much at will into whatever she knew she had to do, whether she especially wanted to or not. Other people’s inability to do it had always frankly mystified her and she had thought, rather smugly and for a very long time, that she was just more virtuous than those around her. But the last year had shown her that anyone could collapse, any faculty could be lost, and in that moment, for no particular reason, she couldn’t open the bedroom door and face the world, nor could she go back to bed and give up, and so she just hung slackly attenuated between the two like a paper doll on a string. With great effort she compromised and sat down on the foot of the bed, disgusted and marvelling at her own astonishing helplessness.

How could she be so tired having just woken up? Perhaps it wasn’t morning yet. But she wasn’t really tired. She didn’t want to lie down. She didn’t especially want to cry. She just...didn’t want. She didn’t even want to want. It felt like treading water, all her energy absorbed in trying not to sink, not to gaze into sunken places, to keep her head in the living world without making any directional motions that might require her face to point downwards.

After a long time sitting stuck, an impulse nipped at her, and as those weird little lifelines of ambition were her only saving graces in such moments she indulged it. She gestured with her wand wordlessly, and the quilt came flying off the canvas to settle itself on the bed. She’d fancied she might surprise its occupant and catch him mid-motion, but it was still just a static artifice of pigment. Her single spark of motivation burnt out and her eyes happening to be pointed in that direction, she stared at the peculiar artwork, similarly unmoving, for a long time. She fancied it could be hanging in a lobby, a place where she was required to wait for her proverbial number to be called so her will to live her life could return, decorating some ephemeral bureaucratic office of the Ministry for Depression.

It really was beautifully done, she decided. The light wasn’t so much dim as it was subtle. And the painter, whoever they had been, had taken great pains to be flattering of their subject and still to capture him faithfully, unmistakably. The long frame, the sharp profile, the absurdly buttony robe that left nothing but his fingers and his pale face to view. It was such an odd, evocative posture, though, that she could hardly believe he had posed for it. It was so much more like a candid photograph taken just at the right moment to capture his perpetual unease and ambivalence. He looked more like a martyr at the stake than a headmaster in his chair.

And it was beautiful. Sublimely and self-evidently. So much so that it felt presumptuous to identify with the subject as strongly as she found she did. So much so that her self-loathing immediately bit
into her in retaliation. He had died a hero, same as Ron, and she...she had lived and out-lived long enough to lose that part of herself, to become someone who became lost between her bed and her bedroom door...who couldn't even save-

There was a faint knock from the potions classroom.

Hermione Granger, hero of Hogwarts, closed her eyes and begged her heart to behave, to rev up her catalytic will and let her stand and walk and open a door and cope with a day like a real live woman. She begged herself for a shred of the motive force that seemed to infuse the lifeless painting; the way he seemed to writhe and push against the chair as if he were bearing up under torment or clawing his way out of a grave. She felt her hips twist and her hands push, and she was standing. Steps and steps and she was through the one door and to the other, and her hand was on the handle and she had done it.

It was Happy.

“Good morning, Professor. Breakfast is just ready, and the headmaster was asking about you. I told her I’d check in to see if there was anything I could do to help get your morning sorted so you could join her. Is there anything?” the elf peered past Hermione’s hip and bit her lip sympathetically to see almost nothing arranged. “Anything at all?”

Hermione looked at her apartment, then to Happy and back again, running a hand into her hair and finding it had gone rather wild while she’d been sleeping. Habit and impulse needled her to put the elf off, make some explanation that meant she hadn’t been caught-out as a failure, roll up her sleeves and do her damn work herself along with half of everyone else’s, as usual, but what she actually said was, “Sure. Yeah. I mean...yes. Please come in.”

Happy smiled and glowed like a particularly enthusiastic jack-o-lantern.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence as Happy peered about, and Hermione clenched as if she were about to beg for more time on a paper. She wished she had Ron’s glib talent for pleading incapacity in an endearing way, but she always just came off whiny or entitled.

“So I...” her mind drew a blank trying to think of the needed excuse, and honesty rushed in to fill the void, “I’ve gotten myself a bit stuck,” she blurted, wondering what was going to come out next, “there’s just too many things and I...ever since…” she stopped short and shook her head. Not that. “My brain’s just not working at it’s full capacity lately...barely two-fifths if I’m honest...and I get stuck, and I give up, and it’s not like me at all, and I’m...” she felt her eyes brim and her throat constrict, “I’m so sorry, Happy, this isn’t what I meant to...” she felt foolish standing over the porter turned guest turned impromptu confessor, and sank down to sit cross-legged on the thick rug, unable to look Happy in her enormous eyes. She accepted a handkerchief. There was another long silence and neither moved except for Hermione’s shivering with stifled sobs.

“Hermione Granger.” Happy’s voice had a sort of soft, firm, formally raspy texture, like velvet wallpaper.

“No, please, don’t feel like you have to...it’s just these crying fits. I get them, but I’m fine. It’s like an emotional allergy, it’s just something that my face does now at odd intervals, whenever I’m exposed to people or kindness or anything really, it just breaks out, you know? But I’m fine, truly, you don’t have to say anything- there’s really nothing to- ”

“Hermione Granger.”

She sighed, frustrated at her own inability to stop babbling, “Yes, Happy?”
Two small but oddly weighty hands came to rest on her slumped shoulders, “That’s all.”

Hermione squeezed the bridge of her nose tight and her eyelids tighter, “Happy, please, thank you, sincerely, but please understand, literally everyone that knows me by name has told me that I’m going to be ok because of who I am either ‘in my heart’ or ‘once I get out of my head’ or ‘because I’m a fighter’ or ‘because I am so loved by everyone’ and I just—”

“Not everyone.”

Hermione coughed a laugh, “Well alright no, not literally everyone, that sounds so arrogant, but it’s what people say to assure me, and themselves I think as long as I’m being honest, that I’m ok or that I will be and I’m just not...I’m not ok, and honestly I understand that that’s ok, but I’m not and I’ve no expectation that I’m ever—“

Happy sighed and spoke with great care, “Not everyone who knows you by name, I meant. We haven’t all taken the liberty of telling you. Some of us wouldn’t presume. But...” Happy’s small hands moved from Hermione’s shoulders to the sides of her jaw, lifting gently and with the smooth strength of an iron lever, then simply waiting a beat until Hermione lifted her gaze, “we all know you by your name. All of us.”

“I...I don’t know what that means. I’m sorry.”

Happy released her jaw and patted her on the shoulder again, “It is not so important. For right now it means that you have nothing to apologize to me for. Certainly not for needing help despite constantly doing the impossible all on your own.”

Hermione didn’t feel better, exactly, but the faucet of her face lost pressure. Mostly she felt guilty, as if her work for elf rights were leveraging Happy to feel obligated to be kind even though she herself was being pathetic and awful and inexcusable, but it would be worse to keep objecting and forcing the elf to comfort her about being pathetic out of the same presumed obligation. Happy was already pulling sheets down off furniture and looking about the dimensions of the room with an appraising eye.

Hermione got herself up off the floor and did her best not to sound argumentative or like she was dictating terms, “I...I do need your help. And I so appreciate you taking the time. But please do know that you don’t have to. I...I just...” it was one of those times when she realized the truth of a thing right as it was coming out of her mouth, “I’m already putting so many people out just being here, just needing this job, and that’s before the students even get here and everyone finds out I’m utter rubbish.”

Happy turned to her, and it was hard for Hermione to interpret her expression. Elf faces really didn’t lend themselves to looking annoyed, not even the very mild amused-bordering-on-annoyed expression with which the old elf regarded her, “Hermione Granger, I want to help you.” She resumed her survey of the space, and pulled a sheet off of a small end-table.

Hermione couldn’t help herself. Other people being consternated by her thoughts always felt like a challenge, and it was out of her mouth before she could catch it, “You’re very good at being kind, but I know elves aren’t forbidden to lie anymore.”

Happy stopped, blinked pointedly at the floor, then turned to face Hermione squarely. She planted her boxy slippered feet and straightened her spine, “And that in large part thanks to you and yours.”

It was unbearable. Hermione felt the old rhetoric swell in her lungs, and she gestured as if she were
back at the podium, “You don’t owe me or any witch or wizard or anyone anything! Not for simply ceasing our millennium of terror and torture and exploitation. We owe you. All of us. Forever. I’m no exception to that.”

Happy folded her arms, “Then believe me when I speak. Do me that courtesy, if you please.”

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it again, chastened.

Happy took a professorial step forward, “Now, Hermione Granger, who is known by name, it is my wish that I could go to where your heart is and put it right. I cannot. The only other person who understands what you have lost took that knowledge with him,” her throaty voice was conciliatory, soothing, but the words cut through like a pronouncement. “My heart can not go to your heart. Yours has gone to ground, and I am not its secret keeper. But my hands can be where your hands are,” she held one out illustratively, “And I wish it. Especially when you feel helpless and unseen. Especially when you know you should be powerful enough to do what must be done on your own but still cannot until someone helps you. And if you feel great gratitude for that, then our hands meet in the middle, and you know my heart, and you will believe me when I say what it is that I want.”

Hermione had always garnered praise and ire for her skills as a political orator in the wizarding world, and she could barely even take the measure of the effect of Happy’s extemporaneous speech. But her shoulders straightened to mimic the elf’s, and she did hold out her hand. Happy took it, and shook it firmly, her glowing smile blooming in a line like the dawn.

“Breakfast is waiting. And the headmaster. I promise I won’t do too much. I’ll just get things in here arranged so you can see them. Make it a puzzle rather than a barricade. Maybe get the fire going. This is not hard for me. You go and have some coffee, you’ll be surprised how ready to work you will be,” Happy snapped her fingers and an inlaid writing desk lifted into the air and oriented itself properly against the wall beside the fireplace, its pivoting chair rolling to join it. Something about seeing basic order created with a simple act of magic dissolved some of Hermione’s mental fog, and the part of her brain responsible for basic planning and organizing sputtered to life like a propeller engine that had finally been properly spun. She could suddenly fathom the steps required to get her robes on and comb her hair and climb the stairs and drink coffee and greet the headmaster. She hurried into the bathroom to freshen up just a bit, then strode to the bedroom to grab her robes but stalled in the doorway. The painting. Would Happy recognize it? If it belonged somewhere else would she take it? The thought pained her. She liked looking at it. It captured something she needed to ponder. She wanted to solve it on her own and she wasn’t ready to explain it yet.

Would a free elf be more or less likely to look in the bedroom if asked not to?

She edged the door closed and crossed to the canvas. She couldn’t put it back behind that ugly tapestry in the draft, the thought was too depressing. And covering it with a quilt wouldn’t make it any less conspicuous to an elf bent on organizing.

Unless…

With a gesture, the crumpled quilts and topsheet rose up off the bed and began assembling themselves into a neat stack midair like a flying lasagna. Before they settled back down, Hermione gingerly laid the large canvas flat on the mattress. Once the quilts were in place its presence didn’t even make a visible bump in the patchwork plane. She rushed off to breakfast before she could start to feel guilty and juvenile.
“Oh good, Happy found you.”

Minerva McGonagall stood up from the empty head table in the otherwise empty great hall and leaned on her walking stick as Hermione bustled up the long aisle between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables. As the younger woman got close enough that she wouldn’t be shouting rudely across the room at the headmaster, she made the usual moot protest, “Oh Professor, please don’t get up. I’m sorry I’m late.”

McGonagall raised a well-trained eyebrow, “You’re not late, dear. In fact you’re the first one here. Any earlier would be a new level of perfectionism even for you.”

Hermione got up the low steps and finally noticed that the table was laid with clean place settings. Blushing, she returned her boss’s knowing smile and came around to greet her properly, taking her free hand and leaning in for a prim and reciprocated air-kiss beside her cheek, “I suppose I’m still a bit turned-around. Thank you for sending Happy to get me up.”

Minerva gestured to the seat at her left hand and eased back into her own, “Not at all, I’m terribly sorry that I wasn’t available to meet you and Professor Bolger yesterday to get you oriented. We’re rather less formal on the days when there are no students here. Albus always felt it gave everyone a chance to- oh good morning Cuthbert.”

Hermione turned and was startled to see the spectral Professor Binns, the History of Magic teacher, float in through the closed door at the end of the table to her left. He seated himself stiffly in the most immediate chair, folding his hands and waiting patiently without especially acknowledging either lady.

After a pointed beat, Hermione said softly, “I...have literally never seen him anywhere but in his classroom before now.”

Minerva shrugged and shook her head, “It’s the only meal he ever attends, and I think it’s more to disapprove of how people straggle in. As I said, less formal than in his day. But it allows everyone to get fortified to the year in their own way before the hordes come crashing in, and I like to keep as many of Professor Dumbledore’s traditions alive as I can. But I hope you don’t mind being sent for early. I wanted to have a private word with you.”

Hermione smiled. As a child, she hadn’t understood polite behavior. As a teenager she had found it disingenuous, dull, and exhausting. But as she’d gotten older and collected a great many scratches and dents to her ideals, she’d come to find the company of skillfully polite friends soothing, and had begun to recognize what an enormously warm, perceptive, considerate person Minerva McGonagall was within her formal courtesies. Her kind of measured intimacy had been essential to Hermione since Ron. She still craved human contact, but anything too close burned in her like a hug on sunburn. Conversation that was both warmly personal and consciously distant was welcome, nourishing even, like honeyed tea and ice cream to a sore throat and empty belly, “I don’t mind at all. How’s your leg? How’s the treatment going?”

“What? Oh, fine, it’s fine, much better actually” she waved a hand dismissively, “we can talk about
that over the sausages, but I wanted to tell you, or to ask you I suppose, because there isn’t…”

“Hello Hermione Granger!” a rather posh voice rang across the vaulted, cloudless sky that was the great hall’s ceiling, and the ghost of Sir “Nearly-Headless” Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington came sailing through the far wall and the Slytherin table. He seemed not to register the sour edge in McGonagall’s carefully diplomatic Headmaster smile, and bounded up to the main table, bowing gallantly to them both with a slight wobble of his barely-tethered head.

“My good lady! So wonderful to see you back! I do so look forward to-” He drew up short as Minerva cleared her throat loudly, “Oh...have you told her yet?”

“I was just about to.”

“Oh dear, I do apologize. Start-of-term giddiness and all.”

“Quite all right.”

It was Hermione who cleared her throat this time, “Told me what?”

Minerva’s lips drew tight and she exhaled a sharp huff, “Well, to cut right to the point I suppose, I wanted to put to you...and I do understand that one’s first year teaching is quite an undertaking in itself which is why I thought to enlist Sir Nicholas…”

“Good morning everyone!” another clear male voice rang through the room, neither quite as posh nor dashing as Sir Nicholas’s but making a good showing in both categories. Hermione didn’t recognize its originator at all as he came striding up the aisle, though she recognized the older fellow walking companionably beside him...despite the beard.

“We can talk later. Lunch in my office?” Minerva muttered as she hoisted herself up from her seat and Hermione rose with her, offering a supportive hand that was declined, “Good Morning Mister Kalil, Professor Longbottom!” she said in a far more cheerful tone, “If you’ll come and sit I’ll declare us a quorum and we can begin.”

The dashing young man laughed easily, showing very white, straight teeth that were thrown into greater relief by his dark skin, hair and eyes.

Neville chuckled, nodding assent, “I’ll second that motion, Minerva. Hello Hermione, I was so pleased when I found out you were coming back” he crossed behind them to sit at the Headmaster’s other side, touching them each genially on the shoulder as the spacing and haste made anything else awkward. The light touch dragged a dull razor of deep fondness for her old friend across her as she struggled to generate the appropriate reaction. The new fellow took a seat at the end by professor Binns, leaving an empty chair between himself and Hermione, for which she felt both enormously grateful, and discourteous in her gratitude. New people could be good, but they also came with a lot of questions.

Professor McGonagall clapped her hands and spread them wide. Covered dishes, plates and tureens blossomed on the table, and the smells of pepper and proteins and animal fats made Hermione’s stomach growl.

“Well now, who else are we expecting,” the younger fellow said, picking up a napkin and laying it across his lap with the air of a sprinter crouching down onto his mark.

As if on cue Madame Pomfrey and Professor Bolger walked in, chatting intently and only looking up
to greet everyone when they’d reached the steps. Everyone had begun removing covers from dishes and assembling their plates, and the two ladies hustled to join in, taking seats down the far end on the other side of Neville.

“Well let’s see,” Hermione decided to test her memory, “I suppose we’re still expecting Professor Flitwick, Madame Hooch, Professor Sinestra...oh and of course-”

“Ermoine!”

She grinned broadly and waved as the hall’s wide door was blocked by a figure rather similar in silhouette. Hagrid lumbered up to the table, beaming like a proud father through the salt and pepper mass of his beard, waving her over with one of his outstretched hands, “Yeh better come ‘round the table! I don’t want to tip er’ryone else over getting back there to yeh, an’ a handshake just won’t do!”

She stood up quickly and skirted around the near edge, coming down only one of the two steps to get her hug from Hagrid, bracing for what she expected was going to be enormously painful but had to be borne lest she break his tender heart. Only for you, Hagrid she thought, as he swept her up in arms as thick and swift as a trebuchet. The first hug was tight, and he said “That’s from me,” then he half-crushed her, twisting back and forth so her legs dangled wildly, “an’ that one’s from Grawpy,” adding, under his breath and half to himself, “yeh ought to come down soon for a visit, though, as I can’t really do it justice, wee thing that I am. He were so excited when I told ‘im,” he chuckled to himself infectiously, not putting her down right away. She clung back, letting the pressure squeeze a few tears out of her eyes that disappeared conveniently into his enormous beard, and a sob she managed to fashion into a gasp at his crushing affection. And oh, it hurt terribly, a great symphony of moans billowing up from her heart like compressed bagpipes, but something about the sheer enveloping bulk of him and the massive unconditional simplicity of his affection made it better, tolerable, purgative. When he finally put her down she felt a little cleaner inside, reluctant to let him wander away again.

Coughing from compression and a little overwhelmed, Hermione said, “Good to see you too, Hagrid. Come on and sit, there’s a seat by me.”

“Aw, no, I can’t this morning. Just came to say hello an’ maybe make myself an’ Grawp a couple little sammiches. Lots to do, lots to do! The kiddos are comin’, gotta have something great ready for ‘em.” He had all the nervous energy of a child on Christmas Eve, one who had been extra-special good since the previous February. Hermione had never seen him quite so giddy, though she had no doubt he had been like this every single year since he’d begun teaching. She envied his eagerness for the task, acutely.

“I will have to come down, then. Tea on Thursday perhaps?”

“Hmm,” he looked grave, putting a finger to his lips, “I suppose I could fit yeh in...” his face split into a grin again, “anytime yeh like! Always! Yer a professor now!” he laughed and bellied up to the table, taking some large clean handkerchiefs and making an enormous sandwich of sausages and scrambled eggs and toast to wrap in each before tucking them back into his pockets. Hermione moved back around to her own seat, hoping to get something onto her plate before it all disappeared into the Care of Magical Creatures professor’s capacious coat.

As he lumbered away, she made a boarding-house reach for the fried potatoes and served herself a tidy pile beside her sausages, remarking to Professor McGonagall, “He still thinks I’m eleven, doesn’t he?”
She nodded, “And himself as well, I think. It’s a helpful attitude. I’ve yet to meet anyone with as youthful a reserve of energy or enthusiasm,” she reached for the toast but realized it had all gone, “or appetite. But oh, speaking of youthful, I don’t think you’ve met Mister Kalil, who is joining us for a third year. Nikita Kalil, Hermione Granger.”

She suddenly recognized the name and wanted to kick herself, “Oh my, the same Nikita Kalil who wrote the newest edition of Hogwarts: A History?”

He blushed as he came over to shake her hand, settling in the seat beside her, “Revised and edited, really. And only if the Hermione Granger that’s in it liked how he wrote about her.” He turned away to reach for his plate and perhaps conceal a sheepish, searching look.

“Oh, I, I must admit I’ve never quite had the courage to read that bit,” it was her turn to shift apologetically, for she’d published a few things in her day and knew several very famous authors who, nevertheless, were always cut to the core to meet someone who hadn’t read them. She occupied herself with tucking away most of her plate.

“What a relief then,” he flashed that impossibly white grin again and attacked a sausage. He was rakishly handsome in a slightly pop-eyed, nerdy sort of way, with long eyelashes and skin that glowed with youth.

Hermione reached for a boiled egg, “I do hope there will be some left for Professor Flitwick. He had quite a party with him last night and I imagine they kept him up quite late.”

“Oh he always sleeps in today. The staff know to bring his breakfast up to him.”

“Oh?”

“Well, you know...it’s usually his wife’s birthday so…” he shrugged in a way that was embarrassed enough to imply something other than sleep.

“Oh? Oh!” Hermione blinked once and became remarkably fascinated with peeling her egg. “So what is it you do here at Hogwarts, Mr. Kalil?”

“Nikita, please. Or Nick, if you like. I assist professor Binns. He’s training me to take over as History of Magic professor and this year I’m also- oh my are you alright?”

At the notion of Professor Binns retiring, Hermione had inhaled a crumb of egg yolk and started coughing and gagging into her napkin as Professor McGonagall thumped her resolutely on the back. She turned to Minerva wide-eyed, amused and disbelieving “When did this happen?”

“Three years ago. Out of nowhere he just- well first he floated into my office, which nearly scared the skin off me. All the other ghosts know the headmaster’s office is off-limits without an invitation, and it was so out of character for him to be anywhere but his own rooms, well, it was actually several seconds before I recognized him and I think I woke every single portrait on that wall with the shout I gave,” she shook her head, “and he said to me, he said, ‘Headmaster Dippet, I believe it is time for me to train my replacement.’”

Hermione looked down the table at the ghost, then back to McGonagall, “And what did you say?”

“Well,” Minerva straightened in her seat somewhat indignantly, “Professor Dippet’s portrait answered him and asked why he felt it was time. They get so impertinent if disturbed while
“sleeping.”

Hermione cringed sympathetically, “And what did he say?”

“Well he said, to me mind you, that he would like to…” she took a breath and shook her head, “that he should like to go on sabbatical and travel a bit before he dies.”

Hermione opened her mouth, closed it, squinted, blinked twice and then finally said “Oh…”

“That was my exact reaction too,” Minerva nodded, “so I reached out to a few colleagues and got a recommendation for Mr. Kalil here.”

Hermione shook her head, still trying to process, “Just takes your breath away.”

“So kind of you to say!” his grin was palpable even with her back turned.

She regarded him with a look that gave him full marks for insolence, “You said there was something else you were starting this year, Nick?” she let the final sound click sharply.

“I’m taking over as flying instructor.”

“Really? Did we also lose Madame Hooch?”

Minerva nodded, “A bit unexpectedly. It’s one of the things I’d like to discuss with you at lunch, we’re going to be stretched a bit thin this year, staff-wise.”

“Well what happened? Is she alright?”

“Oh yes, yes, I think I can say with some certainty she’s quite alright.” The headmaster’s expression was shifting about in an unreadable mix of trepidation, annoyance and...delight?

Hermione looked between them again, trying to divine her meaning. Nikita’s expression was similar, but without the annoyance, “Well?”

“She eloped.”

Hermione wasn’t sure how many strange and delightful shocks she could take in one breakfast, “She did? That’s wonderful! With whom?”

“Professor Vector.”

“Septima Vector?”

“Yes.”

“Our Septima Vector. The Arithmancy teacher?”

Professor McGonagall nodded, chuckling resignedly, “The same.”

Hermione gave up on eating any more, “That’s wonderful. A bit startling, but wonderful. Did you have any clue that they were-”

“Not a one. Not a hint of warning. Not that I go to any great pains to snoop on people’s intimate
lives, but still. Not a single clue. Just a mynah bird. Last week.” Minerva threw up her hands in exasperation and struck the table with her fingertips as they came down.

“A mynah-”

“It’s what they use for owls in Tahiti.”

Hermione tried to keep her voice even but it had begun to flutter with laughter, “And…and you’re sure it’s for real? They haven’t been kidnapped or… or…”

Minerva nodded and sighed, “It was a picture postcard.”

Hermione couldn’t help herself and her face burst open with laughter. It was just too sweet and mad and lovely. Professor McGonagall’s shoulders were shaking too, annoyance melting into capitulation, wiping her mouth with a napkin which she put on her empty plate, draining the last of what Hermione suddenly realized was probably a mimosa.

Dabbing at tears, Hermione leaned in, “Minerva McGonagall, tell me honestly,” she slitted her eyes, teasing suspicion, “Have you put something in the water here?”

Just then, seeming to notice that everyone was finishing up, the shade of Professor Binns stood, took a deep breath, and began a sonorous speech, “My fellow educators...it is the time of the year...as we all look forward...that it is best to remember...the history of this fair institution,” then without any further preamble, he went into his characteristic dull wheeze, “Hogwarts was founded…”

Hermione looked up the table to see if anyone else was attending. Of everyone else, only Beasley Bolger was looking as perplexed as Hermione herself felt.

“You don’t need to mind him,” Nick said conspiratorially at her shoulder, “He gives the exact same speech every year, just keep your talking low so you don’t annoy him.”

She turned back to Professor Binns, who was speaking with more feeling and animation than she’d seen in all her interminable hours of class with him; which is to say any at all, but still not very much.

Nick stared at her, his mouth slightly open and his breath held as if he couldn’t decide how to launch into speaking, now that he’d tacitly invited her to talk to him. She stared back until he gave a little half-laugh that seemed to set him rolling, “So...I feel a little strange making small talk...I can’t ask you where you grew up since I already sort of wrote the book on you...I mean I didn’t write all that down but I learnt it to write what I did write...and next-level interview questions would be...well...certainly not what I expect you wanted for breakfast…”

Hermione tried to listen, but she was rather forcefully conditioned to attend to Professor Binns when no one else could, lest they all lack for study notes. So much so that it was actually hard to look at her junior colleague with the ghost speaking over his shoulder. What was worse, something about Nick’s polite distance seemed fragile, like he would overstep at any second and begin poking her in feelings and subjects that did not want touching, “Oh it’s quite alright, why don’t you tell me where you grew up instead.”

“Cambridge, mostly. My parents…” then he said a few things about teachers and the country that got all mixed up with Professor Binns’ speech on teachers and the wizarding world. Hermione was already dizzy from the glut of human contact and food and laughing, and began going a bit cross-eyed as her brain pulled itself towards two different narratives, Professor Binns making her sleepy and Professor Kalil making her a little paranoid.
She pulled herself together for a heroic effort, “Cambridge, so you’re muggle-born, like me?”

He frowned in concern. Clearly she had missed something significant and responded wrong, “Y-yes. I am. Sorry I thought I said. Are you quite alright? Do you want some water? Here...” he reached for a brimming carafe.

Hermione’s hand unconsciously went to the outline of the locket under her robe, the other waving him off, “No, no water,” something in the water her thoughts were already swimming, “I think I ate a bit too quickly is all, I am sorry, I should go lie down and have a conversation with you...I mean, I go lie down now, and we can have a conversation later. When you’re older.” she felt cold and a bit clammy, her seat felt confining, “I’ll just go.”

She got up and waved apologetically at everyone down-table, especially the handful she didn’t know and hadn’t greeted, then crept shakily around Professor Binns, who was so immersed in his recounting of the uneventful tenure of Heliotrope Wilkins that he didn’t notice. She slipped out the side door and down the back way to the dungeon, as if she were running down a drain.

Chapter End Notes

I'll probably put up a short chapter over the weekend.
The drop in temperature as she descended was refreshing. The dark and the quiet calmed her down. The way the voices in the great hall filtered thinly from high above matched her sense of being apart, and it was oddly comforting, sanity-confirming. The back way was narrow and torch-lit, and she took a moment to sit on the bottom stair and catch her breath, leaning her forehead against the cold stone of the passage as her burst of nauseous panic receded.

“Professor Grang- oh blast!” Sir Nicholas, in a failed attempt not to be startling, leaned out of the wall at an angle that was just beyond the ability of his head’s tenuous grip on his shoulders to manage, and it had subsided suddenly. It lolled for a moment by a thin strip of skin and sinew before he caught and replaced it adroitly, barely pausing before soldiering on with the inexplicable composure of a cat that’s just run into a glass door, “Are you quite alright?”

Hermione, taking slightly longer to gather her head, lowered the hands she had clutched to her chest and took a deep breath before lying, “I’m fine, Sir Nicholas. Just a little out of sorts this morning.”

“It is a bit overwhelming, isn’t it?”

Hermione nodded vaguely and made some affirmative noises, not really sure or caring what specifically he thought they were talking about. She’d gotten used to other people appointing themselves experts on her behalf on what widows must be feeling, and she generally didn’t find it helpful to insert herself into the conversation.

“What did you say?”

She shook her head, “Nothing, really.”

He looked stricken, “Nothing?”

It took her a moment to realize that he wasn’t talking about school or loss or beginning of term or life in general or clarifying her vague mumbling, but about the whatever-it-was that McGonagall hadn’t managed to ask her yet. She tried to read his expression as it glowed milk-white in the dark corridor while she weighed the temptation to take advantage. Teenaged Hermione wouldn’t have thought twice about whether not-really-lying for the sake of information were the way to go, but marriage, politics, and parenthood had worn down a lot of her overweeningly clever edges. It was important, when you had an advantage over your friends and colleagues, not to humiliate them or sell them out. And in any case she was a terrible liar.

“Sir Nicholas…”

But she didn’t see why she should be the only one languishing in suspense, “…I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

“What?”

“Tomorrow. Or maybe after dinner if I’m up to it. Right now I need to have a bit of a lie-down. I didn’t sleep well last night and I’m not ready to discuss it properly,” which was entirely true.

“Oh but…” she watched his eagerness wrestle with his gallantry and lose utterly in a way she had to admire, “I understand, of course. I do beg your pardon.”
“Thank you.” She got up and walked toward him down the corridor. He stepped into the wall to get out of her way.

“I just hope,” he said as she passed, his disembodied voice ringing eerily in the narrow passage “that you were kind.”

Hermione paused, “Of course. Always.”

“Minerva never shows the strain she’s under. She’s going to need all of our help either way.”

Hermione sighed resignedly as she walked on, “Don’t worry, Sir Nicholas, she’ll have it,” *whatever it is* she thought.
The rest of the morning went by fairly quickly. Despite her protests to Sir Nicholas, she felt a good deal better when she got back to her rooms, and as Happy was still puttering about and had made good on her promise to get everything laid out, Hermione put in a couple hours of decision-making, sorting, and organizing. She was roundly surprised by how well-in-hand everything was by the time the mantle clock chimed eleven.

“I will go now,” Happy brushed her hands together and looked about at the room, pleased, “The headmaster has appointments, and will want to see you for lunch at half past noon, if you can make it.”

Hermione stretched her back, nodding “Do please tell her I’ll be there.”

“The password is calico.”

“Noted. Thank you Happy.”

There was a pop and Hermione was alone.

Definitely time to test that bathtub.

With just a little coaxing, the gargoyle shower head began belching fresh water into the sunken stone tub. She couldn’t find the right heating charm to make it run hot, and was standing up to her ankles in cold water beside the thing trying to find a mark or sigil that would give her a clue when she turned around and noticed fine silver bands slightly recessed into the places where each step met the next, and in between the stones forming to floor as well. With the second charm she tried, they all glowed with warmth, becoming hot to the touch without burning. Enormously relieved and cancelling the letter of resignation she’d begun writing in her head at the thought of living without hot water, she went into the bedroom to undress, recalling the spell she’d designed that could hang a book in the air, turn its pages on command, and put a bookmark in without being touched.

By the time she was in her dressing gown and brushing out her wild hair, she’d given up on finding a book. The only one that was plucking at her sluggish mind was the new copy of “Hogwarts: A History”, and she knew that with an hour to kill she might be too tempted to look up Hermione Granger, and she’d really gotten quite fed up with that sulky rubbish woman’s sulky rubbish antics for one morning. She wanted, had wanted, for months really, to take a break from Hermione Granger, and a long bath deep below ground where not even an owl could reach her if she didn’t choose to check by the door sounded like her best bet. But she didn’t exactly want to just wallow about in her own head either, lest the killing of an hour turn into more of a knife fight than an execution.

She remembered the painting. Art appreciation. Worth a try. It certainly had helped get her out of her own head before.

She lifted up the corner of the quilts and reached in to draw the canvas out.

“Bollocks bugger bastard bleeding blasted bugger bollocks!” she yelled as her hand met the rough wood mounting slats blindly and a large splinter lodged itself under her thumbnail. She crumpled to the floor in intense pain, squeezing her finger tightly, part of her primal brain advising her to just pull the whole thumb out of her hand by the roots if it would stop the agony.
She groped for her wand where she’d put it down to change and pointed it murderously at the tiny flake of wood that had gone in deep and broken off short. She had to think a minute, trying to recall a spell that would definitely pull a splinter out but definitely not take off a fingernail as well. Wood-cellulose and nail-keratin were frustratingly similar, magically speaking. Finally she decided to just go with an obscure wood-liquefying spell, just to be safe, betting the damn thing had gone in far enough that there would be plenty of blood to push out the resulting goo. “Perdere!” Her bet paid off in gorey abundance.

She glared at the corner of the painting, irrationally furious, and seized it with both hands, dragging it out into the light to explain itself and not caring that she left a bloody thumbprint in the process. She regarded the unmoving down-turned face and muttered “well at least you have the decency to look ashamed of yourself. If you don’t want me to take you into the bathroom you just have to say so.”

The canvas didn’t respond.

“Well then,” she picked it up by the top, leaving another bloody thumbprint on the back, and strode into the bathroom where the tub was just starting to be full enough to enter. She set the painting against the wall by the edge of the tub, pondering whether she really ought to hang it up in the bathroom or whether that would always make her interpret his posture as constipation. That might be more punishment than was really warranted, she decided. Still, he could endure for an hour. Bastard.

Laying her wand at the edge of the tub where it would be handy to mend her thumb once she was sure it was clean, she shucked off her robe onto the towel rack and gave her locket a kiss before putting it in the empty soap dish by the sink. Slipping into the steamy water was like pulling off an itchy scab or getting a hug from Hagrid, just on the pleasant side of painful, and she groaned luxuriantly as the heat reached in to dissolve her aches and pains as easily as the water dissolved her skin-smothering rind of sweat-salt and dust. She sank to her knees and let the water buoy her up, shivering slightly as the heat slithered up her back. She half-floated, and her spine ached as its joined spots decompressed.

As with any time she relaxed even a little, tears crept out of her eyes and she let them pass without challenge, sliding over her temples into the water. Just something her face did now. Just like being randomly snappish and sulky and triggery and maudlin and closed-off at the best of times...just what she was like now. Unrecognizable even to herself. She opened her eyes a sliver and regarded the image of her old teacher. “This is just what we become, isn’t it. Harry told me about you. After. About Lily, about why you did everything. I think the memory is still jarred up around here somewhere. We’re both of us nothing more than floating relics of dead love. Forgotten war. We just rattle on and on until we just don’t anymore. You at least found a meaningful way to end it. I’m still looking...”

He didn’t look at her. She didn’t blame him. She wasn’t supposed to talk like that.

She sighed, “Shut up, Hermione.” and sat up, turning to face him properly. She moved closer and pulled him out from the wall a bit, looking for the part of the structural wood that had savaged her thumb, looking seriously for the first time for some sort of maker’s mark or signature.

There was no signature, but there was a very narrow, jagged crack along the length of one slat that was grinning with dry splinters.

“That’s quite enough out of you,” she muttered, grabbing her wand, “Reparo!”

The wood creaked but refused to mend. Hermione sighed. The break was probably too old. She
cleared her mind for a harder, more precise spell, “Perduriata!” a small shimmer of motive force radiated from the end of her wand in a fine line, tracing the jagged crack, turning a thin margin of wood inside to viscous goo. “Resolivia!” The sagging liquid wood formed up and hardened into a much more satisfactory piece of slatting, though the grain pattern was gone.

She returned the painting to its place against the wall, never noticing that the thumbprint on the back had, at some point, vanished of its own accord.

She half-swam a stroke back and sat down on the stairs, regarding him again. Like the standing mirror opposite, the surface of the painting had gathered some condensation from the bath, and droplets had formed as though he were sweating.

“Oh don’t get yourself in a lather. I can definitely reparo you if you get warped or something. You’ll be fine.” She lay back, resting her head on the rim of a step and stretching out her legs.

“You’re easier to talk to this way,” she muttered, “more than you ever were, anyway. Though I suppose I shouldn’t say ever. I barely knew you, so how would I know? Were you a good listener for Lily? Was that just another part of you that fell out when your heart broke? That’s sort of where I am. My poor kids, Rose and Hugo, last year they had two parents and now they’ve barely got half a one. I try to listen, I do, I’m just so wrapped up in my own garbage, exhausted and hopeless all the time. It’s all I can do just to maintain them, you know? And we do all right. Rose...she’s the older one, an insufferable know-it-all, you’d like her...Rose has just been an angel. One of the stern, fearsome kind; the ones that you never hope to see coming in your direction, but still. Well-intentioned. She’s channelled herself into becoming our family’s social secretary and maker of lists, and basically drop-kicking her mother through the whole mother thing.”

Hermione shook her head, feeling self-indulgent tears trying to muscle their way into her straightforward self-flagellation, “It isn’t fair to her, at all. It’s beastly, actually. It just...is what it is. I’ve let her know that I do know, at least, how much she’s taken on and how well she does it, and that seems to please her. And Hugo, he’s such a lovely boy, but I think he’s turning to Rose more now instead of me. Her and her aunt Ginny who...well she has just as much right to be grieving but she...I mean it was a shock to everyone but she and her brothers...they’ve lost a brother before. This is my first...widow-ing. She’s always seemed to thrive on family and I...I don’t. I love them but it...it doesn’t help me. It hurts, actually. I know that’s terrible.” she scooted around the edge of the pool until she was facing the bathroom door and the painting was by her shoulder, facing obliquely away from it as if it were an analyst.

“It’s unforgivable, plainly,” she scoffed so hard her sinuses stung, “And I’m here playing the concerned parent and that’s such a monstrous fraud. But I feel like I can’t...I can’t take in anymore. I can’t participate in their story anymore. I daren’t change, it hurts too much. Like I’m just a monument to his memory, our memory, so I can’t heal, I can’t let go. And I’ve...” she sighed ruefully, sour with contempt for herself, sobering anew to the simplicity of her guilt, “I’ve got these two beautiful mysterious human beings I’ve been blessed with, becoming more and more interesting every day and I just can’t reach out to them. I can’t take them in. It’s like my arms don’t work, even when I’m willing to let it hurt. I was never exactly the cuddly fun parent, anyway. That was all Ron. It would probably horrify them if I started trying to fill that void, flailing like the damaged machinery that I am. Even Harry and Ginny...well...nobody’s safe from my sprawling incompetence lately, let’s just put it that way. So I squander everything, and no matter what I do it feels like I’m failing somebody.”

She sighed again in disgust, and leaned back with her ear close to his canvas, tired of the sound of her own voice and trying, tentatively, to imagine the sound of his. That brittle, crystalline, resonant baritone that swooped and stabbed and crackled like glass being ground. How would he have sounded if he had ever said anything tender. Encouraging. Heartfelt. Mentoring. She closed her eyes
to problem-solve the layering of a voice she had not heard in a great many years onto some series of words that he'd never said, would never say, but might comfort her now at a safe remove. She realized she was hovering at the edge of dozing, and thought she may have faded out once at least, unhitching herself from time.

There was no way of knowing whether she had dreamed it or heard it.

*It doesn’t heal. We wouldn’t want it to.*

She splashed bolt upright, craning around to look at the canvas while turning her chest away.

It was unchanged.

All the same, she stood up and hurried out of the water, wrapping her heat-pinked skin out of view in her robe before daring to look at the painting again.

It was unchanged.

She grabbed her wand and directed the tub to drain itself, reassured that her imagination had floated away with her, but still rattled and brimful with the shot of adrenaline it had triggered.

“Bloody hell, Hermione,” she chastised herself, grabbing her locket by the cord and slinging it on over the sodden mass of her hair, “can’t you even lose your mind in a pleasant way? And you!” she pointed her wand at the canvas, “you just...” she felt stupid just thinking it but it slipped out anyway, “go to your room.”

The painting didn’t respond.

She grabbed it and marched it into the bedroom, putting it down against the wall behind the door.

“And avert your eyes, I’m getting dressed,” she growled.

The painting obeyed by remaining unchanged.
“Calico.”

The Gryphon guarding the headmaster’s office jumped aside and Hermione went up. She could hear voices chatting pleasantly as she knocked.

“Come in, Professor Granger!”

Professor McGonagall was sitting in a wing-backed chair by the window, ramrod straight and smiling knowingly. Several feet away, a petite witch with thick black hair and knobby fingers was sitting at an easel working on a canvas with her back to Hermione.

“Enith Stoke, Hermione Granger-Weasley. Enith has taken pains to fit me in for my sitting, so I hope you don’t mind if we work a bit through lunch.”

The little witch turned around and appraised her, up and down and quite possibly through. She had small eyes behind enormous glasses, an unusually broad mouth and slightly pointed ears that made Hermione expect she had goblin heritage. Enith said nothing, nodded, and turned back to her work.

“No, not at all, headmaster. As long as I’m not a distraction.”

“I think we can all muddle through together. Come sit.” she indicated a squat black wooden armchair, antique and ornately carved, on the opposite side of the window. Hermione obliged, thinking that she heard an indignant sniff from Enith as she crossed between the artist and her subject.

“Is this to be your portrait for the office here?”

McGonagall nodded, beaming, “Yes. They’re very special. Require a real artificer to do them properly so they last and are convincing.”

Hermione smiled, stunned by the opportunity but uncertain how best to make use of it, a detail of the carved chair poking uncomfortably into her back like a pistol “I’m not sure I really want to know the process. Part of me likes being able to believe it really is Professor Dumbledore up there and not just a...a clever impersonation.”

Enith cleared her throat and stood up abruptly, stalking across to them with a wand in her hand.

“Ingenious! I meant ingenious, artful, breathtaking,” Hermione babbled, unnerved by the intent look in the artist’s eye and the seemingly dire downward curve of her mouth.

She stopped by McGonagall’s chair. Her voice when she spoke was oddly high, breathy and gentle, “Now, Minerva, please take a moment, I need your first day of teaching.”

The headmaster held up one finger, closing her eyes. After a few moments she said “alright”, and Enith touched the wand to her temple, drawing out a thin silvery thread of memory and lowering it into a vial.
Hermione watched raptly as the little woman sat down and attached a brush-end to her wand, dipping it into the silvery mist and drawing out just a little bit before mixing it with one of the pigments on her board and continuing to work. Her jaw hung open as McGonagall smirked at her like a canary-crammed cat, “It’s...that’s…”

“It’s quite complicated,” she nodded.

“I was going to say amazing.”

“It’s just copies you understand. She’s not actually dragging out my mind to collage it in bits and pieces into the facsimile of my face. But it helps to sort of...if I understand correctly, to arrange the image’s personality to be a faithful representation of mine, give it a fund of knowledge and experience to help it recognize itself as me. Have I got that correctly, Enith?”

The tiny witch gave a noncommittal head-wobble but did not object.

“And every headmaster gets one.”

“That is the tradition.”

“Did, um, did Severus Snape get one? I don’t see him here.”

Minerva’s face clouded and she shook her head, pursing her lips before saying diplomatically, “that’s also a bit complicated.”

“Not so complicated,” Enith interjected softly.

Hermione scanned Minerva’s face for permission before responding, “How do you mean?”

“Well,” the painter replied, dabbing at her work and looking nowhere else, “no painters available when he was headmaster. Word spread fast that the evil one had grabbed Olivander for some sort of plan, none of the rest of us artificers wanted any part of that. Went into hiding. You wouldn’t have been able to find a parrot willing to squawk a haiku about him, let alone a painter to artifice him and a gallerian to frame him.”

“So definitely not.”

Enith sniffed, “No, sadly,” she sighed, “Such a pity. Such marvelous bone structure. And the eyes. And dead so suddenly. Such a loss. Such a loss. Now Minerva, I will need your most vivid memory of failing to achieve what you wanted as a student.”

McGonagall nodded, and the procedure went much as before. Hermione felt odd staring, and so scanned the high wall where the portraits of previous headmasters were hanging. Albus Dumbledore was reading quietly, though he glanced impishly at her and gave her a quick wink. Phineas Nigellus was pointedly ignoring her but refusing to pretend to sleep, staring off into space with his fingers steppled. The only other headmaster she recognized by their portrait was Rufus Scrimgeour, who was busily feeding corn to a crow that had perched on his astrolabe.

When Enith had seated herself again, Hermione peered at Minerva, “Is it terribly taxing?”

Minerva smiled, “On the contrary. A little tiring, maybe, like a brisk walk or a good cry, but I find the process of remembering leaves me with a much clearer head for days afterward, much like taking one’s thoughts out for a glance in the pensieve. Shakes out the cobwebs.”
Hermione smiled back, “You do seem very relaxed. But, what are the paintings when they’re finished? It seems like they must be self-aware.”

Just then Happy came through the door, levitating a small round table with a large round covered tray atop it, a clay jug atop that. One hand held three goblets, and she had a small basket of rolls hooked over one arm. She set the table and rolls between McGonagall and Hermione, and poured each of the three women a glass of cold juice. She removed the tray cover to reveal cold-cuts and sliced vegetables before heading back for the door.

“Thank you, Happy,”

“You’re welcome, Minnie.”

The door closed and there was a long silence. Enith’s brush paused, and she took a long slurp of her drink, smacking her lips appreciatively.

“Min-?”

McGonagall cut her off with a warning look that could have sliced her roll for her.

“The paintings, they are artifice.” Enith said off-hand, half-concealed by her canvas, “Indifferent. Like a book. Like a wand. They live in reaction to the living. They give you answers. If they are very good, very true, they can keep giving you new answers all your life, and speak differently to different people. They can even be playful. But they are closed, like a book, like a wand. They open when you open them. They live when you live with them. Otherwise,” she shrugged, “they wait. They sleep. They pantomime. They give beauty. They do not suffer, they do not struggle, they do not wonder though they can speak of how they have always wondered. Like dreams. Like memories. They are not real, only true.”

Enith took another drink and continued silently to paint, to render a miracle as the laity slowly absorbed the significance.

Hermione looked at professor McGonagall, somewhat sappily overcome, wanting to express simultaneously how glad she was that her dear mentor and friend would be immortalized, and her pre-emptive grief to think of what would be lost when there was nothing left of her reality and they all had to make do with her truth alone. McGonagall met her eyes and they seemed to communicate everything clearly for a moment, then the older lady blurted, “It’s a household name.”

“What?”

“Minnie. It is what my family called me when I was little. Happy has...equity in that sense. Since my brother passed she is the very last one, and I’ll thank you to not make gossip of it.”

"I would never,” Hermione picked up a roll and began loading it busily, “but she was yours? I was wondering where she’d come from. She’s marvelous, I’m so glad she’s here.”

Minerva nodded, “She is. She worked for my great grandmother, and on down the line. When my aunt died she transferred to my mother despite the family estrangement, and kept house for us despite the strict need for secrecy. She...she stayed literally invisible almost the entire time. She’d helped raise me my entire life and I didn’t meet her until it was almost time to leave for Hogwarts. She came to live with me when I worked in the ministry, then she was with my brother until recently. I shouldn’t like to talk too much about her, as she’d tell you herself if you’re interested, and I really haven’t any right...I mean...I like to think that she was treated well but…” she had the grace not to
fidget, looking at Hermione earnestly, “I’ve taken a lifetime of liberties at the expense of hers. I’d hate to take any more by trying to explain her to someone else.”

“She chose to come work for you here. That’s high praise from a free elf.”

Minerva nodded, smiling wryly, “I offered her twice the salary of anywhere else, and promised, when she deemed them ready, I’d see that her grandchildren are admitted as students. She’s setting up a trust for a school for elves, and she wants her kin to learn to be teachers.”

Hermione was breathless, “That’s outstanding! That it might happen in this generation is...”

The older lady shrugged, “It’s a start. We ought to be doing more. If you like you can come the next time she and I sit to discuss it, if you think you have anything to contribute. But, speaking of teaching, and school...”

Hermione swallowed a bite of sandwich, “Yes.”

McGonagall sighed, “Well...the thing about these portraits is, ideally they’re made in a headmaster’s last year of service.”

Hermione sat a little straighter, trying to seem professional and not succumb to the great clouds of sentimentality in the air now that they were discussing school business, “Oh, I see.”

“Yes. And I’m going to need to be bringing my replacement up to speed.”

Hermione felt an odd, cold rush of dread. It hadn’t occurred to her before how frequently former ministers were put forward for headmaster. And Hogwarts was shorthanded. Her mind snapped out a sensory sketch of what it would feel like to take on the heavy mantle of stewardship, the poking detail of her chair feeling even more like a pistol. She struggled to keep her tone blithely conversational and nonspecific as something in her mind began forcefully objecting no no no no no no no no, “Of course.”

“That’s why I’m hoping you’ll accept...”

“No!” She shot up from her now-even-more-uncomfortable chair, barely avoiding upending the lunch tray, and backed a few steps into the corner.

McGonagall looked shocked, and affronted “Professor Granger! Sit down this instant. Whatever are you-”

“Please, professor, I can’t. I’m barely-”

“I haven’t even told you-”

Enith’s soft voice cut through, “Minerva.”

Both women froze, McGonagall’s face pinched in annoyance, Hermione’s trembling on the verge of one of its mortifying soggy outbursts.

“Minerva I need your greatest regret as an educator...” Enith said as she crossed the room with an imperviousness that brooked no interruption, “…and I need you to stop scowling.”

“All right...all right, just...” she straightened in her chair, put her hands on her knees and took a deep
breath, closing her eyes. It took several long moments before she said “All right,” the third time.

When Enith was seated, Minerva spoke again, “As I was trying to say...while I am working with Professor Longbottom to prepare him to take over when I step down, I would greatly appreciate it,” her jaw clenched slightly, but relaxed again when Enith cleared her throat pointedly, “if you would consider taking over his duties as head of Gryffindor house. With Madame Hooch gone, you’re going to be the only other former Gryffindor on the staff. I realize it’s highly irregular in your first year but,” she shrugged, “we are needing to make do, and I expect all hands on deck, as it were.”

Hermione was trying to find her balance between enormous relief, abject embarrassment, and lingering trepidation.

“I have asked Sir Nicholas to put his long experience with the castle and the students at your disposal, and he seems to favor the idea.”

“Oh yes, he’s downright keen.”

McGonagall regarded her quietly for a long moment, then said, “Well, there it is, think it over won’t you?” with a sort of disappointed finality that jammed itself into Hermione’s gut as acutely as the chair was jamming into her kidney.

Hermione thought of Sir Nicholas’ words about the strain her friend was under. Indeed she barely showed it. She looked at the portrait painter and felt time passing her by too swiftly, leaving her on the platform while everyone else moved on.

“No need, professor, I’ll do it.”

The headmaster smiled in a way distinctly reminiscent of her animagical cat form, “Excellent. It means a lot to me for this year to go well.”

“Best of luck on that. I, for my part, am going to be utter rubbish.”

McGonagall shrugged, her composure surrendering to her pragmatism, “Mm. If we get through at all it will be a miracle. But that’s life. I’ll see you at dinner.”

Hermione stood up and crossed to the door.

“It was so nice to meet you, Ms. Stoke.”

The goblinish woman favored her with a backward glance of her perpetually disapproving face, murmuring “Likewise, I’m sure,” in the mildest and sincerest of tones.

“Will you be staying for dinner? I should love to talk more about paintings if that would be at all interesting to you.”

“I’m in Hogsmeade all week.”

“Well...if you have a moment to spare, send me an owl.”

“As you say.”

And Hermione left.
Next week is the first chapter with "explicit" content. For folks that don't like that kind of thing, fair warning. For folks that do...congrats on sticking around through the first twelve chapters! :)
Dinner was good, buffet-style again. Hermione sat alone until Sir Nicholas came over to talk a whole lot of pleasant nothing about the dynamics of heading a house: what he knew about the prefects, the head boy and girl, promises of an extra set of eyes and a reliable repository of names and anything else that might be a help. Beasley came in later and sat with Madame Pomfrey at the Hufflepuff table, not deliberately ignoring Hermione but not taking notice of her either. Hermione couldn’t blame her. Professor Flitwick and his wife, sans entourage, sat cozily together for one last meal before she had to be getting back.

Evening routine was good. She sat by the fire and drank a glass of wine and thumbed through her copy of *Hogwarts: A History*, specifically the part about the portraits and how those at Hogwarts, unlike artifices without connections to a gallery, could go visiting between frames, and how the headmaster’s gallery could even extend to portraits beyond the castle. She read carefully, trying to sift any hints of why or how or where to look next. She didn’t find much. “To the library then,” she said aloud, putting her red-and-gold bookmark in just before the clock chimed eleven, “...tomorrow.”

She brushed her hair and got into bed. She got up to brush her teeth and returned. She got up for water and returned, staring blankly at the wall and unable to close her eyes or extinguish the sconces. She noticed a small bolt-end sticking out between two stones right about the height to hang a painting, so she got up one last time and hung up Professor Snape across from the foot of her bed. It made her feel his judgey presence. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling, but at least it motivated her to command the lights out and get under the covers to avoid seeming pathetic.

She closed her eyes but felt wound-up, anxious, and emotionally tender to the touch. *All right, what?* she demanded of whatever it was that was plucking at her, *I managed to act like a human for almost the entire evening, but now it’s your turn so what?* 

She turned the feeling over, trying to “sit with it” as Ginny would always say, to let it unclench, trying to let it point her to memories or sensations that would tell her what, specifically, was wrong. *Lonely.*

She sighed. She was feeling lonely. Not exactly a secret, but it was hard to look at all the same. She
wanted to be held. She wanted to be kissed. She wanted to be able to enjoy a decent wank without having to sob like a fool afterwards. Except for one notable and idiotic disaster, she hadn’t had anything even approximating sex since Ron had died. And he’d died the day before date-night, so it had been that long plus a week. Reflexively she chastened herself for thinking flippantly, but smacked the impulse away. *Oh shut up, he’d think it was funny, too.*

She put a hand to her locket and murmured sincerely, “I miss you, lover. Good night.” She gave him a squeeze and slipped him off, hanging him on a scrollwork-end of the bed frame, imagining him sleeping soundly, letting go of the burden of his absence for the night. She didn’t have any theories about the afterlife that were fundamental enough to take precedence over grief. The ministry’s department of mysteries had worked tirelessly on high-level projects meant to discover and describe the distant shore of death itself for decades without hard conclusions. She was friends with The Boy Who Lived, and had heard amazing hints of something after...maybe...unless it was something else. She knew genuine ghosts, had just taken one on as an assistant, even, but even the ghosts had no reliable notion of what they might have found if they hadn’t stayed among the living. Her only thought about finding Ron again in the afterlife was “maybe”, and even that she rationed carefully for her worst moments. Gazing longingly into death was no way to live. If there was no reunion waiting there, it was pointless to pine. If there was, it was pointless to hurry. Plenty to do in the meantime.

Plenty to do in the morning, certainly, but locked firmly in the “in the morning” box of her mind to keep worries from scurrying around like mice in the attic. Instead she was thinking about pictures again. Snape on his canvas, writhing. Ron in his locket, smiling. Dumbledore in the headmaster’s office, dozing. Each of them true, but none of them real, casting heartfelt shadows their survivors lived in, alone. A few tears leaked down her temples into her ears, but she was too done with the day to hear their petition.

She had just slipped into a twilight drowse in the total darkness when she heard and felt the side of the bed sink under a person’s weight. Someone had sat down. She stayed very still, intrigued and strangely unafraid. She could hear them breathing. They didn’t sound like a maniac, though it made no sense to her that she thought she’d be able to tell. She didn’t want to scare them away, or perhaps startle herself awake. She seemed to remember inviting them, or meaning to.

With another slow creak of the bedframe her visitor leaned over and she felt fingertips, smooth and warm, alight upon the back of her hand where it lay on the quilts over her chest. In the utter dark, that sensation glowed; secret, safe, and daring as illicit flashlight reading. Long fingers smoothed over her hand pensively, studious slowness and provident sensuality, examining the blind contours of raised bones, tracing lingeringly down the surprisingly sensitive inner sides of her fingers. It was unlike Ron, nothing he would ever do. Ron was always performing, she thought fondly, and his touch was perpetually venturing, self-narrating his next intention. This touch was comparatively silent, slow, vigilant. Exploring but not seeking. The thoughtful reserve of her visitor’s touch told her she could tell them to go or invite them to stay, and pay no price for it later, engender no obligation or scorn. They moved no further than the back of her hand, though she kept still a long time to see if they would. This touch simply offered and observed, as self-possessed as a kiss upon a glove, an overture to collaboration and gainful conspiracy.

Experimentally, deliberately, she turned her hand over and crooked a finger to touch the pit of her invisible visitor’s wrist, to return the silent signals of intent, interest, exploratory acceptance. His wrist was covered in fabric that buttoned over half his palm. She felt him hesitate but he did not vanish, did not stop caressing her. She beckoned along his wrist. The bed creaked as he leaned nearer, his touch trailing unhurriedly up her lower forearm, hers roaming in kind.

They went on like that for a captivating while, gradually discovering and affirming a silent and
invisible diplomatic language of touch, inviting and assenting, each slowly gaining ground until their arms were entirely in play, a process of lingering advancements and artful processions, the weight of him settling in beside her atop the quilts, establishing an embassy.

She tried another experiment, turning her hand until she could close it around his slim, sinewy wrist. He did not vanish, did not pull away, simply held still, attending, assenting to detainment. She squeezed him gently and let go. For a moment he seemed to withdraw, and she felt a lurch of regret, but then his fingers returned, stroking the back of her hand from fingertips to wrist, turning about her forearm with smooth deliberation until his long fingers encircled her, echoing her, and squeezed, and held for a moment, so steely-strong that she had to catch her breath in excitement...

*Excitement?* she marveled silently...

...before releasing her and returning to gentle caressing, though now with a bit more of his clothed palm in constant contact.

Tentatively, she braced for another experiment, hoping it wouldn’t break their spell to speak.

“Why are you here?”

There was a moment’s stillness, though the contact remained. Then:

*You are lonely. So am I. It seemed like a worthy idea.* His voice was smooth and resonant, exactly as she remembered it, but calmer, more kind, exactly as she had tried to imagine.

“But why you?”

*Do you want someone else?*

She considered, for a moment, if she could conjure a dream of Ron, but just the idea of being able to feel his hands on her again so vividly was too much, too dear, and she winced away from it before it could make her cry. Those dreams generally wrecked her for days. Or at least waking from them did. Knowing it was a dream while she dreamed would be unbearable.

“I see what you mean.”

She felt him lean in a little closer, his weight conforming comfortably to her side through the thick bedding. His palm lifted off again as his fingers began to explore past her elbow and up to her shoulder, wandering over and under the hem of her sleeve in an experiment of his own, gauging her reaction.

She made her feedback firm, intentional, bringing up her other hand to grip his wrist, pressing him back very gently as she turned under the blankets to face him, and brought his hand prayerfully close to her lips, pressing it between her palms. Carefully, her fingers worked to slip the first button of his cuff through its hole. When she had done that, and he had stayed, she took a second button. He let her, breathing evenly. She took a third, her fingers exploring down the shaft of his naked wrist under the cloth. She heard his breath catch, his hand rolling into her touch, nestling reflexively.

*Is this real?*

He sounded hopeful, sighing, surprisingly vulnerable, but it was the question that stunned her. Could fantasies ask that? Should dreams...seem surprised? Or unsure? She thought of letting him go, putting on the brakes, interrogating what on earth was happening, affirm reality using talk and books and
ideas instead of...primary research...sensory investigation. But the thought of turning away the first chance in months to feel recognized as a sexual being in a place she felt safe and unbroken was too cerebral and persnickety even for her, so she let go of the doubt instead and moved his parted cuff up to her lips, touching the soft, salty pulse-point gently, first with the tip of her tongue, then with a slightly parted kiss. His voice resonated deep in the metal and fabric of the bed as a sigh thickened to an unselfconscious groan. He turned his hand to stroke her face. She reached for him in return, forbearing to draw him in and kiss him properly, needing more to confirm him to her awakened fingers.

He was real. He was so real. She stroked the fine long hair back from his temple and behind his ear. She gasped as he caressed the back of her neck and ran his fingers up into her hair, cradling the base of her skull before closing his fingers into a fist that gripped her hair tight, just as he’d done to her wrist, shivers fizzing through the skin of her scalp and putting him, momentarily, completely in control of where the weight of her body went. Gentle and merciless as gravity, he compelled her down until she was lying flat again, his long body leaning over hers, her throat exposed. The gesture was so inherently menacing and her sense of incongruous safety so complete that a surge of delight almost made her laugh. He kissed her beating artery, tasting her gingerly, his breath washing over her. He released her, his hand returning to her cheek, her chin, her lips, his weight receding over the covers like a broken wave as he gauged her reaction to his foray and awaited her response.

She kissed his fingertips and ran her fingers deliberately into his hair as he had done to her, gently massaging the back of his head a few times, teasing as though she might pull him down to her lips, his eagerness for this counter-proposal eloquent in the taut line of his body against hers. As he leaned down she gripped his hair, preventing him. She heard his breath tighten and felt his body slacken, his chin lifting obediently, immediately, surrendering. She guided him in an arc down onto his back, rolling to lean over him, her blood stirring like a stormy summer wind in response to the supple grace with which he succumbed to her.

She did not let him go.

She touched the collar of his cassock with her free hand, finding the buttons and prying them apart, maintaining a moderate pace but beginning to feel rather urgent. There were so damn many buttons, fabric-covered and fussy, and the holes were annoyingly small. She used her grip on his hair to turn his face away from her before releasing it, needing to prop herself up a bit higher to cast an unraveling charm as she ran her hand down his tightly-bound chest and belly, buttons falling free in her wake, stopping somewhat timidly before she reached his groin, her surge of confidence bearing her only so far.

Feeling her falter, he turned back to her and took up the thread of their exchange, leaning in close, his breath on her lips, one sharp-nailed finger-tip finding her temple and slipping through her hair, behind her ear, and glissading down the long muscle of her neck to the top of her sternum before alighting on the thick barrier of quilts. With a quick motion and a quiet word his deft touch slashed through the enshrouding layers like a giant scalpel. He snaked an arm around her waist and drew her out to him, bringing her neck to his lips as she twined her fingers in the hair behind his ears to draw him in, affirming his impulse that they should fasten to one another, desiring that all things else should unbind and dissolve. With his free hand he tore at his robe, and his skin was against her thin nightshirt. With a gesture, she made her own buttons wriggle free of their threads, and fabric gaped as his mouth climbed down her front, his lower jaw reaching open and pulling his kissing mouth closed to wherever it found purchase.

_Is this real?_ He asked again, sighing into her skin, urgent, rapt, _Can you be here in my bed? Mine?_
She felt another twinge of doubt that was quickly buried by the sensations of his lips summing her left breast and claiming it for king and country with a ravenous zeal. He pressed his weight down on her hips and braced her along the sides with both forearms as she writhed and groaned helplessly for a long time, lightning-shocks flashing down her spine and ricocheting behind her fluttering eyelids. But when he finally released her she felt so tenderly grateful for his passion to give her pleasure that the doubt came wheedling back, for his sake.

He sat up, his back to her, shucking himself of the last of his awkward garments with a kind of violence, as if he were a lycanthrope tearing off his human skin. It reminded her of Lupin, as did her feeling of being more frightened for him than she ever could be frightened of him. Did he know what he was doing? Could she let him if he didn’t? She kneeled up behind him, pressing her bare chest to his bare back and twining her arms around his to still him, to gently bind him, drawing them back very slightly. He submitted immediately, if not fully: his muscles were still tense against her grip, anxious to their purpose but biddable. She leaned in and put her cheek against his ear. He smelled like no man she had ever been close to, body musk and the light sweat of living and something else green and sweet and foreign, like eucalyptus or sage but unknown to her. Could dreams smell of something she’d never smelled? The changing pressure of his back against her front as he breathed was hopelessly erotic in its raw material certainty. It couldn’t be a dream. Somehow, he was there. She kissed his ear, nuzzled it, had to fight to keep her head long enough to speak.

“This is real. I am here, with you. But...Severus...I’m not her. I’m not the one you’re lonely for.”

His arms slackened, and she released him. He turned in the dark, his sharp cheekbone and nose gliding against her collarbone as he prioritized getting an arm around her waist over responding to her words, breathing her in and nuzzling and seeming to fight the same battle she had to stay above the mounting demands of their intersecting flesh, to gasp out words before slipping beneath their surface again.

No...and I’m not him…

She leaned against him and he kissed her breastbone three times, slowing. They were both still then, sinking back into silence, she stroking his hair, him stroking her long back, but neither of them advancing, both trying to come to terms wordlessly the way they’d begun. Words weren’t helpful, wouldn’t tell them if they could bear to stop or bear to continue. Very gradually their touch wandered, patient and wary, like a pair of starving wolves circling dangerous prey, relying on each other to survive what might happen next. One would shift and the other would move with them, considerate, attuned, exploring, testing, as if their whole bodies had become hands that could caress one another neutrally, safely, every surface an academic discovery of fingertip and palm, chaste and intent. They also tested small movements apart, yielding space, testing the gravitational imperative to see if it would fade given room, always finding that each motion away simply stored an energy that would impel them together again. Eventually she was in his lap, wrapped about him, both of them making small sounds in a low, meditative way that helped to bind and guide each through the other like a secret epiphany language. There was no great shock, no finality of decision when he entered her and she enveloped him. It was just one more touch, intense and continuing and consonantly questioning, learning. They rocked, breathing. They had been joined that way for a long time before their fused lips resolved into separate pieces and she said against his, “Do you want me to...”

He nodded, breath ragged, cupping a breast in his hand and bringing it to his mouth, freeing her to cry out. She shuddered and rocked hard against him then. After the long build-up it happened very quickly, churning the slow store of deep heat to a rocketing eruption that felt like it might actually blow off the top of her head.

He held her tight as she bucked, arched, made a sound reserved for sudden religion, and went slack.
He gathered her in, still rampant inside her, burying his face in her neck and whispering... do you...do you want me to...

She felt a pang of regret that she hadn’t been clearer. Perhaps words had their uses. She slid her fingers into his hair and squeezed, focusing his attention on hearing her, obeying her, “Yes, Severus. I want you to. So much. Yes, yes.”

A groan surged into a cry as he lifted her, bringing her down on her back with him on top of her, grinding more than pumping until the very last...few...thrusts. He thrashed, gasping almost in disbelief. She held him, feeling him surge through their tightly joined bodies, the heedless molten rush, and the abstracted certainty that it couldn’t feel like that and not be happening. And then, quelled, still pulsing inside her, he kissed her so tenderly she thought her freshly resuscitated heart would break.

She held him as they rested in one another, luxuriating in the weight of him, that nourishing warmth and pressure against her starved skin, wishing it wouldn’t end, that she wouldn’t have to ruin everything by figuring out what exactly the hell was going on.

He grazed along her ear like he was a deer and she was the earth, murmuring *We’re both still going to be lonely. Fair warning.*

She nodded against his cheek, “I know. It never heals. We wouldn’t...”

...want it to if it could. But...shared loneliness...it’s worth study...

“Yes. Yes, Severus.”

She felt a tear on her face that for once wasn’t hers.

And then she woke up.

“Accio! Lumos!”

She was alone. The painting was unchanged. Her nightshirt buttons were nowhere to be found. The quilts were un-sundered. The damp spot on the sheets was enormous.

And there was a tear on her cheek.

She bolted out of bed, her legs rubbery, and stalked over to the painting, the angle of his head now seeming more bashful even if it was no different than before.

“What the HELL was that?!” She couldn’t quite articulate why she was angry, just that she had been utterly certain of fundamental reality moments before, and the lapse into uncertainty made her feel foolish, exposed. Abandoned.

She touched the tear from her face, holding it up accusingly, “You left this,” and she swiped it brusquely onto his bared cheek.

She heard the clock in the main room chime eight. Morning. She paced halfway to the opposite wall and turned. Her ruined nightshirt was clinging clammily to her thighs. She pulled the fabric away from her skin, pulled the shirt off and held it to her nose, trying to find the dusky, metallic, mineral smell of semen, or any lingering of that verdant smell of his skin. She couldn’t find them. She wiped her sticky thighs with her shirt and tried again. Inconclusive.
“And not all this is mine!” she yelled, throwing the shirt at the painting. It bounced off with a soft slap and fell to the floor, defiantly anticlimactic. She sat down on the corner of the bed, naked, staring at him, too angry to plead but too desperate to yell, “Just...what the hell was that?”

She sighed and answered herself, “It was a dream, you stupid ass. You had a gigantic vivid wet dream because you’re a ridiculous spinster widow who can’t just masturbate, apparently, and was ready to come like a geyser so your body gave up on waiting for you to pull your heart and your head out of your ass and take care of business. You cast a goddamn unraveling spell in your sleep and ruined your shirt, then you mopped up your juicy crotch with it and threw it at a weird goddamn painting. That’s what the hell just happened.”

She nodded, resigned, answering again, “That’s fair.”

Still, she felt pretty fantastic, like something that had been wedged up tight against her heart had finally shaken loose, like a seed worked free from between her teeth. She was still lonely but...she wasn’t alone. Somehow her fantasy had tricked that grieving, unreasoning part of her brain, the one that kept expecting Ron to come through the door, into believing that someone had finally come through the door and that the universe made more sense than someplace where people could just disappear. Because brains are incredibly stupid when they’ve made themselves up. And she was cold.

She hastened to the wardrobe and pulled on her clothes as her mental “in the morning” box popped open and the contents came spilling out into her forebrain. She had lesson plans to review, Neville to consult with, the supply cabinet to organize, a trip into Hogsmeade to refresh anything low, a trip to the library if there was even time...and enough fresh energy to really attack a day for the first time in far too long.

She pulled the door closed and the room became dark. And there, in the dark, Severus shifted in his chair, conflicted.

Chapter End Notes

Hermione goes to bed, feeling plagued by loneliness. As she's drifting off, someone sits on the edge of her bed and touches the back of her hand. She feels strangely and completely safe. She gradually invites him closer and recognizes in the dark that it is Severus. They're both confused about what is happening, but he asserts that he found her because they're both feeling lonely. They acknowledge that neither is the one that they really feel lonely for, and have consensual (if somewhat confusing) sex that feels very real. Then Hermione wakes up and feels very confused about what's real, and more than a little outraged without any direction to send it. She yells at the painting and throws her dampened nightshirt at it, admitting to herself that she probably just had a wet-dream, and that it has made her feel a fair bit better. But after she leaves the room, Severus in his portrait finally moves.
Hermione almost felt lifelike again. She went through the day, from task to task, never getting lost in her own head or ambushed by swampy rumination. She’d gotten the cupboards sorted and the desks stocked. She’d gotten her chalkboards written and then gathered the text into her wand to be deployed with a spell of her own design, one that had revolutionized meetings at the ministry (though not always for the better).

She even had time, just a little, to stop in at the library to look for books on art and artificers of the wizarding world. Maybe it was just a painting, she rationalized, but her interest in it was creating a space for her mind to move. Reaching out to this idea of a person who had gone through loss and alienation was making it easier for her to ponder really reaching out to less custom-made people, given a little time. Pursuing that interest, especially if it let her learn a little more about a facet of her world she’d never really thought about, seemed smart. Fantasizing was healthy, she assured herself, and until she figured out where the painting had come from and where it best belonged, it wasn’t hurting anyone to indulge herself a little. For the first time in a long time she felt...young. Or at least merely approaching-middle-age-d.

The library was exactly the same as she remembered, and to come back to it on a good day felt like a celebration. She strode, as quietly as one can stride, down the main aisle, heading for the material arts section. Her old pattern of browsing came back easily. Read all the spines. Don’t grab anything yet. Read them again. No, not yet! Patience! Close your eyes. Picture the titles that stand out in your mind. Then and only then-

“No I help you find anything, Professor Weasley?” Anglen Krowse stood at her shoulder, his broad young face careworn and solicitous.

“Um...well if you like. I’m content to browse but, there’s an artificer, a painter, who is visiting Hogsmeade and, well, I’d love to treat her to dinner but it occurs to me that I don’t really know how to talk with her at all, or even ask intelligent questions, so I was thinking I should bone-up on art a little.”

The idea of Ron that lived in her imagination nudged her and grinned, and it made her smile.

“Ah,” he said, “well, you’re in the right place. If you don’t find what you’re looking for here, maybe try over in biographies. Artists’ lives can’t be told without their work after all. We’re a bit sparse on actual art history I’m afraid. But most of these picture books are top-notch.”

“Do you like art, Mr. Krowse?”

“Oh. Yes. And Dorian paints. He’s quite good. For his age.”

“How lovely. Well, I’ll have to talk some more about it with you some time. As it is I’ve only got a little while before I have to get ready for the sorting ceremony, so…”

“Yes, right. Well then, see if there’s anything you’d like to take out now, and if you like I’ll pull a few more things for you tomorrow. I’d do it tonight but- “

“No no, I understand. Busy night for everyone. But, yes, if you get a chance, that would be a help, thank you.”

“Not at all, Professor Weasley.”
She grimaced, “It’s Granger, actually...” and she unreeled the patter that attended the assertion.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Sorry professor.”

“It’s fine, really, but...I really should pick something and be going.”

He suddenly smacked himself in the forehead with the book he was carrying in a way that was quite alarming but was apparently meant to be genially self-deprecating, “Right. Bye now.” and he ambled off.

Hermione shook her head, the peculiarities of true youth reminding her that, no, maybe she wasn’t all that young after all. She picked a volume named “A Treasury of Portraits”, noting that it was “revised and expanded with muggle photographs of the most frequently absentee portraits”. She tucked it under her arm and hurried out.

Just outside the library she met Neville, headed her way, looking a trifle smug. “I thought I’d find you here. Never bet that Hermione’s not in the library!”

She grinned and held out her free arm, “You got me. Do I get a proper hug before the students come and we have to be unfeeling pillars of authority?”

He wrapped her up and gave her a hearty squeeze. He’d gotten slender after they’d left school but had put a bit of baby-fat back on with the arrival of his and Hannah’s own babies. It made for lovely hugs, though his beard was ticklish. And...and it didn’t sear her to the bone, this old affection. Not as badly as it had the day before. A certain soreness, a definite sting of something lost, but between the niceness of the hug and the pain of her injuries, definitely not a net drain on her stores of endurance. The sense of relief was even better.

“I tried to find you earlier,” she said, continuing on as he fell into step beside her, “You weren’t in your office.”

He nodded sagely, “Look for Hermione in the library and Neville in the greenhouse.”

“I did, they weren’t there anymore.”

He clasped his forehead, “Right, sorry, they’re in a different spot now. Long story. They got dissolved and Minerva thought it wiser in general to build new ones further from Hagrid’s hut.”

“Dissolved?”

He grinned, “Those in glass houses shouldn’t allow gamekeepers to import Saharan silicasti sprites, is my new motto. How are you?”

“Overwhelmed.”

“But picking up extra-credit reading anyway? That’s so you.”

She smiled wickedly and affected her exaggerated insufferable-know-it-all cadence, “You’d like it, it’s mostly pictures.”

He gave a little whimper as if wounded by her jibe, the sort that was mostly kidding but slightly not. He didn’t laugh. Ron would have belly-laughed and said something just as scathing in return until they’d nearly suffocated with laughter, scrapping like intellectual puppies. She missed that terribly, and suddenly missing it made one of her oldest friendships feel suddenly and unjustly deficient. Stop making comparisons, Hermione she chastised herself, pitying Neville for having such a shabby
friend. “How’s your dad doing, Neville?”

He gave a half-measure smile, “Really well, I think. It was a struggle there after mum passed, but they’ve been trying a new treatment, one of the ones they developed from studying the Lestrange wand...he’s not exactly lucid, but they say he’s dreaming when he sleeps again. They say that’s major. I don’t really understand it, but he does look good. I’ve been meaning to thank you for donating that thing when they asked.”

“It was my pleasure honestly. Glad to get rid of the malignant thing in a good cause. Really thank Luna for coming up with the idea, and fighting for it when nobody believed her the first time around. Or thank the freak of luck that conspired to lock her and Olivander up in Lucius Malfoy’s basement all those years ago. I don’t think she’d have become his apprentice otherwise.”

Neville smiled uneasily, “That feels a little too close to being grateful to Bellatrix Lestrange.”

Hermione returned his half-measure smile, thinking of the scars under her skin where the mad death-eater witch had carved the word “mudblood” into her arm before torturing her half-mad with the same unforgivable cruciatus curse she’d use to destroy Neville’s parents when he was just a baby, “I know what you mean. But I’m glad your dad is doing a little better.”

He nodded, “Do you feel ready for tomorrow?”

“Not even slightly,” she sighed.

“That’s a good sign. Means you’re a good judge of reality. Nobody’s ever ready. It’s like parenthood times twenty, but with fewer hugs and less dignity.”

“I just...I was never any good at potions especially. I was so much better at defense and charms and...well almost everything else.”

Neville shrugged, “That’s a good sign too. You can’t teach stuff you didn’t struggle a little to learn. All that stuff that came easy for you, would you know how to explain it to anyone else, or would you just get frustrated that they seemed to be failing at something perfectly simple?”

It took her a moment to absorb that. It sounded like nonsense to her rational mind, but then Ron had always done best at helping the kids with their homework, “I...I hadn’t thought of it that way, but you’re completely right,” she grinned at him, “you’re going to be an outstanding headmaster. Congratulations by the way.”

He shrugged, “I was third choice. Vector bolted and Flitwick didn’t want it.”

“He always was clever.”

Neville sighed, “You’re telling me. This year is going to be completely mental. The defense against the dark arts teacher we were going to borrow had to cancel, so I’m doubling up teaching that and herbology. Bolger’s going to be filling in arithmancy along with divination, at least for the first half of the term. McConagall’s even filling in transfiguration classes while Professor Plinkette is out having her baby. We’re a skeleton crew. The only saving grace is that the outbreak of gallopox is keeping about a quarter of the student body home this term. Though I suppose it’s tasteless to phrase it that way.”

“Yeah a bit.”

“Sorry, pressure.”
Hermione nodded sympathetically, unable to think of anything to say. They strolled briskly down a corridor that bustled with busy elves and idly gossiping paintings. They were at the bottom of the stairs to the dungeon when she came up with the ingenious response of, “It’ll be alright.”

“Oh I know,” he took the liberty of pushing open the potions classroom door for her, “Every year I think there’s going to be a disaster, and every year the sorting ceremony sets me straight.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes.” He nodded gravely, lingering in the door as she passed him “The looks on the little first-year faces always remind me that they’re more afraid of us than we are of them.”

“I’d better bring the smelling salts, then. They’ll be fainting dead away up there.”

“Don’t think it hasn’t happened.”

She grinned, trying to think of something more supportive, “Neville…”

“Yeah?”

“I know an awful lot of talented people that owe me favors. I’m not above calling those in if you decide you need more hands and don’t really care about experience.”

He nodded, pondering, “Yeah…yeah maybe. I don’t think we’re to that yet, but I’ll think on it. Thanks.”

“See you up there.”

“Courage!” he swept out of the doorway and down the hall with exaggerated gallantry.

Smiling, pondering names, she went through to her bathroom, washing her face and trying to decide if she ought to change. She brushed out her hair and plaited it back, considered her face and decided to do a little makeup. Just her eyes. Make an impression. She was going to be head of house, after all. She was actually excited. And she was excited about being able to be excited.

She went into the bedroom for her pointed fancy-dress hat, lit the sconces with a gesture and stumbled back a step in shock. Severus was still in his painting, his eyes still averted but turned slightly in the opposite direction. He was sitting in the plush amber chair, elbows on the armrests, hands folded, shoulders tense.

“Don’t,” he murmured, his tone clinical and distant, “be angry.”
Hermione felt her politician’s demeanor close over her face like a panic-room door, masking the rage that ramped up steadily as she processed the situation. It was the least-productive kind of anger: outrage mixed with embarrassment. She hated surprises, she hated being fooled, she hated being wrong, she hated not knowing how far back she had to rewind her perception of reality to get up to speed, and she hated being at a disadvantage of indeterminate size. Her boiling-cold analysis of the situation was teeming with all those factors.

She gave him her coolest McGonagallian stoneface, “Very well. I’m not angry.”

He turned his head without looking up, turned his hands to fold them a different way, “What year is it?” he seemed uncomfortable, mannered, guilty, but it was still a demand.

She indulged her fundamental compulsion to answer questions correctly, “Twenty nineteen.”

He lifted his eyes and looked at her for the first time. It was uncannily him. He spoke more forcefully, “Where...am I?” She recognized that cadence, the volume and emphasis of the first word meant to frighten the listener into unthinking obedience. It wasn’t a dream. It did not feel safe. It felt immediate and foreign and treacherous. But she wasn’t eleven anymore.

“You’re...” she recalled what Enith had said about paintings, how they were as unconcerned as books, “...worried about where you are?”

His hands gripped one another tighter and he looked away.

She tried to sound solicitous, “Well, at least be fair. What year are you from?”

“Nineteen ninety-seven.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, “I don’t believe you.”

His flicked up, flashing dangerously, “What.” It was a challenge. He was falling back on trying to be intimidating again. It was certainly working, it was just no match for Former Minister for Magic Granger’s polity face. A cold trickle of sweat ran down between her shoulder blades as her body revved to fight monsters, her expression calm and pleasant.

She shrugged to assert that she was just the messenger, “There were no portraits made by artificers that year. You’re either not an artifice or you’re not from that year. Possibly both. But if you’re not lying about the year, then what are you?”

She folded her hands to keep them from shaking. She was so bad at this when she was angry, feeling humiliated. She couldn’t tell how she was doing. She could keep a straight face by brute force but adrenaline always made her hands shake. She was so much better at being forceful and direct...but then, as she recalled, so was he.
Out in the main room, the clock chimed the half-hour.

Her condescending mask slipped and she swore audibly, “I don’t have time for this. What are you? Why are you here?”

His mouth crimped sardonically, “Oh but be fair. Why are you here?” It was a hard press at the first scent of blood. It seemed desperate, but his face was placid, unreadable behind a haze of smug.

All the same, it got under her skin and she answered too fast, subtly sloppy, “I asked first.”

“But I’ve got time for this and you don’t. Unless you’re lying.”

She scowled at him. He was right. He could probably go for hours effortlessly evading her if she stuck to insubstantial maneuvering. She needed to intrigue him if she wanted him to engage, and she couldn’t do that by lying since she was terrible at it. It would only stoke his contempt. She was almost certain he had already lied, was counting on evasion. The truth was probably a footing that would favor her, “Because I needed a tiny room far away from my life that I could go quietly insane in,” she drew herself up, claiming the strength she demonstrated by volunteering a weakness, dropping a world of emphasis on each word after, “Why are you here?”

His expression shifted, perhaps softened, and he paused, “I’ll tell you when you come back.”

Had he really taken the bait? She tugged gently at the hook, “You assume I’m coming back?”

His composure slipped, either anger or fear, and his diction took on that familiar, subtle snarl. She remembered that. It was distinct from his more manicured modes of intimidation. It was the inflection that said he couldn’t relax his upper lip, gave away his genuine aggression though he was trying to maintain a calmly condescending drawl, “Because I can’t imagine a witch of such exquisite composure can have completed her venture into madness yet, and you don’t seem like a quitter to me.”

At a guess, he was desperate for her to be angry, assuring that she would come back, even just to fight him. It was a good cold read, if it was one. Keen. She kept her voice mercilessly even, “Don’t I?”

He shook his head, gazing at her steadily, “You certainly don’t kiss like one.”

It was a low blow. Sloppy. Telling. When she had been a student, Professor Snape only ever resorted to cuts about appearance or virtue when he felt pushed beyond the pale, otherwise he saved his contemptuous barbs for the only things that actually mattered to him: academic competence and intelligence. She was rationally aware that it was just a flailing ploy, and blatantly hypocritical. Still, the blow landed. He had guessed rightly that she was concealing a sea of doubt and hurt pride.

She ran her tongue over her front teeth and retracted it with a harsh crack of suction as her anger reached a place where it froze into contempt. Without a word she went into the bathroom and did her eyes with a steady hand and a vengeful flourish that gave her the look of a lion. She breezed back into the bedroom, picked up her hat and fixed it to her head with a silver pin she’d gotten at her wedding. If he wanted to go low, she wasn’t the only one who had managed to look ridiculous in the last forty-eight hours.

“If I return to find you doing that penny-dreadful mannequin act again, I will chop you up and put you in the potbelly stove. Do you understand?”
He inclined his head in assent, “Your servant, Madam.”

“That’s ‘Professor’ to you.”

It wasn’t the sort of door that could be slammed, but she made sure the latch clicked as loudly as it could.
Sorting went well: no fatalities for the nine-hundred and sixty-fourth sorting in a row, though one small witch did keel over in a dead faint when she was sorted into Gryffindor. Dinner was boisterous. As Neville had said, each table was at least a quarter empty, and the incoming first-years didn’t do much to fill them, but somehow the noise-level was much as she remembered it. No one at the staff table talked much; they were all too busy keeping an eye on the new students, taking their measure. Rose scrupulously avoided making eye contact with her, but was kind to all the new Gryffindor first-years, including her brother Hugo and cousin Lily, and that’s all Hermione really wanted from her daughter. She touched her locket, thinking how proud of them all he’d been, and would have been.

When the time came for McGonagall to dismiss the hall, Hermione leaned over to Neville and whispered, “Am I supposed to do anything?”

Neville shook his head, “Not really. Just try to learn their names and intervene when they screw up. And keep an eye out in case any of them seem like they’re up to something.”

“What do I do if I think they’re up to something?”

Neville shrugged, “Learn their names and wait for them to screw up.”

“Right. So I can just save time and assume they’re all up to something.”

“Still the brightest witch in the room.”

Being on the other side of the beginning of term banquet was so novel, it was almost easy not to think about the painting. But after the children had all been herded off to settle in, the walk back filled her with a chilling speculation. If he wasn’t a Hogwarts portrait, there was only one thing she could think to compare him to: a diary, from a long time ago. One that could communicate and seduce and share visions with whoever trusted it.

Her mind pounced on the problem. Had Snape made a Horcrux? He could have. He’d killed Dumbledore, and had known he was going to. Would that have worked? Doubtful. Would Voldemort really have trusted anyone else with the secret? Even more doubtful. But Snape had been cunning and resourceful, and determining the Dark Lord’s secrets had been his life’s work. Would he have done it? She couldn’t imagine it. He’d been a deeply flawed man, but the sort of gross ambition and vanity it took to do something so fundamentally wrong and foolish and self-destroying in the same act was nowhere in anything she’d known of him. But then, she hadn’t imagined any of the things about him that had come to light after he had died, either.

Should she tell someone?

Dumbledore had wanted the lore of the horcruxes to vanish from the earth. It had practically been his dying wish. She and Harry and Ginny, as far as she knew, were the only ones left alive who knew about the awful practice of creating mutilated soul-shard objects via murder to prolong one’s own life. If all went as intended, the knowledge would eventually die with them. She knew Harry and Ginny would be at her side in a moment if she called them with a fear like this, being both her friends and her in-laws. Both victims of Voldemort’s crude immortality scheme, they would certainly want
to know. But...well...that would still be painfully awkward. They still hadn’t talked about what had happened on Ron’s first post-mortem birthday after too much wine, and now Hermione was left weighing which conversation she dreaded more. She knew, in her heart of hearts, that they would still run to her side, go above and beyond, and not press for conversation the moment she asked. They were Gryffindors too, after all, and she knew she would do it for them. She still loved them, after all, even if that made it worse.

Maybe she could just sleep in her armchair. If it was good enough for a couple-dozen headmaster portraits...

Then a grim thought occurred to her. If she ignored him would he be able to move around to other portraits? “Go visiting”? Pick someone else’s dreams to haunt? A student?

She closed her eyes and shook her head. She had to be brave. And smart. She was both of those things. She could handle this. She was a grown woman. When Ginny had fallen for the diary, she had been a naive child. Naive and brave and smart and in a disorienting new life situation and heartbroken and desperately lonely for someone she could talk to…

Oh bollocks. That rationalization went nowhere helpful.

She tried again. The diary had been Voldemort, one of the most sadistic, malicious, powerful, vile, manipulative people to ever live. Whatever was in that painting, it wasn’t him. It couldn’t be. If it were evil, it was still some lesser evil than what she’d already faced and defeated several times over. And if it were some evil aspect of Professor Snape, well, even at his most loathsome, if he were telling any version of the truth, he was the only person she’d ever met more fundamentally heartbroken and lonely than she was. Was it only her imagination that he seemed desperate for someone to talk to?

And it was too late to call anyone else. And she didn’t want to admit defeat. And she didn’t like bullies. And she didn’t want to sleep in her damn chair. She had to teach in the morning.

*That’s right, Hermione*, she thought, *think of the children…*

*...and not about how you’re being a selfish lunatic reluctant to let go of the only thing that’s made you feel even vaguely like yourself in months*, her exactingly rational mind muttered at her as she pushed open the bedroom door.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah, this is a short and very intermediary chapter and y’all want more Snape (somehow I can just tell:). I’m hoping to make this week a twofer.
“The lioness returns,” his voice was less acid than it had been, almost neutral. The edge of mocking wasn’t aimed to cut like before. A better mood, maybe, or perhaps he’d decided, as she had, that basic civility and tactical cooperation were the surer, subtler diplomatic strategy. He was standing more in the foreground than before, his loosely clasped hands and asymmetrical stance affecting a lofty ease contradicted by the subtle pout that ruched his bottom lip, and the way his eyes flitted restlessly while his head never turned, twin flames in a tower’s arrow slits.

She stood squarely before him, her best diplomat-face in place, “I said I would. Or at least, you were right when you said I would,” she conceded, “I admit I don’t remember everything I said. You’d caught me off-guard.”

He bowed slightly, acknowledging her concession, “I was hoping we could get off on a better foot this time.”

She pursed her lips and tilted her head to the side, “Better than tonight, or better than last night?” It was overweeningly provocative, but she had to establish, for her own reference, whether they had actually been to bed together, or if he’d just taunted her about it, having heard her rail at herself about a dream.

He gestured past her at the corner of the bed with his upturned palm, asking her to sit and turning to his own chair once she had. Once settled, he laced his fingers together, speaking through a thin-spot in his laconic confidence, “I do want to apologize for that.”

She blinked, “Same basic question: For tonight or last night?.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, maybe annoyance, maybe discomfort, “Last night.”

That was interesting. She’d expected evasion, “Well?” She was genuinely curious, eager to take him at his word, making note of the sympathy she felt when he wasn’t being an utter pillock, and that she probably ought not to be so obvious about it.

“It was wrong of me to...approach you like that. In my defense, it wasn’t entirely under my control. But I could have stopped. Could have stopped it. With occlumency. But dreams are tricky. I got confused. I forgot myself.”

She rested a forearm on the iron frame, “So, is that what happened? We shared a dream?”

He grimaced slightly and shook his head, his weight shifting forward, his posture loosening, suddenly the engaged academic and unwisely obvious about it, “Not exactly. More that we were each dreaming, and our dreams shared a space.”

She leaned in to mirror him collaboratively, “What’s the difference?”

“Safety, for one.”

She remembered that; the instinctive feeling of confidence “How so?”
“Well…” his face was pallid but his ears turned pink, and he eyed her as if she was testing him, “If one dreamer,” he held up his left hand, “enters the dream of another,” he held up his right, “each must experience exactly what’s done, much like in the real world but with less…separation. Though the hosting dreamer has the most influence over the environment, the other is not powerless,” he placed his palms together and used one hand to force the other down, “But when each has their own dream,” he held his hands less than an inch apart, “there is room for interpretation. Both only have the same experience of a given moment if it is what both of them accept or desire,” he moved each hand about the other as if molding the air, then alternated touching his fingertips together, “they lend each other the use of certain…raw materials…vividness, presence, spontaneous detail…but they only meet where their dreams agree,” he laced his fingers together very loosely, “which is not to say that they cannot be very close, they are simply…buffered, against things like malice and mismatch of intentions, awkward thoughts, hurtful mistakes. And of course it’s a dream, so neither is constrained to having their experiences reflect the physical or logical properties of the real world,” He seemed to recall himself and let his hands fall into his lap indifferently, the lecture completed.

She decided to risk a press, “Fascinating. I must admit, I’m sincerely intrigued to know what you ex- 
experienced” she’d tried to brazen through smoothly but didn’t quite make it.

He swallowed. He looked askance, but his right hand began tracing gently over the back of his left in a pattern that made her catch her breath. He stopped. Neither of them spoke for a while.

She cleared her throat, “So what you’re saying is, even if you’d wanted to, you couldn’t have harmed me.”

“Correct.”

“Then what reason did you have?”

He glared at her incredulously, “That’s a bit of a demented question, don’t you think?”

She nodded, relieved that his revulsion seemed authentic, “I’m glad you think so. But if what you’re saying is accurate, there’s nothing to apologize for. Or if there is, I was conscious that I had a choice, so I owe you one as well.”

He blinked, apparently stunned, but nodded, “I’m…glad you think so,” there was the small hint of a smile, clear-eyed and genuinely relieved. She resisted being disarmed by it, clearing her throat.

“I suppose what I mean is, what do you mean by apologizing? What did you do wrong? We’re both adults. A little disoriented perhaps but if what you say is true,” she didn’t linger over-long on the “if” as she might have if she were needling him, “we were both, by definition, consenting. Do we really have to be as…as stuffy as all that about it?”

He pretended to clear his throat to give himself a moment as he steepled his fingers nearer to his face to mask his expression, “I suppose I mean that…I would like you to expect, in the future, that I would not…engage with you on such ambiguous terms. It was an unintended liberty born of disorientation. My mind is clearer now, and my self control is excellent. I will always be able to stop myself. I have, and had, no desire to menace or interfere with you, in any respect.”

Hermione nodded, civil, balanced, feeling as though she ought to be pouring tea, or possibly bashing her head against a wall, “I see. Well then for my part I hope that my participation wasn’t an abuse of your temporary indisposition.” She cringed inwardly so hard that for a moment she couldn’t inhale. This was exactly the conversation she didn’t want to be having with anyone. It was her turn to pretend to clear her throat, “So, if you don’t mind, I’m quite interested. Why were you able to…approach me?”
His relief at returning to something technical and interrogatory was evident, his head moving more naturally as he spoke, “I’m not sure. I was asleep and you were simply there, evident despite the darkness. There are any number of possible bonds between dreamers. If we are blood relatives. If you were carrying something enchanted by me. If you used any of your own magic on this...item,” he eyed the edges of the painting with disdain, “If you’d somehow managed to get blood or sweat or anything else of yourself on the canvas.”

She felt an urge to change the subject, “What I mean is, artifices don’t tend to have the ability to dream.”

His expression soured and his tone became terse, “And muggles will tell you that portraits don’t tend to have the ability to talk. If you don’t mind I feel like I’ve extended quite a bit of good faith. Do I get to ask any questions yet, Professor?”

She noted the question as one he didn’t want to answer. There was a good chance he was not a portrait, and knew it, and did not want her figuring out what he was. That was troubling, and highlighted to her how much she had drifted into assuming he was not an enemy, “You’re right, of course. I’m sorry. Ask away.”

That seemed to restore his businesslike calm, “Where am I?”

“You don’t recognize it?” He scowled at her and she realized she had ham-fistedly thrown in another question, “Sorry. Your painting is in the bedroom of the potion master’s quarters at Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry.”

He pursed his lips, plainly puzzled and intrigued, “How did I get here?”

“I honestly don’t know. I just found you behind the tapestry, night before last. Well, and then you were in the bathroom for a little while, then in here again. That’s all that I know.”

He narrowed his eyes, “And you are the potions master?”

She tried to look indifferent, though the incredulity in his voice stung, “Does that really seem so unlikely?”

“Says the woman who doubts that the oil painting of a human subject is a portrait,” he muttered sardonically.

“I have reasons. Do you?”

That curl of the lip again, “There is much overlap between the aethers of consciousness, the energies of the body, and the reagents of potion-making. If you’re the potions master your ignorance in such matters is appalling.”

She regarded him coolly. He certainly had Snape’s expert aim for pushing buttons, “In my defense, my teacher was a miserable preoccupied bully.”

Another flash of puzzlement glinted behind his dissecting glare, and she realized that he did not recognize her, though he had gleaned that she was talking about him. He managed to keep his voice pointed and compelling, “Who is headmaster at Hogwarts.”

She did her damndest to read him, but all she could see was that this question mattered to him enormously, which would explain why he’d tried to throw her off with insults before asking if blanket contempt wasn't also so much in character, “Minerva McGonagall.”
His paused, “And he-who-must-not-be-named?”

“Voldemort,” she said, with intentional punctuation of each syllable, “is dead. Utterly. For over twenty years. All of his death-eaters are either dead, reformed or,” she traced the edges of his canvas with her own pointed gaze, “...imprisoned.”

He lowered his eyes, tapping his long fingers together, then stood up suddenly and turned away from her, resting one wrist on the wing of the chair and the other in the small of his back, clearly trying to collect himself and disguise it as more assured contempt. She admired his use of the very limited space and props, feigning confidence and authority when he had next to nothing to work with, not even knowledge

“How did it happen. Please, tell me everything.” His tone revealed nothing, but the strained attempt at courtesy invited greater courtesy as a show of strength. That alone might have been a feint, but his ignorance invited compassion in a way she couldn't ethically ignore. She’d forgotten that Snape had died not even knowing whether it would be in vain. If he were a spy, it was hardly information he couldn't get elsewhere. If he were only what he seemed, toying with him on that point would be abominable.

Hermione took a deep breath, deciding, taking time to unpin her hat and lay it on the bed beside her. She was getting weary, she might as well be bold. Her eyes settled, momentarily, on her copy of *Hogwarts: a History* where it still lay on top of her covers without a table of its own, the hand-made bookmark still protruding from the end of the chapter about portraits, tongue-like and mocking. She sighed deeply, feeling a little ganged-up-on by the attendant mixed media, but still adequate to the task, “I can tell you what it says in our histories. There was a man named Severus Snape. Voldemort had killed Lily, his friend, whom he’d loved all his life, and so Severus worked in secret to bring down the dark lord and his death eaters, serving as a double agent for Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix.

“When Voldemort took power, taking over both the Ministry of Magic and the Hogwarts school completely, Severus kept the resistance informed, taking no credit, making few friends and many enemies. He braved unimaginable pain and peril, and was an utterly miserable pillock to ever interact with.”

He turned his head toward her a fraction at the insult, but she soldiered straight on, “Voldemort murdered him right before the final battle for Hogwarts, but never truly defeated him, never knew what he had done to undermine the death eaters and why, couldn’t conceive, in his pathetic fragmented heart, of the magnitude of devotion and sacrifice it took to live as a double-agent for so many years for the sake of someone long dead and longer lost.

“Voldemort was defeated because Severus Snape bought time for Lily's son and a few others to gather and destroy the dark lord’s objects of power,” she stood up and moved around the footboard, leaning back against it with her hands braced, her tone growing more pointed as her thoughts turned to horcruxes, “a technique they perfected and haven’t forgotten. Professor Snape was the headmaster of Hogwarts for a single year, installed by the dark lord to establish a horrible new order, but no portrait of him hangs in the headmaster’s office because none was ever made,” her voice rose steadily from admiring to indignant, and she hadn’t realized until she said it how much it offended her that something might use a fellow war hero’s image to invade Hogwarts, his especially, “So I’ll ask you again: who, or what, are you? Because if you are some sort of trick, or trap, or misguided attempt at vengeance, and you’ve come here in his form to try to harm this school, I assure you, if you are as inexplicably capable of wishing as you are of dreaming, you will dearly wish you hadn’t.”
His head sank, the ribs of his back rising and plunging with breath as if he had been running for years. He seemed to gather himself, and she tensed in case he turned on her and responded in some blistering way, but his will seemed to abandon him as soon as he’d gathered it. She recognized that, intimately: the mechanics of being swallowed up from the inside by feelings one could not begin to express. When he’d lost more strength than he could afford to the maelstrom, he sagged against the arm of the chair, his elbows locked, his head bowed and turned away, very much like his original pose from a different angle. It was exhausting to look at him, and Hermione turned away as well, putting her hat in the armoire and moving to sit on the edge of the bed, waiting for him to respond, struggling to maintain some semblance of a hold over herself lest his storm swallow her up as well, sympathy-first.

“They don’t mention that he deserved it, then. How much of it was entirely his fault.”

Hermione shook her head, not looking to see if he was actually looking, “No. Those that know about that part of it feel that he did his penance, or at least that it is ahistorical to assign blame the same way he clearly did,” she studied her shoes, realizing it must be getting late, “It does clearly say ‘miserable pillock’ though.”

After a small pause, “Does it.”

“Mmm,” she nodded, “Italicized. With citations and a lengthy footnote.”

There was a breathy snort of half-laughter. She smiled and looked at him. He’d sat down deeply, his back in the corner against the wing, arms folded gently across his abdomen, exhausted, supported, clinging to vigilance. She wanted to believe he wasn’t a threat.

“Are you Severus Snape?”

His eyes flicked and he pursed his lips, “I suppose if I am anything I am he.”

“How is it that this...form of you exists? What is it?”

He sounded drowsy, resigned, “I can show you. Tomorrow if you like. Is the pool still in the bathroom?”

She tilted her head, perplexed, “It is.”

He nodded, “Tomorrow, then.”

She slipped off her shoes and stood up, “I’m teaching all day tomorrow. I’m free after dinner.”

He was silent for a long time as she puttered. She undid her hair, hung up her robe, and bent over the bed to retrieve her book and turn down the covers.

“I do recognize you now. Who you are I mean, not just the presence I woke to.”

She straightened up, unbuttoning her shirt cuffs, still feeling a bit punchy, “don’t tell me it’s because you recognize my great motherly rear-end. I was eighteen the last time I saw Professor Snape.”

“It’s because you’re still an insufferable know-it-all.”

It pinked her very slightly, but was mostly companionable, probably offered as proof of his identity, though too many people knew that story for it to serve as such. She feigned nonchalance, offering him an easy chance to insult her, trying to gauge his lingering defensiveness, “Why now and not
before?” bracing to let any comments about her wider hips, her laugh lines, or how the line of her jaw had gone a bit soft slide off her armor.

He loosed a droll snort, “I suppose even my impressive capacity for sufferance has improved with time.”

She returned his half-laugh, and he chuckled. It was an intimate, human sound, and it utterly wrecked what remained of her sensible defenses. It was horribly foolish but oh Merlin she was exhausted, emotionally drained, tentatively relieved, getting ready to face the depressing ruminations of bedtime, the terrifying prospect of teaching in the morning, and all she could think was how much easier it would be to sleep if she had someone to swap some “raw materials” and affirming warmth with, and how he might be feeling something very similar. But that was, by every rational measure, a terrible idea, and one she could resist. If she were smart. She was quite smart.

She went into the bathroom, taking her dressing gown to change, taking her wand to undo her eye makeup, and intentionally taking a long, long time. She let the shower-head sluice icy water down her sides, trying not to scream. She brushed and flossed and brushed again. She counted to six-hundred once, and then again, until her eyes felt heavy and she was fairly certain he’d be asleep and she’d be unlikely to say anything to him that made her sound like a thirsty schoolgirl.

When she returned, he was indeed fast asleep, head leaned back and turned away so a slim patch of his bare throat rose above his high collar. She turned away, knowing what his throat tasted like, how it smelled, wishing she didn’t. She turned out the lights and slipped out of her robe, hanging it and her locket from the corner of the headboard and sliding, naked, into bed. She touched herself almost shyly, certain she could get off, silently, before she fell asleep, and then she’d feel better and clearer and less prone to fall into bed with an insufficiently-known quantity. She could do her own work.

But she fell asleep halfway through.

Chapter End Notes

So today I finished the very last chapter of the very first draft of this story. That's 80 chapters, four-hundred and nineteen pages, just over 183,000 words. The final version will be a good deal shorter, probably closer to 140k if my editing tendencies remain constant (ed. boy did they ever not...). But, to celebrate, I'm going to drop this one today and try to have *three* updates ready for the weekend.

Up next: More smut. Also talking. Talking is compulsory.
This chapter contains explicit sexual content. Please skip to the notes at the end of the chapter for relevant plot details if that is not something you enjoy.

She slipped out of bed, bare feet padding along the stone. In the main room it was bright and warm, the fire crackling in the grate suffusing everything with rich colors. There was still a draft, but the hot and cold swirls of air felt lush and right against her bare skin. A climbable tree had grown beside the antechamber archway, with branches that reached up through a bright crevice in the ceiling, and a basket on the dining table held trinkets she had lost or coveted as a child, but she was looking at the door.

The door to the classroom was still the same heavy brown wood, but in the firelight it glowed like golden velvet. Above it was a plaster bust of Athena, and on that a crow stood, eyeing her ominously. She crossed to the door slowly, put a hand to it, found that it was warm and plush. She pressed a cheek to it, her chest, her shoulders. It was smooth and pleasant and she briefly fancied that she was lying face down in bed, but when she looked again it was definitely just the door to her classroom.

She thought of going through it, but realized it would be better if she were to knock.

The door resounded heavily, then slid aside, folding and bunching like a thick curtain.

She stepped through into the classroom. He was there at the desk, intent upon an iron cauldron on a bright blue flame, ingredients arrayed in measured quantities around it. His sleeves were rolled up halfway to his elbows, and it almost felt as though she were spying on him in a moment of private undress. She was certainly more concerned over his modesty than her own.

It struck her that she was, technically, having a naked-classroom dream, but instead of feeling exposed and anxious and unprepared, she felt bold and balanced. Just from the setup she knew exactly what he was making, exactly where he was in the process, and what step came next.

Veritaserum. Truth potion, challenging and elegant. Impulses to surprise him, or assist him, or annoy him warred merrily as she watched him work. He moved with such precision and intensity of focus; the sterile and solitary passion of the late-night academic. She recognized that too, intimately. When enough ingredients had disappeared into the pot, she moved over quietly and sat on the edge of the desk facing the blackboard. She knew, vaguely, that she’d had very good reasons, at some point, not to invite him to bed, but in the moment they seemed fairly inconsequential and open to interpretation. Desks aren’t beds, after all.

His eyes flicked to her face, then to the cauldron, then returned and fixed on her, his hand hovering midair with a teaspoon of silver powder. He swallowed, and his lips parted a long moment before he could get any speech past them.

Hello.
She shrugged, “I couldn’t sleep.”

He squinted at her in perplexity, then realized she was kidding. He shunted his gaze back to his work with a will.

“Is this what you dream about?”

_Sometimes._

“Your work.”

_My life._

“But...here?”

He paused again, smirking, and suddenly she knew that what she was seeing was one of the happier times of his life. Just knew it, as if he’d somehow told her through the air, through her skin. He returned to working, saying only, _I’m not the only one here by choice._

The potion-making process came to a complicated point, and she kept amiably quiet, watching his technique. If he wasn’t Snape he was a brilliant mimic. Or was she just seeing what she wanted to see? Finally he turned the flame down to let the potion simmer for a long while. He placed both hands on the desktop and regarded her with an engaged study that mirrored her own.

“Do you mind that I’m here?”

His eyes flicked away, and he glanced down at his hands, _You remind me that I’m dreaming._

She realized he was admitting that her presence was not ideal, that she ought to leave, but she didn’t feel rejected. On the contrary the honesty was flattering, comfortable, as incongruously reassuring as her nakedness, skin-certain, “I can go, I don’t mind. I thought I needed...well...raw materials, but I’m fine now. I just wanted to find you. To see if I could, I suppose, but I don’t mean to interfere.”

He glanced around the room, then shook his head, _Stay. If you like._ He moved around the table to her knees, putting a warm hand companionably on the outside of each of her thighs,

_Do you want to?_”

“To...share materials. We could. Soon.”

_Honesty came as easy as breathing, and she wondered without concern if the veritaserum vapors were changing the quality of the air, “I do. I want to do everything we did last night, actually, and a lot more. Over and over until we’re too exhausted or hungry to keep on.”_”

He looked down acutely, _I...um...concur. We do have to wait a while first. Or I do, just until the potion’s impurities have burned away and the surface becomes mirrored. I have to keep watch over it and...forbear. Any energies in its vicinity could foul its integrity. It would get cloudy and overly specific._

She grimaced, “Passion clouds veracity? That’s a bit ham-fisted, even for a dream. Or magic. But,” she shrugged, “I don’t mind waiting with you. I do have questions, to pass the time, if you like. I expect you may as well.”

He nodded, and the small smile that narrowed his eyes was pleased even if the tilt of his head was dubious to the point of sarcasm, _More questions?_
She nodded, deadpanning, “I’m surprised that you’re surprised. So is it the dreaming that makes your touch feel so...uncomplicated, or is that something you’re doing? Or not-doing? Does it mean I’m dreaming it and you’re not?”

He glanced at his hands on her legs as if he’d forgotten they were there. After a moment he stroked lightly with his thumbs, testing the bewilder ing ease of it, No, it’s a shared experience...but...I agree that the attendant lack of tension is pleasantly surreal. It’s nothing I’m doing on purpose, but I see what you mean. It’s very...uncrowded, mentally, he gave another experimental brush with his thumbs and it felt...nice.

Hermione frowned with thought, “But is there a reliable way to know if I’m just making you up in my head? Is it possible for me to know whether you’ve really decided to touch me or if, in your dream, I went ahead and left you in peace just now?”

He began to answer but frowned, mostly to himself, Truly, though, aren’t you bored of lecture?

“Never. And this is clearly lab.”

His smile warmed with a sly hint of competitive intellectual pique. It made him marvelously handsome. His thumbs migrated to the inner slopes of her knees, pressing gently to cue them apart. He took a small pivoting step between, then square to her again, levering her thighs apart with his hips, stroking her legs pleasantly.

You have to want it.

She grinned and arched an eyebrow, and his untried chuckle melted her. She missed being silly. She missed flirting. It had been hard to find it without Ron, he was one of so few that knew her. She softened her smile, “What do I have to want?”

He caressed her shoulder, his words academic, his touch quietly taking up different simple meanings, You have to want to see what they dream, invite it, want it more than the other things that brought you together, without grasping at it, and without waking. It’s more difficult than you’d think. Even very gifted legilimens have trouble with it.

“So you’re saying I have to want to know whether you’re laughing more than I want to hear you laugh.”

He nodded, Basically. It's been posited that dreams, or dreamers, share faithfully by default, just on the principle of conservation. And there’s a pressure towards a certain...candor in all dreaming. But we can certainly fool ourselves for our appetities just as easily. Even so, I am given to understand that those who practice a great deal, together, get a sense, he raised his right hand, palm towards her, and she met it with her left, feeling a deep shiver at the vivid sense of touch, of what is mutual and what is a private embellishment.

He turned his hand and rolled it to stroke her palm with the backs of his fingers. They were cooler than his palm, with fine hairs between each knuckle, the ridges of his nails strumming the texture of her handprint, though it is a field that hasn’t had enough methodical study. It’s considered unreliable. A novelty. Something complicated and ashamed slipped through her sense of him, as if he’d been caught-out deserving to be ridiculed for such a lapse in his tightly-buttoned rigor. She knew that feeling, most especially when she longed for an afterlife. But dreams, at least, they might gainfully study.

She sat a little forward, lifting her chin, her lips parted enticingly, silently proposing research. He slid
in closer, bending to her and lingering, breathing her before tasting. She waited until his radiant warmth was hovering patiently on her mouth, until he was waiting for her to close the final centimeter, before she spoke, “So when we do things this way, slowly, asking, it is likely that we are quite close...in what we experience.”

He nodded, his lips parting, his nose caressing the side of hers, and made a low noise in his throat that resounded inside her like her own name. She met his mouth, moulding it with hers, working it until it was softer, warmer, shaped just for her own. When it was properly heated she released it, and he roamed over her cheek and ear and collarbone. She stroked the backs of his hands, his wrists, and let her fingers meander across the air to the button-riveted lap of his outer robe.

“I do have another question,” she murmured, blushing, “It’s a bad question, probably with a bad answer, but I won’t take it badly if you won’t.”

He stopped slowly, trailing his lips along the line of her jaw as he straightened to regard her, Ask whatever you want.

She hadn’t thought she’d be able to look at him steadily, but she did, fiddling idly with a button at his center of gravity, pulling gently to rock him towards her, her desire for him becoming tense and specific, “Last night, did you think I was her? Did I spoil something for you by reminding you that I’m not? I expect that sounds jealous but what I mean is, I didn’t intend for you to think that I minded if that’s what you wanted, I just didn’t want to take advantage if you didn’t realize. It seemed unethical. But then so does cancelling your fantasy when you were...are...being so generous and considerate with me.”

His expression clouded-over at the question and scudded fitfully as he tried to answer it, No, I...I couldn’t quite...place you relative to my life, if that makes sense. I was disoriented by the setting, I recognized my bed, and with the way dreams can create their own context I...I remembered expecting you, I recognized you after a fashion, and it was at once familiar and mystifying. I... the truth seemed to get out ahead of him as he worked to express himself, I do long for her, but that’s not what I was...that’s not why I didn’t recognize you at first, and that’s not...that’s not why I come here in my dreams...”

An obvious truth lotused open to her, and she offered it to him, “This...is where you come to hide. Me too. It’s why we recognized each other, remembered seeking each other out. We both came down here to be alone. Funny how that works,” she took a breath, confessing, “Being alone is the only time I don’t feel quite so...isolated. Hiding is the only time I don’t feel lost, or trapped.”

He listened and nodded slowly, continuing the thought and its meditative openness, But being alone...where you are...wanting to touch you and then just...

She stroked his cheek illustratively and nodded, “Just touching. Instead of always longing, wondering, planning so many moves ahead. And knowing it’s alright. I know, it’s such a relief...like an escape.”

Even now when it’s a bit... his breath caught in a slow moan as her fingers traced along his ear ...frustrating.

“I don’t mind it. I don’t mind waiting. I like the slowness. It’s still so much easier than...”

He nodded ...not-touching .

She kissed the trail along his cheekbone that her fingers had traced, relishing his smoothness first
with her nose and then her lips, breathing in the sweet, specific, earthy smell of him that her hindbrain was rapidly filing under “anticipation of pleasure” for future reference. She circumnavigated his adam’s apple, and lead an expedition to the shallow well at the source of his throat, parting his collar and pulling it down with one finger as far as it would go, feeling his palms stroking her thighs in a vaguely tidal manner, regular and ranging, occasionally sending giddy chills up her spine by grazing the ticklish inner joint or letting his fingers trail over the sensitive rounds of her buttocks before receding kneeward. She sighed contentedly as she nibbled at him.

Emboldened by these collaborations, he murmured In theory dreamers could also… his sentence trailed off as his mouth abandoned it in favor of doing a tactile meditation on her earlobe, his fingers tightening on her hips as if he might pull her tight to him.

She gripped his hair gently and leaned back, pulling apart, “Don’t theorize with your mouth full.”

His crooked competitive smile yearned towards her face playfully, like a draft horse with a heavy cart, dreamers and legilimens can share semi-passively, they can also...push...

An improbably clear idea of what he meant formed in her head, the concept of pressing into another’s mind with magic to examine thoughts, extract memories, or inflict visions, the active arts of legilimency. She knew a fair bit about it but not what it might feel like, look like, be like, in a place where their bodies were, arguably, only thought-forms, “Mightn’t that break the dream? Or the buffer between dreams?”

He shook his head, still leaning, pulling towards as she pulled away, eyes closing, presuming to kiss. She leaned past his lips and nibbled his neck while he answered, just to vex him, Not if we...they...consent, in careful coordination. If one were to push without the other pushing back with similar force and enough discipline to brace them, they would simply push apart, not touching.

She nodded, letting him turn his mouth to meet hers, luxuriating in the vivid pressures of his kisses; warm and damp, soft lips, firm tongue, hard teeth, flowing breath. Her rudimentary receptive legilimency was clunky and out of practice, and projective legilimency was another thing altogether. It was one of those arts that was useful in small doses and in combination with other disciplines, but had a rather shady reputation as a very-dark-grey art that Voldemort had used and refined to terrible effect, solely to violate his followers and torture his enemies. Even at its most benign it was strictly wand-magic, requiring precision and care...or depraved indifference.

Still, it was intriguing, the idea of a kiss where lips met like two halves of a cut deck and insinuated into one another, sharing an otherwise unfathomable awareness. To reach beyond someone’s skin and touch their heart. Dangerous, requiring training and preparation. Probably foolish to the point of madness. But what would it feel like?

“Can you teach me legilimency? Or at least, help me practice?”

Do you trust me?

She thought for a moment and had to shake her head. She really only trusted him because her senses completely agreed with his assertion that she was safe and nothing was being hidden. Breaking into other states of presence might have other rules. For his sake as well, they would be mad to trust each other too far so soon. He hadn’t even told her what he was, and wouldn’t until the next evening, if then. And she would need to find some way to verify whatever he claimed was true, “I shouldn’t yet,” She thought he would be offended but he shrugged and continued caressing her.

I can recommend some books.
She groaned wantonly, laughing at herself, knowing how Neville would tease her if he knew that phrase was such an aphrodisiac, and she pressed against him appreciatively. She put the palm of one hand in the small of his back, the other on the front of his pelvis, bracing him towards her as she rubbed lightly against the heavy fabric, strumming its rough ascetic texture to send vibrations to the parts of him buried there. He groaned quietly against the soft skin behind her ear, and she felt a tight shiver slide down her spine as she began to separate buttons between caresses.

_Do you make me different, or want to? I...don’t feel like you need my permission but...much like you said, I want you to know it wouldn’t upset me._

She paused, wanting to answer him truthfully, pondering the lines of his jaw and ear like a memory puzzle, “I don’t think so. I might, I suppose, subconsciously, but I’m in a pessimistic place, lately...my fear and anger are so much stronger than my desires, I wouldn’t recommend trusting me as any sort of editor. Honestly I most prefer the things you do that seem the least like something I would invent from my own preferences. I spend too much time in my own head, I get bored of myself. Everything that I know I like just reminds me of...well...” she paused, and felt him pause, and smiled, “There’s a lot about you that I don’t tend to have in common with the other people in my life. I’m drawn to that. I might have thought to invent that if it weren’t already true of your...waking...self...” she trailed off, actually feeling naked for having admitted an attraction to him that went beyond the boundaries of useful dreams. It made things more complicated, but not unpleasantly so.

He tilted his head to one side, eyes narrowed as if preparing to interrogate further, a flicker of hunger to exercise power behind the incredulous smirk. It wasn't malicious, exactly, but it was very Slytherin; a recognition of something in her that he longed to scrap with, to test and be tested by. She recognized that feeling more than she cared to. Enough to reflexively assess that a discussion of her affections would not be favorable footing in a battle of wits.

_“Do you make me look younger?” she began tending to his buttons a little more intently._

That successfully gave him pause, his sense of obligation to answer accurately, from a place of knowing, a close match for her own. He looked at her with critical curiosity, like a sculptor, assessing light and shadow, _I don’t think so. How old are you now?_

_“Not eighteen,” vanity injected some grim wariness into her smile, “A little older than you are...or...were.”_

He stroked her breastbone with the backs of his fingers, then lifted his palm under her breast appraisingly, thumbing her nipple with the intent dispassion of a food critic inspecting an orange, _You could have fooled me._

She scoffed to cover a gasp, _“But so could you, that’s what I’m asking,”_ working free another button at hip-level that left the skirt of his robe parted from navel to floor. She insinuated an exploratory hand into the space between his robe and his clothes, liking the way her flesh sat in his hand and the way his flesh pressed the placket of his trousers against hers.

He shook his head, not looking her in the eye but bending to her breast, putting out his tongue and tasting her with the broad, wet plain of it, oddly vulgar and enormously pleasing, sighing with consonant pleasure and muttering, _I’ve no prurient interest in students._

She hooked a finger in the front of his trousers, gently tugging his hips back towards her, _“Then you shouldn’t give such erotic lab exercises. Stick to recommending books.”_
He chuckled with a hint of dark playfulness, straightened and took her firmly by the hair, pulling her mouth to his with a one-handed grasp at the base of her skull, his other thumb and forefinger rolling her nipple as if to mould it into a perfectly round bead. She was grateful for his steadying grasp as the intense sensations made her squirm against him. He was hard under his clothes, under her hand, and he leaned weight into her touch as she stroked his outline, surrendering the use of lips and passing the seemingly interminable wait-time without questions.

Chapter End Notes

Hermione dreams that she gets out of bed, naked, and goes to the classroom to find Severus. As with her previous dream, she feels uncharacteristically safe and confident, despite being naked in the classroom with her former teacher. He is making veritaserum potion, which is a complicated process. She sits with him and they chat, the fact of her nakedness feeling like a minor detail the way taboo things sometimes do in dreams. They talk about how difficult it is to lie while dreaming, and she admits that she wanted to find him because she was feeling sexually needy, but she felt alright to leave him alone if that's what he wants. He admits he prefers that she stay, but that he has to attend to the truth potion and abstain from any "discharges of energy" that might interfere with the potion's integrity. Still, they touch and kiss, remarking on how bizarrely un-anxious the process is and ask each other questions to pass the time.

Hermione asks about the personalized safety of dreams, and whether there's a way for her to tell if they're choosing the same things or if they've each gone off onto a separate timeline, and Severus explains that dreams will tend towards a conservatory sort of candor, and that with practice a shared touch can be distinguished from a personal embellishment, but that it mostly has to do with *wanting* to know what is true for the other person more than wanting whatever else a dreamer might be seeking. The slower and more carefully they go, the more likely they are to be sharing.

They each ask whether the other wants to see them as something different, and admit that it wouldn't bother them, and realize they prefer being together to re-constructing what they've lost, because the dungeon is where they each came to get away from all the feelings of longing for something they can't have and just have something they can instead.

They talk about dream-theory, about how practiced dreamers might not be able to only share but to push, with legillimency, into each other's minds in ways that would seem physical in the dream, but admit they shouldn't trust each other so far yet, especially since inflicting things on others with legillimency is a dark art, though academically interesting.

They do a little more playful sparring and necking, and Hermione admits to some real affection for him that goes beyond dreaming, though they dodge around it and make-out a little more intently instead, still waiting for the potion to finish.
Ne Plus Ultra

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains explicit sexual content. Please skip to the notes at the end for a summary of plot-relevant information if that is not something you enjoy.

Chapter Notes

Spoilers/Content warning: This chapter contains painful sex, confusing sex, interrupted sex, and lots of similar sexual angst, along with some symptoms and experiences reminiscent of PTSD. Do please practice your self-care. It matters. <3

Much later, it seemed, on some cue between them that waiting was becoming unbearable, she separated her mouth from his and asked “Can you promise me this isn’t some clever game you’re playing? I know you could just lie, but I’d at least like to be able to say later that I did ask.”

He pulled back an inch, whispering to her lips, I’m sure you’ve felt...how it’s difficult to say something that you don’t mean here.

She rubbed his nose with hers, “Yes, but I always feel that way, a little.”

He gave her that vaguely quizzical look again, as if she were one of Hagrid’s peculiar beasts, Lies are about control. Dreams are...not. We exist here without so many gaps and filters between what we think and what we show, what we expect and what we experience. Shared dreams can be very similar to solitary dreams that way. Things simply...happen, on impulse, as easy...and as hard...as thinking of them. They tend to be true, or at least honest.  He put the back of his hand under her palm where she’d rested it on his hip while the other gently molested him, even if I don’t work at showing you those things closest to my surface...you can… he purred as she lifted her hand from his and stroked the side of his face.

“I can,” she murmured, awed, “I can almost hear you through my skin. I thought I was imagining that, projecting it, but I can feel it, just a little, what you want. It almost feels like my own thought but...not quite...like the way words aren’t literally the things they mean, but they can conjure their subject without conscious permission. I just...know how much you enjoy it when I touch your face. But not why.”

He turned his head, eyes closing, preening into her touch, Between spending a lot of time in a laboratory and needing to conceal ‘tells’ for discomfort, I cultivate a strict habit against touching my face. It has ever been my tactile vice. Whereas you…I think... he nibbled her fingertips lightly as they strayed towards his lips and she gasped softly.

Her head fell back a little and resolved into a nod of agreement,”I was a nail-biter. I’d bite them bloody. I still don’t trust myself with even the least temptation towards my manicure. But If you can tell what I want, how do I know that this isn’t all just me, saying what I want to hear, permitting
myself vain and guilty pleasures?"

He spoke into the side of her neck as he measured it in mouthfuls, I’ll take that as a compliment.

She squeezed him with her thighs, growling back at him and giving up on pointless practicalities, “Take whatever you like.”

He made that hungry, name-like sound again and reached for the clothes above his navel, flicking a few more buttons apart single-handed with the maddening ease of a dream and the precision of avid intent, For what I want, we’d have to go slow, just so the potion has time to-

She smirked, but not meanly, “Finish first?” She knew there was something nonsensical about caring whether tasks got completed in dreams, but couldn’t quite remember how to argue it. She wouldn’t have, in any case. It mattered to him, to his ability to enjoy what they were doing, so it mattered more than enough. Her finger-tips toyed with his earlobe and her insides tingled, craving him, “If it’s safer, we could go through, we could go to bed, or in front of the fire, a different desk, anywhere…we’ve got all night...” she was pretty sure she couldn’t wait but should at least offer, her mind latching onto spiraling fantasies of every surface in her rooms, horizontal or otherwise.

He shook his head, continuing to excavate his uncooperatively rigid prod from the depths of his layered clothes, Just a little while, a few minutes. It would be a mad waste to have to stop or to hurry. But we can handle it like we did before, slowly. I...I want so much to...ahh... he sighed as he got himself unlimbered and she stroked him, tagging him as he closed with her. He slid an arm around her waist as if to waltz, seeming to speak more and more to himself as she nodded and murmured emphatic agreement over his low babbling, I won’t move but...oh I want to feel you...now...just like this...I need...to be…

She mated the firm tip of his eager flesh to the pliant lip of hers, and their bodies slid together, matching length to depth, shuddering, imposing pressure and contact through one another like a surging sound. She murmured on a deep sigh as the initial wave of stimulation pressed itself up her spine and poured out a cartesian flow of words, “That feels so impossibly good. I was so afraid you meant what you said, about not wanting to approach me again,” and clasped him to her to hide her face from her own neediness.

He shook his head and sighed her name over and over into her hair, caressing her face with a touch that trembled, I was so afraid you wouldn’t come to me, and I would burn awake forever.

Desire struck and flared. She seized a handful of his hair, a mouthful of his mouth, marveling at the entrancing symmetry of their feelings, feeling again that twinge of doubt in whether any of it was real, needing the reassurance of vivid kisses, finding them laced with the savor of covetousness dissolving into a purer sort of unifying focus.

But the intense relish of joining didn’t settle or fade as they sat still. That dense humming thrust of pleasure continued undiminished, refusing to become quiet and accustomed, pulsing again and again up her spine into her shoulders, neck and lips without provocation, sizzling down her limbs to her digit-tips, sharpening drowsy nerve-endings and reflexes to ticklish pinpoints. Her tender interiors tightened so eagerly on him that she wasn’t sure a lack of pumping would ultimately make any difference.

It quickly became even more of a problem than that. She shifted just a little (noting clinically that the desk they dreamed of seemed to have shortened itself just a bit from an ideal snogging-height to a far better rutting height) and even that perfunctory, distracted motion was startlingly intense and escalatory, nudging up the volume on a deep bass beat that was becoming impossible to ignore with
no method to quiet it again. She huffed, strangely annoyed, wrapping one arm around his waist and under the skirt of his robe, bracing them together like books on a shelf, willing stillness to permit relief, or at least reason. The driving thrum of arousal took no notice, steady but not still. It would have been thrilling if she weren’t forbidden to actually fuck him.

He braced himself to her as well, bowing his forehead to her shoulder, stunned, tense, not supple and articulate like he’d been moments before, nor silken and sinuous like the previous night. She kneaded the curve of his low back slowly, resisting the strong urge to grip him by the buttocks and press him to roll against her like a moored boat in a choppy harbor, speaking half to herself, “Breathe...breathe...”

He caressed her hair back from her face, breathing slow but with a little hitch of pressure here and there that told her he was fighting. I can’t, I’m sorry, he half-laughed over a tone of stern embarrassment, breathing makes me move too much...this is...

She nodded, agreeing with his annoyance “Yes.”

He groaned with rue and relish together, stirring against her unthinking, Oh don’t say that right now, and kissed her hard to stop her mouth.

She slid her hand up his back under his shirt, undoing the buttons at his collar with her free hand, hungry for his skin. They were almost impossible for her, one-handed, and not nearly distracting enough. Something was wrong. When he released her lips and bowed his forehead to hers she moaned, “This is no good, I’m still...oh, oh don’t move don’t move...” he’d shifted one hand to try and help her with his collar buttons, and the light abrasion of her chest against his coat flared across her skin like heat lightning, “...this is ridiculous...this...this isn’t how anything works...” She tried to squash her desire to complain of unfairness, even as her body climbed stubbornly towards blind havoc in defiance of sense and biology, the tension of their joining beginning to ache more like fatigue than desire.

She wondered if it was all some big ironical joke, and who she could justly murder if it was.

He murmured agreement, distracted, kissing her neck and shoulders ardently, almost defiantly, and her hips rolled, reflexively seeking to relieve the shrilling ache. He shook his head and scooped a hand against her sacrum, crushing her fiercely to him, the tip of his middle finger nestling with peculiar intimacy into the dimple at her tailbone. But his self control was becoming pliant, his rigid posture easing into a rocking that levered him back and forth inside her like a deep massage. Her flesh responded to his with waves of peristaltic tension that begged him avidly: closer, harder, more, mine, yours yes; and that old, elusive, sweetly acidic sting began to pool in the basin of her pelvis, promising to erupt in convulsions if she didn’t find a way to keep still. “Severus, something’s wrong. I don’t want you to stop but...if you don’t I’ll--” she bit down on her lip and tried to recite the alchemical table backwards in her head.

He nodded, his lips by her ear, whispering, his hands sliding down her body to her thighs, There is something...strange, maddening, I want so desperately just to... he gripped her hips and his posture braced, and for a giddy instant she thought he was ready to give in, but he shook his head and gasped ...I can stop, he groaned low and halted his rocking by leaning into her and planting his hands on the desk, sighing tense whispers into her ear as she clung to him, her slick flesh still restless to milk him, But if I pull away...mmf...would you...would we...

She thought honestly about pushing him away. Every cell in her body declared the idea heretical. The absurd arousal had become undeniably painful, but she could stand it better than the pain she imagined from stopping. She shook her head, “I’m not strong enough, even if...if the sensation of
your... of pulling away didn’t prove ruinous I would just pull you back...” her voice dropped to a whisper as she imagined it, “...thrust you back through me…”

He nodded, gasping as if stroked by her words, I concur, I can’t even want to... but... it’s important that we control it. Lay back, try to relax.

She scoffed, her skin hot everywhere, but grabbed his shoulder for balance and let go with her other arm, braced up on one elbow. The push of his weight and the pull of her leverage eased her thighs back further, sinking him even more, and he sucked air through his teeth, her agitated flesh tightening almost combatively on his unyielding interposition, wringing at him. She closed her eyes, moaning piteously, and gripped his shoulder so hard her fingers hurt as she lowered herself to lie flat on the chill and glossy surface of the desk.

He leaned down, his forearms along her ribs, his fingers curling over her shoulders, and he thrust once, sharply, ramming in tight and straining to stop as their hungry, disbelieving moans mingled. He stayed braced above her, a crouched panther, perfectly still, eyes closed in concentration, his palms clutched against her under her arms, weight bearing down through her with the crackling immediacy of a lightning bolt frozen in the act of splitting a tree to its root. After several long moments of seeming to listen intently, his fingers flexing against her ribs, his expression pinched and then eased. He leaned to one side and lifted his other hand, whispering here.

She closed her eyes and forced her hand to unclench from him. She placed her palm against his and somehow, slowly, the near-painful ache and driving sting of their joined bodies began to ease to something more tolerable, more human, less driven. He pressed gently, and gently she yielded until the back of her hand was against the table, pinned beneath his. She lay her other hand back, inviting, and he pressed a palm into that one as well, the maddening pain dropping away as inexplicably as a wind.

She took a gasping breath, felt him pressed deep, lusciously arousing but not unbearable, not insane, though the need to wait still felt like a dramatic injustice, “Faust’s bloody fluxes, how much longer?”

He inclined his head, listening to the potion simmer, and took a deep breath through his nose, Not long. Are you alright?

“Yes. It’s... better now. What did you do?”

Reality was creeping in. Between us. I shut it out.

They stayed still, catching their breaths. She looked in his eyes, wanting to touch his face, but when she tried to move her hand he held her still, and she caught that little flash of his desire for control. She tried again, with a little more force and a small warning in her small smile.

He tightened his grip and bent his neck to mercilessly nuzzle her helplessly exposed chest.

She sighed and groaned, “Oh you bastard,” and wrapped her legs tight around his waist, arching into his ministrations with a long undulating writhe that moved her body tightly around his like a hinge on its pin. As he gasped in tormented amusement his concentration slipped and for a few moments the ache between them flooded through with a vicious acuity.

He groaned without syllables, still managing to sound like he was cursing earnestly, and slid his hands down to her hips, gripping her firmly, the ache becoming muffled, before drawing their bodies apart, sighing explosively as if coming up for air as she let him withdraw, steadying her warily as if any artifact or excess of movement might start the unbearable pulse again. It didn’t, but the
withdrawal didn’t do much to quell the gravitational craving in the space between them, either. He caressed the length of her side appreciatively and she sat up, putting her arms around his shoulders loosely, trying to read his face for how much closeness felt safe to him, her skin-certainty still flooded with too much tingling noise. His eyes were closed and his cheeks were flushed, but he didn’t recoil from her. He’d let his robe fall closed but did not move to rebutton it, and his hands on her thighs stroked her as gently and intently as before. She decided it was better just to ask.

“It still…feels strange. Difficult. Tantalizing to the point of cruelty. I could go. Wait for you in bed I mean. If you think it would help.”

He leaned forward until his forehead rested against hers, burnishing her brow gently as he shook his head, Stay, please. If you want to. I apologise…for… his voice was a trifle strained, his breathing warm and deliberate.

She shook her head, “No I liked it...too much is all…considering. I wouldn’t mind it, later. But should we...should I go?”

No. I mean, you’re right, certainly, it would be smarter. I’ll let you go if you like, of course, but… he touched her ribcage beneath her arm, fingers moving with searching independence as his palm glided down her waist, his halting speech confessing a distinct discomfort with articulating want, I still...want...to keep touching you. I don’t mind that it frightens me. It’s easier to block it out for both of us if you’re by me. And the thought of longing to touch you while not touching you here is… he shook his head, losing words.

She nodded as she stopped his mouth, sharing his sentiment, certain that she didn’t understand what was happening either but willing to play through the pain, “I still want this. As much as you can stand. I think I understand what you did...I might be able to help.”

He squinted at her skeptically. She closed her eyes and reached for her skill in occlumency, not to shut her own mind away, but to wrap the dream-space they shared in the sort of small compartment that let her lock away worries or hide ideas from rivals, reaching to create a tiny universe where only a pair of dreams existed. It almost didn’t work, as she struggled to extend her own mind around his, but he felt what she was doing and matched her halfway, helping to draw their personal universe close around them like a quilt. She let her eyes flutter open, hoping she hadn’t got it inside-out and tossed them both out of sleep, but found him still in her arms. The barrier took just a little concentration, but not nearly as much, or as futilely, as trying to control the mad driving ache it shielded them from.

Severus was peering at her with a look that was impressed, pleased and conspiratorial, and just a little...Slytherin. She seldom admitted it to herself but she recognized that feeling, that defiant little rush of recognition and power between devastatingly clever people. She never admitted it to herself, but it was sexier than books.

She leaned towards him and he nuzzled into her, sighing, and she gathered him in greedily, wrapping her legs around his waist. They rocked together, whispers of shared awareness blending into an ecstatic trance, and just as she was beginning to worry that her enjoyment of him was building too quickly again, the tingling spring behind her navel longing to be pumped, that his pleasantly rough robe might slip open again with their repetitive motions and she wouldn’t have sufficient will or motivation to stop them from coupling seamlessly and just...

There was a small crackling puff from the cauldron and finally the potion was done, needing only to cool before it could be decanted.
He glanced at it, waved a hand. The flame went out, and his mouth rushed against hers, their four hands flurrying to navigate a route through his clothes. Impatiently she squeezed him with her legs and twisted sideways sharply to apparate them. With a splash they materialized in the bathroom; him, naked, up to his thighs in the hot water of the tub, her sitting on the edge on a thick towel, her legs still around him, shifting against him slowly, eager but asking. He made a face at the sight of his own bare skin and spoke a bitter word that brought the lights down to almost nothing. It seemed a shame to her, but she didn’t object. Of all her senses, sight was easily the most negotiable. He wasn’t a painting, after all.

She put an experimental fingertip at the top of his bared back and dragged her nail down his length with the pressure of a quill, bumping over a few puckered and mounded scars. His head lolled and he arched into her touch, groaning, interrupting his work towards entering her again. She added a few more fingers and raked him again, lightly, sensually, letting her hand stay at the small of his back and urging him into her with a firm pull which he obliged, grabbing her hips so firmly she thought he might drag her into the water with him. Instead, after taking lascivious survey of the topography of her upper torso with his cheek, nose, lips, tongue, teeth, and eyelashes, he pressed her down until she was lying on her back, pinned at the edge of the pool by his weight and her willingness. And when he had smoothed her body like a blanket, caressing her until she was ready to beg, he ground slowly, experimentally, into her. A small flicker of pain whispered up her spine like a burning thread, but she groaned with pleasure.

Let it hurt, she thought. She was greedily relieved, gratified at her own cleverness in disapparating him right out of his clothes. She arched her back and rolled with his grind, the simple act feeling scandalously extravagant for having been so strictly forbidden. He flinched slightly, and she knew he felt the sliver of pain too, but he shifted around intently, undeterred, trying to find a comfortable angle for motion and leverage that would keep such petty distractions to a minimum. It felt exquisite, it felt like everything she had ever wanted. They’d waited for days and days, for all the weeks it took for veritaserum to cure, held out against temptation and torture. But the veritaserum was complete, the truth assured. They’d finally been to the pool, she thought, just like he said, and it’s alright. I know the whole truth. He showed me, weeks ago, that night after dinner, and I’m not afraid. It had been nothing to fear or else...she’d remember...

But...that was wrong. That was the dream backfilling its own reality. She still didn’t know what he was. Not until after dinner...it had only been one night. Everything still had to happen. She still barely knew him, shouldn’t trust him. Desire was blurring her judgement, clouding the truth, and the inexorable escalation of his luxuriant grinding was lulling her into...

That her own mind was trying to fool her felt suddenly dangerous, and a tiny crack opened in the barrier they’d collaborated on to block out reality.

He felt it too. He stopped, his voice tender but controlled as that awkward pain began to seep through more intensely, *shut it out...don’t think about it*...

She shook her head, biting her lip, “It’s complicated...” her body disagreed heartily.

Another sliver of pain flowed between them and he leaned into her, defying it, *It doesn’t have to be complicated, not between us*...

She shuddered, sitting up, unable to explain her sudden fear, feeling guilty that she’d come to him and wanted him, that she still wanted him, but suddenly, “I...I don’t trust this.”

*We don’t need to trust, just want, just have...we’re alone here, I can’t possibly hurt you,* he reached back and ran a deliciously warm hand up her thigh to her buttock, taking a handful and squeezing just until the pleasant point of pain, letting his nails make themselves known ...*except if you wish it.*
A thrill of longing piqued her, but she shook her head, “I know you can’t hurt me. I even believe you wouldn’t. But it still...” she winced, “I still can. I probably will. And you, too. Maybe that’s the reality we’re trying to avoid...that we’re afraid...that it hurts...“ there was a creeping chill in the room that intensified like a gathering storm.

He clenched his jaw, nodded tightly, engaging her gaze, his whole skin radiating warmth over her that she longed to wrap herself inside, So hurt me, Hermione. I’m no stranger to it, I don’t care, leave me forever tomorrow but...please....right now... his lips hovered by hers, parted, begging, balanced in longing ...say yes to me... He sounded so sure, but his skin against hers confided his fear, his need, his ruinous affection, his fatalistic certainty of abandonment spurring him on blindly, so much more loudly than the static of her own anxieties.

Her rushing desire and her adamant doubts cracked against one another, the fault widened, and the painful throbbing continued seeping in, dense and stale and awkward, muddling things further. Her mind registered a dozen complaints and contradictions at once. The air was bitterly cold against her back and the floor seemed to yawn like a cliff’s edge. She clung to him, oddly lightheaded and suddenly fearful of falling, her ache for him feeling like a thumb with a splinter shoved under the nail, screaming for relief, estranged from the concept of pleasure. All her conflicting convictions felt so certain, something had to be lying.

He put a hand on her cheek, the simple animal warmth focusing her, the sides of their noses nestling together, and he whispered ...please.

She gave a tortured groan and her mouth grabbed at his, anchoring her against the swimming strangeness of a dream that was starting to come apart at the edges, boiling away. Deploying all he knew of how she liked to be kissed, he wrestled desperately to secure the assent that was quivering on the tip of her tongue, savory and metallic, and she clased to his mouth in kind, her objective as desperate as it was unclear. It was brutally unfair, coercive, unethical, unwise on both their parts, and she hoped it wouldn’t stop, all but barricading her mouth with his to keep either yes or no from escaping. At that point her body ran out of patience, and she leaned backwards, drawing him down onto her, daring the interloping reality to do its worst. He abandoned the water and swept over her, lithe and longing, his overtaxed will bound to hers in concerted heedlessness as the room crumbled away, leaving nothing but endless darkness at the freezing edge of a bottomless pool. He moaned as they joined, and the pressure within the ache was blissful agony, pain resolving pain into a kind of harmony. Let it burn, let it bleed, she thought. They could have one another, and all other concerns were her enemy.

What happened next happened very fast.

As she closed her eyes and opened her mouth to speak, a nightmare struck like a last reflex from a dead viper. His amorous grip was, for a moment, coiled about her with rubbery primordial limbs, writhing greedily into her warmth and gathering her close with a strangling tightness. In another moment it would be dragging her into the green drowning dark, cramming her full of a suffocating pain that was worse than death, worse than birth, worse than letting go and falling. It would reach up through her pelvis to her heart, yank her inside out, and feed.

Her eyes slammed open. Half-mad and panic-strong, she writhed her lower body apart from him, crying out as their relief vanished, bracing his chest with two half-clenched hands and pushing him up until her elbows locked, trembling, icy air flooding down her sweaty front. She could only just see him in the dim light, the spike of adrenaline dilating her pupils until they, too, must have seemed like bottomless pools.

For a moment her lover looked alarmed, fearful he had harmed her, then he clasped her right hand
where she held him over his heart and his gaze dissipated, staring through her. Losing his own grip
on their sheltering universe, his eyes rolled closed and his voice came out heavy and haunted, as
fragmented as the dream roiling around them, *Do it...kill me...harm...it hurts me...Lily...please...harm...* he groaned again from someplace deep in his belly, tears pattering down, his mind
somewhere far away, lost in time or nightmare, clasping her hand so tightly against his chest she
worried her nails might draw blood, still muttering senselessly *...it hurts...me...do it... do... harm... Minnie...Lily...please...*

She was baffled. Things were shivering apart too fast. Any moment she would fall from the cliff at
her back. She couldn’t get ahead of it, feeling a kind of fury at herself, at him, and the things they
clearly couldn’t get beyond, the nightmare things hounding them, whatever any of it meant. It
couldn’t be easy, she shouldn’t have wanted this. She felt her arms wobble, her panicked strength
failing, their abused bodies jostling to recombine, to smother the pain of wanting in an agony of
having. His eyes became lucid again just as she was letting his weight sink to her, embracing him,
longing to soothe him. Just as she was blinking back tears...submitting to candor...something fell
apart.

“I’m sorry…”

She opened her eyes in the cold mundane dark, shedding the overwhelming chaos of the dream like
a robe full of angry cats, and it scattered away from her just as quickly. The pressure of his body
became the pressure of her mattress against her chest. Her legs folded around him became her legs
folded under herself, her rear-end presented, aching, pressing up against the quilts that had a moment
ago been the bathroom floor. The creeping chill, the yawning cliff, was just the place where the
blankets had slipped down her back and let the air in. And her idiotic hand, she realized with fury,
was between her legs, clumsily rubbing and squeezing and fumbling at “buttons” while she dreamed,
abrading herself to the point of pain...except when he’d held it still for her... that had been reality
seeping in, driving her too hard and too fast. That’s all that had been, her body groping to go along
with her masturbatory mind like a loyal, lonely dog.

She cursed quietly, thinking that he had been right, that rationally there would have been no harm in
shutting all this out and having an orgasmic dream rather than an awkward wank. Why had she
refused? It was just sex. And not even real. The sweeping drama and overblown horror...in the cold
and the quiet and the solidity of her bed, it all seemed a bit...silly, those last moments just a jumble of
nonsense flooding into a panicked moment of angst and repression. She’d read that returning to
sexual pleasure could be difficult for widows, the intimacy haring too close to the fear of loss and the
guilt of the survivor. There might have been something more at the time but...it was fading, and her
conscious mind was as helpless to recover it as her subconscious was unwilling to. She remembered
being afraid of hurting him and decided that, at least, was an undeniably valid monster under the bed.
And a self-fulfilling prophecy, probably.

She didn’t stop rubbing, but chose a more steady, customary rhythm, so horny by that point that she
felt bruised. She thought of his hand against hers, pressing her down, controlling her pain, how it
would feel if her hand were under his control as she touched herself, and she turned her face into her
pillow as she gasped, hoping she could finish in the kind of silence she’d learned from attending
boarding school throughout puberty. She listened for him, wondering if he’d stayed asleep, whether
he had simply dreamed of her begging to be fucked rotten and was, in his sleep, nobly and skillfully
obliging her, whether he was wondering where the immediacy of her had gone. She wondered if
he’d been rubbing himself every time he’d touched her face or hair or legs, stopping only when she’d
had her hand on his, wondered what he looked like right at that moment, whether he was...she
couldn’t hear anything. She wondered if he was imagining that his hand were hers, dreaming of how
intense the...
Years before, while wading, she’d turned her back on the ocean because Ron had called to her from the shore to see the cute thing Rose had done, and a sudden wave had crushed her flat and rolled her along the bottom, roaring like a hurricane. It felt like that, when release finally broke over her. She had to bury her face again as several high, sharp cries were compressed out of her by the sheer surging weight of it, and an image of Severus, kneeling behind her, pistoning into her, strobed in her imagination.

She heard him then, against the wall. Just one dry, shuddering boarding-school gasp, muffled, perhaps, by the heel of his hand between his teeth. Then silence.

She spread herself flat and closed her eyes, running stubbornly over her lesson plans for the next day with all the zeal of denial, packing everything else into her occlumentive “in the morning” box that was so important for sensible and organized adults. She hoped he would pretend to still be asleep, too, and was thankful when he did. Sighing at her own stupidity, she drifted off into the dreamless dark.

And far off in the deeper dark, something cold and primordial stirred.

Chapter End Notes

Waiting is beginning to seem unbearable, and Hermione asks to be assured that he's not something evil, just so she can comfort herself later that she did ask, and he reiterates that it's very difficult to lie in dreams because lies are about control and dreams tend to happen without much control or filtering. Hermione admits that she always finds it hard to lie, but that she does almost feel as if she can read his surface feelings and reactions through the surface of her skin. He seems puzzled by what it must feel like to be averse to lying, but admits he has a similar experience physically.

Feeling frustrated, but with Severus still adamant that they have to wait for the potion, they agree on having sex on the desk, resolving to just go slowly and not finish, but find that their bodies react very strangely and intensely to the attempt. The sensations are painfully intense for both of them, as if to specifically prevent waiting, even when they keep as still as they can. To steady each other, he holds her hands down and they deploy a mutual occlumency to block out what Severus diagnoses as "reality creeping in" with pain and fear and neediness to spoil their harmless and noncommittal fun and comfort.

As soon as the potion is done, Hermione disapparates them directly into the bath and out of his clothes, since dreams don't have to obey waking laws. He doesn't like being naked, and drops the lights, but they both want to continue.

Hermione feels relieved, her mind wandering off to feeling very good and clever for waiting to get close until after they'd been to the pool and she knew everything she needed to, but then realized that's a dreamlinke mistake and she still doesn't know what he is. That her own brain is filling in what it prefers to believe makes her feel unsafe, which in turn makes the dream begin to feel like a nightmare. She wants him, but is scared. He tries to reassure her that it isn't necessary that they trust each other, that he can't hurt her unless she explicitly wants him to. She responds that she knows that SHE can still hurt both of them, and is afraid she will, because she's a mess. But she still wants him and is still conflicted, and the dream state keeps crumbling.
Just as she's making up her mind to say "yes" and be with him, she gets a nightmarish vision that he's really some kind of eldritch horror from the depths of her fears, and that being with him will be indescribably painful. It's just a flash, but she panics and pushes him away forcefully, and he seems to go into a fugue state, mumbling something about "Lily" and "Minnie" and "harm me" and "it hurts". She's scared for him, but also for herself, and as much as she wishes there were some way to salvage things there simply isn't, so she leaves him and wakes herself up.

Back in the dark in the real world, she realizes that the weird pain and inability to pace themselves was because she'd fallen asleep while touching herself, and the vividness of the dream had encouraged her body to keep at it. In the waking world, her fears seem a little ridiculous to her, and she does her best to resolve her physical frustration without making any noise, wondering if he's doing the same, before falling into a dreamless sleep until morning.

And somewhere, a thing like the one in her nightmare is stirring.
Ponderous

Chapter Notes

Happy no-smut Sunday! :) Who wants some secular socratic somnambulo-sexual exegesis? Whee!

The next morning was militantly simple. She got up very early, keeping the lights low so as not to disturb him, and if he was disturbed he was good enough not to demonstrate it. She felt a strong need to discuss things with him, but decided it could wait until after breakfast, in case he really was asleep. In case she needed to have second thoughts.

It occurred to her that she simply did not know how to do the after-part of an affair, the reality part, the conscious and intentional part. She understood it in theory. She’d had plenty of friends, associates, assistants, advisors, and mentors who “dated” and “hooked up” and “slept around” and all that sort of thing. She didn’t disapprove. On the contrary she was very much in the “anything between consenting adults should be enjoyed without shame” camp, theoretically, and didn’t really think her life had been any better or simpler or smarter or wiser for having found one relationship that suited her so early and stuck with it. She’d felt lucky, certainly, and everyone certainly agreed she was lucky, but there really wasn’t anything simple about marriage and parenthood, any more than cohabitation and career-balance were always clear-cut worlds of perfect plans and unhurtable feelings. She and Ron had had to learn quite a lot together about how to communicate, how to work-through, how to parse feelings, to express anger, to fight fair, to set expectations, enforce boundaries, compromise, mend fences, and so on. There were a lot of times things had gotten quite raw, and learning had not come easy. But skills acquired in a long, comfortable life with a loving family and a brave, extroverted optimist who had poor impulse control and a flair for the dramatic hadn’t really given her much equipment for dealing with a fellow broken, taciturn intellectual at the start of something hungry and peculiar. None of it let her know how to categorize whatever it was she was doing, let alone how to feel about it.

She did narrow it down a little, pondering over breakfast. If she put aside the idea that he was something evil, or an outright lie, or a complicated non-sentient, or an absolute hallucination on her part, and assumed he was exactly what he claimed to be, it was a little easier to manage. She had taken someone (albeit a possible fugitive of some kind) up on the proposition of a mutually pleasurable sexual relationship without emotional obligations, and the real problem was that she was over-thinking it and reverting to relationship habits that weren’t adapted to it. She was reflexively demanding conditions of trust and affection and intimacy, even though her wrecked heart and changed life made navigating the conditions of her own demands impossible for her, made her imagine terrible deadly love-destroying monsters and unbearable pain just below the surface. Her wounded capacity for intimacy was precisely what made the idea of a more pragmatic and polite arrangement so attractive and comforting, and yet she was trying to get intimately involved and ruining everything. It was probably similar for him.

She’d thought it was real, and she’d said yes, as had he, and that was about as complicated as it had to get. The only sticking point was that she’d since gotten some evidence that the person she was in her dreams and the person she was when she was awake had different priorities. Dream-Hermione was willing and able to want more, because dream-Hermione had a clarity and an immediacy that overrode waking-Hermione’s pessimistic, risk-averse community-mindedness. Would portrait-
Severus feel deceived if dream-Hermione was soft and needy and brave in places where waking-Hermione was more exacting and practical and cowardly? She didn’t owe him anything. Or if she did, didn’t waking-Hermione have a right to feel annoyed that dream-Severus was a forthright and generous lover while portrait-Severus had been a brittle paranoid cypher and was unlikely to change?

Not helping matters was the realization that, if he really were what he seemed, she was basically keeping an emotionally damaged, temporally disoriented man hostage without the possibility of contact beyond her bedroom; conditions which, beyond being basically beastly, could be seen as precluding consent. Not the best basis for trust or affection that wasn’t utterly hallucinatory, even without questions of whether both participants were real or trustworthy.

She wondered, self mockingly, if imaginary friends ever got stockholm syndrome. She wondered more seriously if she was just thinking to avoid feeling, daydreaming to sabotage her relationships with living, waking, trustworthy, three-dimensional people by fixating on Severus. It was entirely possible, considering she’d had her entire internal conversation while Mister Kalil had been trying, again, to make external conversation. Valiantly, she assumed. And he had finally trailed off, simply regarding her with perplexity having asked her Merlin-only-knew-what.

“I’m so sorry, Nick, I was miles away. If I promise on the lives of my beautiful and talented children that it’s not anything wrong with you, would you let me try this whole considerate-colleague thing again at lunch? Or...oh bollocks...” she colored, “sorry, I mean ‘oh blast’ or something else less vulgar, just I need to be in the library for lunch. Maybe, come by my classroom at four o’clock break. I’ll make tea.”

His face crumpled a bit, but remained pretty, like holiday wrapping paper. He sighed, “It’s a big day, Professor Granger. Everyone starts in their own way. It’s true for teachers as well as students. But yes, if you’ve got a kettle and half an hour free, I’ll bring the biscuits.”

She smile-grimaced at him gratefully, “You really are too good. Had I...oh blast had I not yet told you to call me Hermione?”

He smiled dazzlingly, “You still haven’t.”

She shook her head ruefully in return, “Well, do, please. I haven’t really got a nickname. It’s what I’ll be calling myself when I’m give-getting my dressing-down later for being such an absolute ass. Ron tried calling me ‘mine-y’ for a while but it made for too many jokes about possessiveness and land-mines and my sisters eeny and meanie and whether meanie was subbing in for me that day, but sometimes Ginny calls me her...” she smiled sadly, her longing for Ron tightening around another deep love that felt both inseparable from her being and utterly lost to her, “...but that’s just hers anyway and...I’m babbling.”

Nick nodded indulgently, “Go quadruple-check your room. You’ll be alright.”

She wiped the smile-puckered corners of her mouth and got up, “You really are too good.”

He flashed that impossible grin again and waved her away with mock loftiness.

Her mind kept turning and turning over Severus as she made her way back down, mostly over whether she should be obsessing so much over someone she’d only just met, then wondering whether that metric applied given the shared history and the peculiar situation; then whether the history and situation made the sex more taboo or less; and if it even qualified as taboo considering that the sex itself had been rather tame and frank; then wondering how she could obsess about technicalities of sex when she really ought to be obsessing about who and what he was; then whether she was dodging that question to protect her flimsy rationalizations or because every option that
occurred to her immediately became fraught and horrifying since it would then have to be something that she had undeniably had sex with. It was kind of monstrously comical that the most useful test she had in speculating over what he was, until she could devise a better one and open some books, was to try to square each possibility with whether what she’d experienced was how a horror of that sort would go about making love to a witch, if it even had a motive to do so.

That was a bit of a sticking point...if she weren’t simply making up or having made-up for her imaginary scenarios that would please and seduce her, she couldn’t think of many creatures or entities that seemed like, well, the meditative vanilla-screw type that liked to play dress-up as history’s greatest tragic nerds. Not that she was an expert. How would she even look for a book on that? And would Anglen’s head explode if she enquired too plainly? Would Hagrid’s?

In any case, did she even really know what was tame anymore? Sex with Ron had usually been the warm, giggly, lazing about in bed all day type, or the quick-one before bed type, or the occasional dreaded birthday/anniversary he’s- making- a- big- deal- about- this- being- for- me type. Apart from hopelessly- awkward- drunken- threesome- disasters -between -friends, those were all she really knew first-hand. Severus was certainly more intense which, by turns, was an exciting difference and made her miss all-day-bed-giggling. But it was still just the same old kiss-fondle-fuck of marriage and movies and racy novels. Wouldn’t a demon or djinn or evil...person be into something more exotic or profane? Was she buying into the terrible cliche’ that evil people were all into S&M and vice versa? Who was to say that a demon couldn’t want a glass of wine and a gropy snog on the couch? Who was to say that a little pain for a lot of pleasure wasn’t just as wholesome and loving as tender caresses? And what about that look she’d seen in his eyes, that inspired hunger not just for sex but for a hunt and a fight? Down in their mutual subconscious where she had to suspect it was sincere. What about the part of her that recognized that feeling; that pressing Slytherinian craving for control; and longed to return it, blow for blow, win or lose, truth or erotic consequences?

She remembered vividly the feel of his tight grip on her buttock and his fervent offer of if you wish it. What if that were true? What if he were only what he seemed and was offering her literally any sort of sexual experience she could work up the nerve to suggest, no strings attached, no accidental injuries or embarrassing bruises to worry about? But then, what if he were planning on tempting her into some situation she couldn’t foresee where the rules would change? She thought about his description of two dreamers grappling in the same dream, one hand forcing the other down, and it didn’t do nearly as much to curb her enthusiasm as she had hoped.

But what about that strange fugue he’d gone into when things had begun to fall apart, begging her to, what, hurt him? Harm him? Stop his pain? Kill him? Mistaking her in his delirium for Lily, or possibly...Minerva? Was there another Minnie? Minerva had said that Happy was the only other living person who knew her by that name, but then, Minerva also thought Severus Snape was dead. Had she...

“...but don’t hesitate to ask.” Sir Nicholas finished with a jolly flourish as she got to her classroom door. She had literally no idea how long he’d been floating along behind her talking.

“Absolutely, I will.” She smiled and nodded, unsure if she’d ever been more disgusted with herself.

"Courage, Gryffindor!" He saluted her genially, smiled and bowed and floated off, humming some energetic military air.

She closed the door for one more moment’s peace, her back braced against it, feeling a bit like a fugitive from the paparazzi and a lot like a ridiculous person who was losing her grip. That reminded her of his grip again, how he was buried in her when he’d said it, hot and hard, how impossibly good it might have been if she hadn’t run away.
She slapped herself across the face as sharply as she dared. She had Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw second-years coming in under twenty minutes, and her mind was dazzled out of its multiple-definition “rut” by pain and the array of possible spectacular failures likely to befall her between that moment and lunch.

“Courage, Gryffindor,” she muttered.
Contrary to all her backup plans, everything went smoothly. Monday and Wednesday mornings were both of her second-year double-potions classes, and one section of first years that were mostly lecture and just a little practice. They were all terrified to death of her, and she had to struggle to keep a straight face. It was a bit maddening when she would explain a concept or try to coax out a realization and they would just stare like stumps, but she had hopes that once the initial fear had passed and she’d demonstrated a willingness not to eat them all up they might get a bit more chatty. She completely forgot to award or remove house points based on performance, but it was a small oversight. She only realized her error three minutes before lunch, when she caught Dorian Krowse doodling birds instead of minding his cauldron, but he seemed a poor choice for her inaugural flourish of power.

At noon, she headed for the library. She grabbed a couple titles on potion making, artificing, dream and memory magics, astral projection, legitimency, occlumency, and creatures of the quantum, ethereal, and astral planes (presumed). Those and the three books on portraiture and portrait artists Anglen had kept for her at the front desk were quite a hefty stack, and she sorely wished it were possible for wizards and witches to apparate within Hogwarts, though her glee at being a professor and being able to check out as many books as she liked was confirmed repeatable on the second experiment. Even with a levitation charm on half the stack, she was winded by the time she’d hauled them all to the dungeon and dropped them onto her desk.

She was torn for a moment between digging right in and going through to the bedroom to see how her...guest? Predecessor? Tennant? Captive? How he was doing. Her stomach growled, and she thought she should ask a member of the kitchen staff to bring her a plate of something, and then was torn over whether she ought to ask Severus if he needed anything first. She was able to get her wits together enough to realize that dealing with him while she was hungry was a terrible idea, and on the off-chance that he did eat, it was a simple matter to place another order.

Clever as anything, the moment she called Wooly he appeared, a plate of food already in his hand. She wanted to kiss him, but settled for praising him to the moon and back, hoping it wasn’t too much or somehow obnoxious. It seemed to please him. After he’d gone, she realized she should ask someone if she ought to be tipping. She skimmed the index of her book on ethereal creatures and nothing struck her as relevant. She polished off her food and checked the time. She still had forty minutes.

She was walking to the bedroom and realized that she had invited a guest for tea but had nothing arranged, and that her front room was cold and cavernous and dismal. She took some time to get the fire going properly, and enchanted it to keep more of the heat and less of the smoke in the room as it burned. It occurred to her to do the same in the bare laboratory, lighting the stove and placing a circulation charm on the doorframe to make sure the heat moved through into the rest of the apartment.

Thirty minutes, then. *Just time for a quick one.*

She drew herself up short. She went back to the fireplace and sat herself down in her chair.

She could run all the if-this and if-that scenarios she might like, but she couldn’t let herself ignore that the theory she most believed, and the only one that really justified carrying-on with him at all, was that he was some kind of sentience that went beyond portraiture, that he was real, that he was probably her old potions master. And if that were true, treating him like he existed at her sufferance
and performed at her whim was...horrifying. More than horrifying. Unforgivable. She’d already let her weird, disoriented, grasping loneliness make a mess of her friendship with Harry and Ginny. She wasn’t going to let it make her some sort of callous, demented sex-dungeon jailer who used other people’s bodies to try and fill the hole in her heart. She wasn’t going to go from careless and distracted to cruelly indifferent. There would be nothing left of her.

She went to the bathroom and put a cool washcloth on the back of her neck to help get her head on straight.

Twenty-five minutes, then.

She knocked before entering her own bedroom.

“Come in.”

He was standing, pacing back and forth in front of his chair, idly more than impatiently, hands clasped behind his back.

“It’s lunch time. I wanted to take the chance to come see if you needed anything. I expect it’s a bit dull in here, and I’ve been very preoccupied and inconsiderate about that. I don’t have any good ideas for fixing it especially, but if there’s anything you want I’d...just, let me know.”

He pursed his lips and squinted, pondering, perhaps a bit suspicious, but his pacing wound to a halt.

A thought struck her, “I could prop up a book for you. I know an enchantment that would let you turn the pages with a spoken command and no actual magic on your part. My own invention, actually. We worked it up when Ron’s father was first recovering from his aneurism and couldn’t even...sorry. I meant to give you a chance to talk. Too much nervous energy. The morning’s gone so well I’m expecting the other shoe, you know? I-” she sighed, planting herself on the bed, “...sorry.”

His head shook, pardonning her, then nodded, “A book would be nice, I think. Yes. Thank you.”

“I could also move you, I think, if you would like a change of scene. And if my experience with the portrait of Phineas Nigellus is remotely applicable, I could probably figure out a way to provide you with objects in your own space that you could touch and use. Not right this moment, obviously, but if you had any requests, I could...or I suppose we could...begin puzzling out how to do it.”

He nodded again, slowly, “Thank you, yes. I’ll think about it.”

“A-and,” she tried very hard to sound neutral, to want to hear what he had to say more than she wanted to prod him to choose as she would choose for him, “It occurs to me, belatedly, that I shouldn’t keep you here against your will. Whatever else you are, you’re a real person. I’d kept you to myself when I found you because you were an intriguing mystery and an appealing art piece, and when you turned into a person I was so surprised that I failed to take into account all the ramifications of you, well, being a person,” she sighed, “what I’m saying, badly, is if there’s anyone you’d like to see, anyone you want me to inform of your situation, anyplace in the castle you’d rather be hung or any...process you’d like to investigate for altering your confinement, then that is what I want, too, and I won’t put conditions on you about it. You’re not my prisoner, and you’re certainly not my secret to keep.”

While she had spoken, he’d sat down, his fingers steepled close to his face the way he did when he was trying to hide his expression, but he only looked pensive, “How much time do you have right now?”
She checked her watch, “I guess about fifteen minutes.”

He frowned and sat back, “It can wait then.”

“The thing you mean to show me after dinner?”

He nodded.

“I don’t suppose you could just tell me.”

“It’s easier, and more reliable I think, if I show you.”

“All right. Then for right now I’ll get you a book. Any preferences?”

He shrugged, eyes as well as shoulders “Anything at all, really. Actually,” he held up a finger, “nothing about magic. I haven’t got a wand or a writing desk, I couldn’t take notes, it would just be frustrating,” his voice hitched on the last word but they both ignored it smoothly.

“Something lighter, maybe? Or muggle, even? Perhaps a novel?”

He smirked slightly, “It certainly would be that.”

“Alright then. On a scale from timeless to trashy, what would you favor?”

He grimaced, “All novels are trashy.”

She smirked back, “Are all paintings so clannish?”

She caught a hint of a more sincere smile, but he looked down to hide it, “Only the good ones.”

“I feel like you’re provoking me into making you a captive audience for the most sloppily purple and delusionally pastoral bodice-ripper I can find.”

His face stayed down but his eyes flicked up, “Do your worst.”

“Don’t say that if you don’t mean it.”

“You don’t scare me.”

It came out drier than she intended, an over-correction to avoid sounding too flirty, “Only because you’re a guilty masochist.”

His hands folded into his lap and he looked away, stung, “True.”

She got up and smoothed her robes, “Come on, that’s the part where you accuse me of projecting.”

He straightened up, his face a carefully amiable mask, “Too much nervous energy I suppose.”

She felt herself beginning to fidget in agreement, “I’ll find you something. Actually I think I know just the thing.”

She went out to the main bookshelf by the table, where her books from home were still only half-unpacked, and dug through a bin until she turned up a slim paperback with a garishly-lettered orange cover, its yellowed pages well-thumbed. She brought it back to him and held it up.

He squinted at it exaggeratedly, “Looks awful.”
“It is. American. Positively merciless. You’ll love it. It probably won’t take you all day, though. I’ll try to check back before dinner if I can.”

He nodded, seeming distracted, “Yes.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me?”

He shook his head again, “Easier to show you.”

“After dinner.”

“Yes.”

She nodded, took out her wand. She held up the book, covers parted, immediately in front of the canvas, “Can you read it alright if I put it here?”

“Yes, with a little more light if you don’t mind.”

She brought up the lights, then opened the front cover of the book. She tapped the crevice between the pages with her wand, casting a quick series of spells to hold the book in the air and convince the pages to turn in sequence whenever they heard the words “turn” or “back”. Severus tried it, and nodded approvingly when it worked. He looked somehow odd in the brighter light.

“If you remind me, I’ll put verbal commands on the lights too. Only just now I have to go. They’re coming.”

He nodded again, rubbing the fingertips of his right hand together absent-mindedly, “Of course.”

She smiled, went to the door.

“Hermione…”

She came back around the armoire and saw he had his hand against the inside of the painting, as if it were a window between rooms. She walked halfway back, studying his face. His mouth was set in that proud and domineering line, but something around his eyes was restless. Anxiety, she thought, and the fight to keep it in.

“I would rather you didn’t tell anyone yet. About me.”

She nodded, “Of course. Whatever you want.”

His mouth twitched affirmatively, but his eyes remained grave.

She couldn’t help feeling just a little impatient. What did he mean for her to see in that look? She could hear the noise rising in the castle all about them, muffled like shell fire over a buried bunker. It was her first day, and her compulsion to excel was plucking at her to not be late. All the same, she couldn’t take her eyes off him. So close to the limits of his confinement he was life-sized, and they were of a height. “Severus, what?”

He stared down at the floor on her side of the canvas, fixedly, “Don’t concern yourself too much
with me.”

Too late, she thought, wondering if there were anything he could possibly have said to concern her more while she stood, frozen, neglecting her job and her charges, annoyed with him and still thinking she needed to hold him.

She crossed to him and brought her hand up, placing it carefully where his own palm, seemingly rendered in fine brushwork, faced her. The canvas bowed back passively under her touch, just a piece of stretched and treated fabric covered in slick chemical pigments, neutrally cool, and her expectations swam and lurched uncannily. The illusion was such that she had genuinely been expecting to feel warmth, or a hard window, or the shape of his palm pushing back from underneath, but it behaved like any other painting, and that mundanity shot her through with a peculiar horror: that for all her ruminating his was a situation that she hadn’t fathomed, and perhaps couldn’t. In the brighter light, so close, she noticed for the first time that, when he moved, it was not at all like seeing a person moving behind brush-textured glass. The brushstrokes of his figure actually shifted through the brushstrokes of background and darkness, squirming swiftly around one another like bees in a hive. She felt her lunch shift in similar fashion, and wished she hadn’t bolted it so quickly. But she couldn’t feel the visible texture move against her own fingertips. That seemed to be a place where a thin plane of ineffable separation intervened, locking him away. She was just as viscerally relieved by that wall as if he really had been made of bees.

She tried to call him by his name again, and couldn’t summon the sound. Only, “I promise, I’m coming back, alright?”

He nodded, the many subtle colors of his eyelids slithering down to hide the writhing colonies of his eyes, stepping away, “Yes, of course. My apologies. Go.”
Cherie

Chapter Summary

So I'm trying to move to a chapter every Tuesday and Friday, but I'm going to be spending the next little while in a place with "spotty" internet. I'll do my best, fingers crossed.

The second half of the day were her third-year classes. They were more of a handful, having been accustomed to Professor Slughorn’s wheedling and bombastic manner, and kept seeming to expect her to observe the same hierarchies that he had, trying to get her attention for their minor achievements while she tried to read as much as she could about occlumency and ignore them. She’d gotten to some of what Professor Snape had alluded to about the connections between thought-magics and the properties of potions, and it was complicated and fascinating, but it seemed like every forty seconds or so someone would pipe up with “Oh professor?” She’d just about reached the end of her patience by the end of the chapter, but made it through without actually murdering anyone. In truth it wasn’t any worse than dealing with the demanding egomaniacs always wheedling and threatening at the ministry, and the students were probably still young enough to learn manners...if she ever managed to model any.

When Mr. Kalil came through the classroom door, paper box in hand, a young Ravenclaw was standing at Hermione’s desk still trying fervently to make his point (as far as she was concerned) about fairness and why he shouldn’t be subject to it. Desperate for a cup of tea and a chance to sit in a better chair, she told the young fellow that if he were willing to drink off the contents of his cauldron with Mr. Kalil as a witness, she would give him a better mark for his silence potion, but she would take ten points from Ravenclaw for attempted suicide, since that is what it would likely be given the horrible job he had done. Red-faced, he stormed off.

“Well that was brutal.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, “I swear I was a better person this morning.”

He quirked a look that reminded her he’d seen her in action that morning.

She shrugged wearily, “Alright, I wasn’t. Come through, I’ve got the kettle on.”

He nodded appreciatively when he saw her main room, “Cozy.”

She smiled, filling the teapot from the kettle and bringing her small tea service across to the right side of the ostentatiously spacious room, “I had never seen these rooms until day before yesterday. I do sort of wonder about our marvelous founders when I think about how much space they dedicated to the dungeon.”

“Does seem a little kinky, doesn’t it.”

She squinted at him, bemused. He’d said it without a hint of bantering or lasciviousness, which was a testament to his detached academic manner, “Not to put too fine a point on it, yes. I hope you like your tea strong. I don’t think I’ll make it to dinner at this rate if I don’t.”
“Love it.” He took a small plate and started unpacking his box, “I wasn’t sure what you would like, so I got some little sugar donuts and a bit of pastry.”

She feigned dazzlement, passing him a cup, “Well now you really have got my undivided attention.”

He smiled, gratified, reaching for the sugar, “How is your first day treating you?”

“Surprisingly well. Young master wozzizname you saw was the only persevering problem so far.”

“He’s a Flitwick, actually.”

“Oh dear.”

Nikita waved a hand, “Fillius won’t mind. Probably give Harry a good chewing-out should he bring it up. Never a fan of Slughorn’s club.”

“Harry Flitwick?”

“Harry Potter Flitwick-Trimble.”

“Really?”

“In fairness, he’s something like the seventeenth grandchild, fourth in the same year. Names started to run a bit thin, I understand.”

“Any Hermiones?”

He saluted her reverently with his teacup, “You remain one of a kind.”

She sighed, “Ah well. I’d feel worse if it were otherwise. Not really a thing anyone should do to a child. So where does your name come from?”

He laughed, “Speaking of things one should never do to a child, you mean?”

“Not at all, I think it’s lovely.”

“Greek and Syrian. Grandparents were immigrants. We’re all pretty English now, but I’m named for my mother’s grandfather.”

She picked up a fluffy donut, “Means ‘undefeated’ doesn’t it? Something like that?”

He nodded, taking an appropriately dainty bite of pastry but managing to get crumbs on his robe anyway.

“Mine’s Greek too. ‘Well-born’. I’m sure the anti-muggle bigots get a laugh about that but, well, they’ve lost. Repeatedly.”

He smiled admiringly, “Hermione was the daughter of a Spartan warrior-king and the most beautiful woman in the world. I think it suits you perfectly.”

She sipped her tea to cover continued bemusement. He really did have the oddest way of saying things that could easily be taken as a come-on, but in a blithely jovial and matter-of-fact fashion that bypassed modest objections or defenses, as if he were an elderly man flirting with his wife: embarrassingly familiar but unselfconsciously benign. She took another donut, settling properly into
her chair while he scanned the bookshelf in the corner nearest the table, letting the ritual lightness of
teatime work its magic, determined to remain frivolous, noting in the back of her mind that his was
probably just the way good-looking young men with manners were taught to treat older women in
posh circles.

His expression became mock-affronted, and he affected the sort of regimental bluster that made her
think of big brushy mustaches “Now, I won’t be called disingenuous. Even if you were old, which
you most certainly are not.”

She blinked, “Oh dear, did my mouth go on without me? It really has been a long day.”

He nodded, “Not to worry. I never quote slanders.”

She sighed, “I’ve come to believe that age is more about mileage than time. Anyway, I believe I said
‘older’, and I’m definitely that. How old are you, anyway, as long as we’re being improper?”

“Twenty-six.”

She pursed her lips and swallowed hard to keep from fountaining tea over the table, “Do your
parents know where you are? Twenty-six and on track to be a full professor. Impressive.”

He frowned incredulously, “I can’t believe there’s enough mileage between the woman I see before
me and the eighteen-year-old who ran off to the resistance, or the youngest minister for magic in
history for that matter, that you don’t see where you’re being just a trifle condescending.” Apparently
his blithe manner worked to soften scolding, too.

She lowered her cup to its saucer, regretful “I am sorry. I was trying to make a joke. I’ve just never
been a charming person.”

He looked politely scandalized.

“No, Nick, it’s true,” she said firmly, setting down her empty cup, “everything with me is brute force
and bald-faced cleverness. I work hard at being right and having reality on my side because I’ve
really no gift for persuasion or humor or any of that stuff that helps people to swallow the truth
happily. That was always Ron’s department. People think I’m so bloody brilliant but it’s really not
eough. I’d never have been able to succeed in politics at all without him on my arm,” she smiled
wistfully, “People think he was such a dope, but he was so enormously clever, imaginative, and
intellectually agile when he wanted to be. Sure, he used it to fool himself as often as anyone, or
weasel his way out of really thinking critically, but that’s why he needed me, you see...” she sighed,
thought of picking up her cup again but remembered that there was nothing in it and frowned at her
hands instead.

Nikita stood up and poured her another cup, adding milk and sugar as he’d seen her do and handing
it to her, “I’m such a prissy scold, you shouldn’t mind me. But I’ll admit, I did want to talk to you
about your life and Mr. Granger-Weasley and...well...perhaps a book.”

She looked at her tea and then at him, feeling oddly suspicious of both. She took a sip anyway, “A
book?”

He nodded energetically, “It just seems like too good an opportunity, living and working with the
greatest heroes of the battle for Hogwarts. I’m looking for a new project for the summer, and my
publisher is keen.”
“The remaining heroes, you mean. The leftovers. The greatest ones died, I’ll thank you to remember. And there are plenty of books about the war.”

“This one would be more about you.”

“A book about me?” she felt herself instinctively imitating Professor McGonagall, “what a dreadful thought.”

Nikita continued, undeterred, “There are plenty of magi-political analyses of the war, cautionary tales, accounts of what was to blame, narratives of the sober burdened responsible adults of the resistance, the ones that gave their lives. It seems like it’s high time for a younger, more personal account. What was it like to run and hide from evil itself, trying to protect The Boy Who Lived? You were still practically children, and according to things the others have said in interviews, you were the one holding the whole world together with grit and sorcery and a small beaded handbag. That’s an amazing story that people should hear, and now that you’ve moved away from politics, there would be no confusing it for self-promotion.”

Hermione felt herself getting older with every word, but she admired his enthusiasm with a mother’s reluctance to steal it from him, “I’m sure someone would manage to confuse it with self promotion,” she smiled, “I actually have an album…over here I think, of all the clippings calling me terrible things. Let me find it, it always makes me laugh…” she got up and started searching through one of the boxes by the table.

“Let me just wash my hands, then, get the icing off my fingers.”

She gestured over her shoulder towards the archway, diagonally, “Through the arch and straight back.”

She found the box of albums and had just got its flaps up when she heard a door open and “Oh, oops…”

Glancing back she felt her stomach jump to see Mister Kalil lingering in the brightly lit bedroom doorway. She called, a bit too urgently, “No, the one across from the arch.”

He glanced around, not closing the door, “Oh, yes, I see. When you said ‘straight back’ I thought you meant…nevermind. Sorry.” he headed into the bathroom, the bedroom door left open an unnerving inch.

She scooped up the album and slipper-sprinted across the floor to close the door, listening to the water running and trying to guess how long she had. One door clicked shut as the other clicked open. She tried to smile breezily, turning to meet him “Here it is. All the very worst slanders. Rita and the rest published them all so that you don’t have to.”

“Oh, great, yes” he accepted the hefty volume from her. “We should take that to the table. Unless you’d rather…”

For a moment she thought that must be genteel-speak for asking if she needed to use the bathroom, but even in the shadowy alcove she caught that his glance went impulsively to the bedroom door. Clever as she was, she recognized immediately that it was hopeless to try and unpack all the awkwardness contained in that gesture with the necessary delicacy not to utterly fumble it, so she just said “The table, I think.”

They were only partway through the arch when a fluttering knock was followed immediately by
another click of a door latch.

“Mum! Cassidy brought these great little pate’ things and I smuggled you suh- oh. Hello Mr. Kalil.” Hugo was standing in the front door with a little plate of finger sandwiches.

Nick brightened, “Hello, Hugo. Good job today!”

Hermione smiled too widely, “Hello sweetheart. Those look lovely. You’re just in time, we’re having tea, and I was going to show Mr. Kalil my Skeeter file. Come sit.”

Hugo was just like his father; clever and forthright and perpetually a fountain of feelings. He especially looked like him when he was confused or suspicious. Hugo blinked at her, looking a lot like Ron, “Um, no, that’s ok, already had some, with Cassidy and them. Just wanted to bring you some,” he looked up at the high ceiling, “this place is nice.”

Her smile softened, “It is, I’m almost settled in. Let Rose know that I’d love you both to come down and I’ll give you the tour, when you get time. Maybe lunch tomorrow?”

He nodded, slowly, looking from his mother to the young man in her rooms and back, finally deciding that nothing suspicious was going on, “I’ll tell her. She might be busy, they’re really loading up the homework and every other word out of her mouth is ‘library’, but I’ll come. And I’ll tell Lily.”

She crossed to him and took the plate, ruffling his hair, and tugged him in for a kiss on the head. She was still a full head taller than him, but just barely. It would probably be the last year for that. He was going to be tall, like his father.

“Bye then.”

“Bye, Hugo!” Mr. Kalil called from the table where he was cracking open the album.

“Actually you could take that with you if you like,” she tried not to sound too pointed, “I’ve got to set up for my last class. We can discuss your book later.”

“Oh, right. Great. Yes, thanks. I’m free, so I can give it back to you at dinner. Hold up, Hugo, I’ll walk up with you.” he downed the last of his cup and tucked the book under his arm.

“Great. Thanks for stopping by.”

She pressed the door closed behind them and turned the lock. At Hogwarts, even tea was going to be a test.
Subtle Gestures

Her last section of first years were as docile and stupefied as the first, but she was much more irritable and snappish with them. She was tired, her neck hurt, and she had a million things to do for her fourth and fifth years the next day. Plus she still had to have dinner and face whatever Severus meant to hit her with, probably find out she was gestating trans-dimensional space-kittens or something. She would just eat dinner at her desk, she decided. She ran through the lecture, did the demonstration, and sat poring over her library books, trying to distract herself, as the students wrote nine inch essays about what she’d shown them.

It wasn’t really the ache in her neck that was bothering her. Or the fullness of her proverbial plate before bedtime. Her body, like an awakened genii, was demanding use, refusing to be managed or put-off, hectoring her about her wishes. She buried herself in a rather incisive essay about classifying the authenticity of memories and the near impossibility of intentionally creating convincing alterations or extracting them cleanly without consent. Her hand kept wandering over to touch the place on the desk where she’d dreamed of sitting, where he’d held her hand down so they could linger, where they’d shut out the incessant tyrannies of practical reality and reasonable doubt. Her imagination kept spooling forward with an ambition to have him on the desk again, lashed down with sticking charms, straddling his hips with a lit wax candle in her hand, the way he’d gasp and harden...

She closed her book, feeling feverish. There were still ten minutes left of class. She cleared her throat and eleven little faces peeped up at her like a patch of wildflowers.

“I think you’ve had quite a long enough day. Hogwarts is a lot to get used to. Leave your essays at your seats, and you may be dismissed.”

They vanished in a flurry of swishes and thuds like a flock of startled pigeons.

She gathered up their papers, not knowing what she was going to do. She wanted to check on him. Did he like the book? Had Nikita frightened him? Angered him? Her stupid animal brain petitioned to grab Severus by the front of his robes and drag him into bed. It simply would not be convinced that there was no physical person to grab. It remembered, vividly, smelling him and grabbing him and having him. Twice, even. On the subject of Snape, her brain was like a muggle child believing in magic or monsters: too clever for her silly grown-up lies about what wasn’t real.

Her back hurt. Her mind was a jumble. She needed to rest and collect her thoughts. She dropped the essays on the table by the unwashed teacups and, resolved to lie down just for a bit and change for dinner, she went to the bedroom with just enough haste to make her robes billow.

He was sitting, staring into space.

The book was resting on the floor face down, without a bookmark in. He’d actually finished it. She sighed dramatically, stretched her shoulders, and slipped off her shoes, climbing onto the foot of the bed and lying parallel to the footboard, spying at him through the ironwork.

She shook her head, “I take back what I said about you.”

He surfaced from his reverie, resting his elbows on his knees, his tone dry and superficially peevish yet dutifully taking the bait, “what part?”

She sighed and closed her eyes wearily, lowering the lights with a gesture, “nothing that you were
there for.”

He snorted, lips bucking with a small tight smile before his reserve broke them back into surly
docility. He sat back, shook his head, “Why do that?”

“What?”

He cocked his head to one side and raised an eyebrow, “Trying to amuse me by being impudent. It’s
like you’ve never met me.”

She stretched and folded her hands on her chest, feeling the outline of her locket with the tip of her
thumb, “It is like that, isn’t it. Still it almost worked.”

He made a noncommittal noise in his throat but didn’t look away, not dismissing her.

She shrugged, wanting to say something about shared loneliness but lacking the nerve, “I don’t
know. I’m always out of tact by the end of the day. I guess I want to laugh but it’s easier if someone
else goes first. I’m a bit uptight that way.”

His head tilted the other way, nodding, a truce in a pantomime conflict, “Was that the last class of
your very first day then?”

She thought for a moment, “Worked that out, did you?”

He smirked, “I suppose your frantic pace today was a clue. But mostly it’s that look of bare disbelief,
like someone just showed you the ocean, handed you a thimble, and ordered you to bail. And I’ve
got a lot of time to think, just lately. Who was the young man?”

She groaned and jammed a thumb into the creased spot between her eyebrows like she was trying to
pop out her third eye, wishing to squeeze out the wound-up weariness so she could read essays and
eat, “He’s a teacher. He wants to write a book. He came down for tea.”

“And blundered into your bedroom.”

“I’m sorry about that. He couldn’t have seen you around the armoire, though.”

Severus waved a hand dismissively, “I wasn’t worried. I’ve got the world’s most ingenious
disguise,” He sat up straight and very still, affecting a distant gaze with just a touch of glowering.

Hermione laughed, it felt good, “Very handsome,” She lay on her back and admired him, grateful
that he could concede a little dry levity, even if it was foolish to become too comfortable. Most of her
relationships with people the last year had been a stilted game of pretend, anyway. As long as she
could have someone to talk to, it almost felt good to yearn for more from a place of cautious reserve.
Almost. “But then he’d have asked why I have a muggle portrait of you in my bedroom, glaring at
me as I sleep. Or worse, he wouldn’t ask and would just assume that the reason was too
embarrassing.”

“Might put him off you, you mean.”

She scoffed, “He is not ‘on me,’ thanks. Don’t become one of those skulking old finger-waggers that
sit indoors all day and make up torrid sex lives for everyone else. He’s too young. And a colleague.
Probably has a bigger crush on you, anyway. He’s a historian.”

His classical brow wrestled with itself through pique, perplexity, amusement, and finally the attempt
to hide amusement, his bow-mouth drawing tight to fire, “What’s he writing the book about?”
She narrowed her eyes at him, annoyed by his aim “Me. But only because he already wrote you. I’m just getting the…” the phrase *scholarly sloppy seconds* tripped through her mind, “...the also-ran.”

He studied her, lips pursed, then with an odd lack of adversarial teasing, “Are you jealous?”

She snorted too hard, “No, are you?”

He shrugged the universal sign for *only a little*, “Only of everything.”

His melancholy and her weariness matched up badly, leaving her nothing to say. She wasn’t sure she had the energy to drag him out of a blue mood, or whether he especially wanted her to, “Speaking of books, what did you think of the one I left you?”

His gaze rolled to the little rectangle on the floor, “Interesting. Peculiar. It could be a text in advanced muggle-studies, if it wasn’t so…”

“Vulgar?”

“I was going to say brutal, but that too.”

She nodded smiling, “Yes, exactly. That’s why I like Vonnegut,” she gestured languidly without wand or word and the paperback edition of “Breakfast of Champions” fluttered up into her hand, “He and Twain can be such seductive intellectual sadists. Rip you to bits with an earnest phrase, and for your own good, mostly, but not in an obnoxious moralizing way. I’m glad you liked it.”

He squinted at her, vaguely indignant, “I didn’t say I liked it.”

She shrugged, fielding vague indignance as reflexively as any other politician or parent of teenagers, “You told me to do my worst.”

“You certainly did that.”

“I certainly didn’t.”

“Didn’t you?”

“Not hardly.”

“You monster.”

“You masochist.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You finished it in an afternoon.”

“That means I’m impressive,” he sounded exasperated, but also a little wounded to be denied recognition of both his reading speed and his willpower. It was a little adorable.

She pursed her lips with what she hoped was an infuriating imitation of coy pity, “True. Forgive my confusion. When I came in you had the look.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, “Had I?”
She nodded gravely, “That look of bare disbelief, like your brain was a freshly ravished damsel pining for its dark defiler to return.”

He squinted incredulously, then a gust of laughter, tamped down too long under laconic maneuvering, caught him so by surprise that it puffed his cheeks out before he could get his mouth open. It cracked him like a sail, his head blown back, pounding out several stanzas of high, honking, drunken gasps that broke down into coughing and then vocalized panting. Hermione couldn't fend off its startling contagion, and it was several minutes before all the little gusts and eddies had finally passed over them both.

He wiped his eyes, “There are no words for how irritating you are.”

“Oh I assure you there are. My opponents have quite the lexicon.”

“Opponents?” his voice wry with disbelief, “You recommend books competitively often?”

She shook her head, smiling sincerely, “No, I’ve taken a special interest in torturing you. You seem to need it.”

He huffed a half-laugh of surrender.

She grinned, sighed, relenting, “Honestly I hope I’m not bullying you. If I go too far just accuse me of projecting. You’ll never be wrong.”

He gazed at her, his jaw glaciating about behind closed lips as if chewing, savoring an unspoken response. When he’d swallowed the flesh of it he spat out the seed, “Dark defiler, hmm?”

She gave that eloquent little shrug and flared her eyes at him, “Cat’s Cradle is worse.”

He squinted at her, not following.

“More Vonnegut.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head in mock disgust, “Am I to beg for mercy?”

Her lips twisted to one side sympathetically and she nodded, “For all the good it will do you.”

He gave one long, high, resigned laugh, unspooling a line of words that started out airily satirical and wandered down his register to something more substantial “Then please, dark ravager, cruel lioness, I beg you. Your fiendish use of my poor eyes has rubbed me raw and I crave some merciful balm, at your blessed and terrible sufferance.”

Her breath caught as his words licked flame-like around that relentlessly illogical part of her mind that wanted him, kindling images of drawing him out and down onto his knees, commanding the use of that agile tongue to plead his case to a lower authority, then pleasuring him senseless until he worshipped her. She nodded slowly, mulling over what that sort of shadowy she-god would say to her attractive man-thing. Several things occurred to her, but she got so jammed up wondering if he really wanted that or if she’d carried the game too far that all that came out was, “You might like Twain. Still an American, but he was more genteel. Or Dorothy Parker, brilliant misanthropic wit. I’ve got Jane Austen and Lewis Carroll if you’d rather come back across the pond. I’ve got quite a collection of muggleborn authors, actually. Solidarity, I suppose. I’ll bring you a bunch and you can choose,” Hermione, you coward .

He made a non-committal noise and rested back in his chair, though his right hand worked a button at his mid-chest restlessly. Was that a signal? “You read a lot of Americans, too.”
She followed what might be his lead, plucking at her own buttons, undoing the clasp at her throat casually then laying her hand back to the deeply quilted surface by her ear, recalling his palm pressed down against hers. She wondered, idly, if she had the audacity to rub one out before dinner, right in front of him, this time with the lights on. Would he have the audacity to watch? Did he want that? Repartee was one thing, but she was still worried about unintentionally using him in ways he felt too vulnerable to refuse. He wasn’t automatically safe from her mistakes, and the forthrightness that worked so well in dreams felt foolhardy and unhelpfully open-ended waking. There wasn’t anyplace that seeing only what one wanted wasn’t a constant danger, “I read a lot of everything, it means I’m impressive.”

He undid two buttons and slid his fingers inside his cassock, lightly massaging a spot on his pectoral in a way that wasn’t quite scratching but still might have been for an itch, “You are that.”

She saw him two buttons down her robe and raised him four on the shirt underneath, fingering the clasp in the front of her bra, “And impudent.”

He swallowed, “Get up.”

She tried not to grin, “What’s the matter?”

He said it again, more softly, with a hint of distant thunder, “Get up.”
Impulsory

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains explicit sexual content. Please skip to the notes at the bottom for a plot summary if that's not something you enjoy.

Chapter Notes

The weekend is going to be a bit hectic, so I'm posting early. Hope nobody minds. :)

It may be a bit hack, but I don't think one can mention the "insufferable know-it-all" thing often enough. It's really one of the more giddily horrifying meet-cutes of all time.

Content warning: more obsessively consensual soft-kinky power exchange ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She casually gripped the ironwork between them and knelt up, facing him squarely, feeling poised to duel, incongruously aware of the wand up her sleeve. He gazed at her, unsmiling, then put the back of his fingers to his chest and brushed casually outwards, as if brushing away lint, the way one might if they were trying to indicate that someone else should do the same.

She rested the flats of her fingernails against her breastbone and swept shoulder-ward, parting her robe and shirt to the apse of her cleavage, tracing the hem down then up the other side before perching her hand back on the rail.

He swallowed subtly behind a deep nod, “Now you.”

As neatly as that, he passed control to her, like it was a turn in a game of forfeits. She caught it in kind, facile and familiar and disproportionately intimate. It reminded her acutely of their game of give and take in the dark, but the other half: looking instead of touching, trading instead of collaborating. Waking instead of dreaming. A memory of his shivering, supple submission when she had gripped his hair tingled in her palm. His appetite for control was well honed, but was subtly twinned to a fierce and underfed appetite for surrender, for trust. She knew what that felt like, and the courage it took to act upon, even framed as a game where, apparently, rules could be discovered as they went, and would stay conveniently out of sight unless skirted, facilitating the illusion of one another’s unlimited power. Suddenly she didn’t feel the least bit tired. She might have been inferring too much, but she had a sense they were on a similar vector. It was worth testing.

So their daring cache of impulses was hers to command. What would she add before returning it to him?

One desire leapt foremost to her mind from the sense memory of herself naked on the desk and him thrust inside her through the tiniest gap in his armor, and his tight rein on himself in both of their previous encounters. He’d certainly shown, as he claimed, that he could always stop himself, always control himself. What she wanted most was to strip him, slowly, and for him to feel safe under her
control, appreciated, confident that she could control him, and that under her control he could relax into her hands as fully as he had in dreams. She couldn’t reconcile herself to treating him like a toy, ever, but she could treat him like a work of art, for a while. She put a stern edge on her soft command, “Open your sleeves.”

Buttons flicked apart with inspiring dexterity, cuffs tugged back sharply, folded until he was bare to the elbow. He was almost comically white under the black, but she thought of the warmth and silken softness of his wrists against her lips and had nothing amusing to say. Despite contradicting what little she knew about how kinky people conducted themselves, the thought of haughtily mocking him felt cheap and isolating. He was submitting to her freely, there was no pride to conquer, and flouting that would only seem like she’d misunderstood his willingness. She resolved that anything between them that needed conquering would find them on the same side.

“Watch me.” She held up her left wrist and brought her lips to it, parting and pressing them against the saddled curve where her hand bent back, stitching tongue-tip touches down the raised tendon, letting her lips trail as softly as she would if it were his wrist, his neck, his spine, then back up, placing another kiss and a gentle nuzzle where the plane of her wrist met the slopes of her palm, imagining, savoring.

She opened her eyes and folded her hands primly on the bar in front of her, “Do that.”

His mouth had fallen open slightly, but his jaw tightened and he swallowed. Fear, but just a little. Perhaps just enough to need courage. She saw his armor come up as he raised his right wrist, and he put his lips to his palm with his gaze still fixed on her seductively.

“No,” she said firmly, “close your eyes. Show me that you saw what I did.”

He sat up straight, lowering his hand, lips pursing, and nodded curtly. Her performance anxiety began to rabbet at her. Maybe it was too much to ask. Maybe it was worse than she thought. Maybe he was too accustomed to humiliation to savor something odd, or feminine, or masturbatory, or exhibitionist. Maybe he was too accustomed to threat to let down his guard, so filled with dark memories of submitting to cruelty that he wasn’t ready for his own fantasies of submission to have form beyond dreams. She resolved to let him try, to reassure him if he balked completely. He hated to back away from challenges every bit as much as she did, and wouldn’t benefit from any goading if he declared a limit. They certainly didn’t know each other well enough for her to push him. Yet.

“Take your time.”

He closed his eyes and lowered his shoulders. He propped his elbow on his knee and stooped slightly to find his wrist, seeming to guide himself by smell though surely his spatial sense would do. He hovered and parted his lips for a kiss so lush she felt it on her mouth. He trailed down and then up, and she felt her wrists tingle, her throat, her thighs. She almost hadn’t gotten her authoritative mein back in order by the time he planted the second kiss, only just closing her jaw as he opened his eyes.

“Very good,” she murmured, meaning it earnestly, wishing to caress him, noting how the sound of praise made him pause. She gave him a few moments, then nodded, her posture shifting only when his had. Passing the initiative cleanly seemed to matter, not letting it languish or hang slack. The weight that passed from her shoulders seemed greater than the one she’d taken on.

He raised his left hand, palm towards her. She raised hers, but he pursed his lips slightly and she switched to her right, mirroring instead of copying him. He undid buttons down his chest until his degree of undress resembled hers, and she ran her hand down her front in synch with him. He slid his hand across the opposite side of his chest, and she was mirroring him so intently that it felt like his
hand sliding into the space between her breast and her brassiere, her skin reacting too acutely to be her own touch. He pulled cloth aside like an anatomist so she could see precisely how he wished for her to proceed, tracing close to the nipple but letting fingers move independently like circling wolves. Before the tension got tedious two fingers scooped the sensitive nub against her thumb and rolled it gently before bearing down, latching tightly before letting go, retreating into a caress. She let out an appreciative moan, retracting her touch obediently.

“Very good,” he intoned from deep in his chest.

She noticed that her knees had slipped apart and she was kneeling low. The hope that he would command her to jam a couple of fingers down there and get to business was strong, but her curiosity for what he would actually choose, and what she would do, was stronger. He nodded and the power was hers again.

“Take your robe off.”

He was more prepared, though his movements were still stiff, conservative, briskly servile. He stood up and bowed very slightly, then unbuttoned down to the nape of his belly. He shrugged the whole thing off and caught it, laying it over the back of the chair neatly. He had no shirt, just a pair of black drawstring trousers of soft material she remembered exploring with her fingertips. She lifted her left hand and rested it on the back of her head, turning very slightly as he mirrored her so he could see her grip her own hair and he could do likewise. She pulled, made him pull, turning his chin aside and upwards, requiring him to watch her with eyes straining to their corners. With her other hand she made him touch his own jaw, trail down his extended neck, turn it over to stroke fingernails down his side, and come to rest dipping into his waistband. She repeated the gesture, slower, pleased that he made the motion more fluidly the second time, anticipating, dipping just a little further, breathing deeper.

Releasing his hair but not his will, she saw in his eyes that he thought she meant to stop, stranding his hand, her hand, mere inches from the stiff outline that proffered itself so candidly. She raised an eyebrow, wondering if he would let his face betray hesitance or yearning, determined to reward him with his desire if he could relax his practiced inscrutability enough to let her know if she was pushing too far. She didn’t want to advance or retreat too soon, but she could linger. She needed him to let her see, out here where skin was just skin and not an absurdly permeable psychic membrane, at least until she learned to read him better. His face didn’t move, but his fingers extended gently, deliberately, reaching downward, his eyes darting away from her.

A half measure deserved half a reward. Withdrawing from his waistband, she brought his hand down over the front of his trousers, tracing gently the hard outline embossed there with fingertips only. He gritted his teeth and his eyes closed, fluttering, fighting. He couldn’t see her anymore, so she said gently, firmly, “Good. You can stop. Slowly.”

His fingers stopped but his hand lingered as he breathed, then closed into a fist and moved to meet the other that closed around it as well. He brought them both to his chest, smoothing his palms down his front as if straightening his absent robe.

“Are you alright?”

He nodded.

She smiled coolly, channeling the dark defiler for him, just to try, “Good. You’re very good, very beautiful. I’d be inclined to show you mercy if you didn’t so preoccupy all my appetites.”
He relaxed fractionally, but it took a long while for him to come back to himself, gathering in. He ran another hand pensively down his chest, looking for his armor.

“Do you want to stop?”

He shook his head, and a small smile tugged at his lip, “No, thank you. I definitely want my turn.”

She shivered and tried to relax in kind, to return the power to him despite the teasing edge of menace in his voice, to trust that he was teasing or to crave his retaliatory torture, either way, and to quell the defiler in her, assured that she would get her chance. The magnitude of control definitely got larger and heavier with every pass as they went on, but also easier, richer, knowing and permitting more. Without a cue from her, he took it up, and the straightening of his posture seemed to release something in her own.

He dipped his chin, speaking firmly, and she felt her resistance melt, “Would you trust me to have you cast a spell?”

She bit her lip. Her body was goading her to agree to anything, to obey unconditionally and be rewarded with his praise, his pleasure, his lavish attentions, his willingness to do whatever she said in return. But she also needed to tell him the truth. He had asked, it was his turn, it felt compulsory. She shook her head, “Not entirely. But I think I can get there.”

He nodded, “It’s fine. You’re good to be honest. Come here.”

She climbed off the bed, crossed to him until she was inches from the canvas and could see the colors squirming despite the lower light. Fear welled up, but just a little. Perhaps just enough.

He rested one hand on the wing of the chair and spoke quietly, clearly, “You’ve been very kind, Hermione. I would like to try a little cruelty. A little...defiling. To see how it suits. Does that interest you?”

Something in the core of her erotic inclinations leaped to assent, but she wasn’t in the habit of letting her gut answer important questions. She knew his capacity for cruelty, his impeccable aim and withering venom, how he’d wielded it when she had been at her most eager to please, her most trusting in her own preparedness, the rightness of helping her friends, and the benevolent fairness of teachers. He’d ridiculed her very identity in front of all her brand new peers, and she’d spent the rest of the day feeling as wounded as if he’d stripped her bare and beaten her with a thorned rod, bearing his epithets more harshly than any slur she’d taken for being muggle-born, because he’d known how to make her believe it. Insufferable know-it-all. But he hadn’t asked if it terrified her, or if it had scarred her for life once before. He’d asked if it interested her.

Her jaw was set fairly hard, “Everything interests me. It’s part of why I’m so exceptional.”

Something hungry crossed his eyes at the whiff of defiance, then stilled, studying her. His voice was soothing, approving, easing her vigilance, “I agree completely. But you have every right to refuse, and I will still respect you, and... touch you, if you want me. I would not be cruel to you just for asking me not to be cruel.”

She tested her courage, trying to gauge what was the worst that could happen if his sadism and her masochism were badly aligned. What was the best if...

“It interests me. Yes.”
Without a beat, “Yes what?”

She balked. She’d heard of this game before. If there was anything ministry interns wouldn’t talk about in the bathroom she hadn’t discovered it. Which answer did he want? Sir? Master? Professor seemed a bit perverse. She fought down the performance anxiety that was straining to dash off in a million analytical directions and just looked at him. What was his place in her admiration? What was he? What did he most long to be?

“Yes, my Prince.”

His eyes flashed naked hunger and he looked down quickly, clearing his throat, “That’s...good. Good. If you change your mind, for any reason, call me Severus. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my Prince.”

“If anything I tell you to do is too upsetting or painful, you don’t have to explain, you may simply stop, put your hand to your chest, like so,” he put his palm high on his sternum, so that his thumb and index finger were each touching a clavicle, “and that part of the game will end, immediately, unconditionally. It is not my intent to get anywhere near that point this evening but,” he shrugged, “better to be safe, don’t you agree?”

She was already so keyed up by fear and excitement over what he might possibly mean to do to her that even opening her mouth to respond felt oddly unnatural, but it was the excitement’s voice that came out, “Don’t I agree...what?”

He squinted at her, his thin smile edged and indecipherable.

“...my Prince.” she added hastily.

He pinned her with that dissecting look that she so-much-more-than-remembered. It lived in her spine like a predator’s scent, ever preceding his acerbic ministrations. Even so, she willed her tight grasp on her defenses to loosen. Roll with the blow. She wasn’t afraid of a name, she told herself. She was interested in his cruelty. Better to look right at it, want him to answer honestly, find out whether this new game could work.

“Don’t you agree,” his eyes were arrow slits, “my favorite?”

There was a pang in her chest so tightly resonant that her lips went numb; separated from the rest of the world, and the rest of her life up to that point, by two words that seemed to carve out a tiny world just for the two of them. Did he know what he had done? Did she? Her head swam for a few moments and she had to put her feet apart just a little to feel steady.

She nodded, working her mouth to try and summon enough saliva to speak, all blood and moisture seeming to have rushed elsewhere, “Yes, my Prince.”

“And you are willing?”

She nodded, feeling incongruously powerful and entirely expecting that he might rip her to shreds with his eyes somehow, “I am. If at any point you need my help, if you think you might need me to stop you, or otherwise shake off this...game...call me Miss Granger.”

He nodded, “I will,” bowing his head and taking a deep breath.

He strode to the foreground, hands clasped stiffly behind his back, staring into her with eyes that
rippled strangely, hissing icy syllables that drizzled down her skin in melting tones, “Show me your
body, but keep your eyes on mine. I want to see that blazing Gryffindor courage, here, where you
are not safe from me. Strip it bare; the prissy, brittle, prideful lion’s glowing pelt. I want to see if it
goes all the way down. If it’s just another arrogant mask you people put on, I’m going to flay it off
for you a word at a time, and rub myself out inside you while you scream heat like the estrus-
maddened alley cat that you are.”

Reflexive defiance shot cinnamon liquor into the base of her spine as his words raked down her back
hard enough to strike a spark. Her lips curled into something between a smile and a snarl, “You
people?”

He smiled back imperiously, his voice full of contempt, “The brave. Do it. And if I see even a thread
of fear or a scrap of insolence I will rip it out of you and lash you down to your bones with it.”

She had not the faintest idea what that would actually entail, nor any doubt he could do it, nor the
least fear of the pain it would presumably involve. His tone and posture and the high pitch of her
excitement made her feel impossibly pliant, wanting simultaneously to triumph over his expectations
and bathe in his wrath, to please him and annoy him and keep his attention. It felt so good to want so
much, so simply. She felt courageous, and like she knew exactly how to show it.

She shrugged out of her robe, let it fall. She shed her shirt without looking, tossing it down. She
popped the clasp on her bra and shucked it off, marveling in the back of her mind how, for the first
time in twenty years, she wasn’t even vaguely concerned about the aesthetics of her breasts. There
was no room to be. The only thing that mattered was doing what he demanded and accepting
whatever he did in return. She put her hand on her trouser-button and he held up a hand to still her.
Stillness was as easy as motion, if it was what he wanted. It was remarkable.

His eyes trailed down and lingered on the hollow of her throat. When he spoke his voice was gentle,
“What is that, my favorite?”

Not taking her eyes off of his, she felt the braided cord of her locket, which had apparently slid
around to her back when she’d sat up so quickly. She blushed, certain he would be forgiving if she
stepped away from the game but not feeling a need to, finding the charm and bringing it around to
the front. It felt good to tell him, to tell someone, “It’s...a memento, of my husband, my Prince.”

Fuzzy recollection stirred in his look, “He...you lost him. I’m sorry. I remember you saying that.
When I was...” he squinted doubtfully, “when I was dreaming...”

She nodded, “I had this made from some trinkets and things when he died. It’s to remember him by,
and as a reminder to myself...to let things change. It really only half works, if I’m being honest,” she
stroked the slender braided cord absently, feeling the impulse to babble about how it had his old
unicorn-hair and dragon-heartstring wand cores woven into it since she couldn’t think what else to
do with his old wands, couldn’t bear to use them, and couldn’t bear to give them away; how some of
the gold came from their wedding bands, how she’d chosen the picture of him inside it, and on and
on, but she felt too calm to babble. When it was time for him to know, he would ask.

His cruelty entirely disrupted, his tone was still commanding, “You may leave it on, or put it
someplace safe. We can stop if you would rather.”

She curled her fingers around it, searching her feelings. When she had first started wearing it, she
could never bear to take it off, but the last few months it had been more of a touchstone than a
security blanket. She took it off all the time. She figured Ron would have prefered her to take it off
under the circumstances, but not that he’d have minded the reason, not if it were making her feel
better. Or getting her naked. He’d always been a big fan of naked.

“I’d like to take it off, my Prince.”

He nodded. She turned away, hanging it on the corner of the bed, touching the place on her bare chest it had vacated, returning to the place near his bare chest she had vacated.

“I called him ‘my prince’ sometimes too. It was different though. To me, this is different. Is that alright with you?”

“Yes, of course,” he went quiet. It was awkward.

“Please don’t,” she blurted suddenly, “Please don’t that...that thing, that silence. I’ve had a year of it and it’s so strange. I mean, I understand, people don’t know what to say, I get it, but they clam up so completely around me...it’s like they’re trying to keep his death, the one omnipresent fact of my life, a secret from me,” she laughed tremulously, “it almost makes it feel like there must be some other thing, you know? We all know he died so the sudden secrecy when his name is mentioned must be about something else that’s just too horrible to trust me with, like he had a second family somewhere or was actually a spy.”

Severus smiled bemusedly, nodding, still silent except for swallowing audibly.

“I…” a sudden thought barely glanced off her mind before tumbling from her mouth, “…but at least people recognize what I am. Widow. There’s at least some placeholder for what I’ve lost, however inadequate. I don’t have to fight social perceptions for my place in his story. They know there’s something so large there that it’s appropriate to wonder, to pause, to struggle to address it. You...never had that. No awkward silences for your benefit, your loss, just...everyone moving on. The world eventually moved on without me as well, after the sympathy cards and covered dishes, but still...I imagine social indifference is worse. A worse silence.”

“It’s…” he was visibly stunned, “it’s kind of you to think of it in those terms. Not even…” he sighed and shook his head, “I mean...thank you.”

She sighed in a sort of agreement, “I don’t really want to talk about it either. I mean, I should, we should, but I don’t want to, I didn’t mean to talk about it. It’s not interesting, it just goes around and around and...sorry. We were having fun, I thought. Or I was, certainly, and if you’d like to go on...”

He waved a hand, nodding, walking to the background, wiping an eye, and then towards her again, gathering his character, perhaps occluding the previous subject for efficiency’s sake, and she took a second to do a little of that as well.

“Finish stripping for me. Everything. Now.” He was deliberately leering, all pathos dismissed, appreciating her as indifferently as if she were the painting and he the collector, his subtle smile proprietary and cruel. It was the kindest thing anyone had done for her in a long time, after one of her self-flagellating outbursts.

She unbuttoned her trousers and let them fall, stepping out of them. She put her thumbs in her panties...she didn’t remember which pair she’d worn and didn’t look, struggling not to look anywhere but his eyes, not to glance down his arm when his shoulder shifted, not to follow the veiled motions of his sliding fingers, conspicuously lewd. She pushed down her last scrap of clothing, stepped aside and stood before him, her rapt hunger easily supplanting the awkwardness of moments before.

His whole hand was down the front of his trousers, brazen and aloof, his curled lips parting as he
stared and groaned quietly, the motion of fabric suggesting that he was attending to his erection with the same deft touch that had undone his clothes earlier. Just as she began to wonder if he meant to go on until he’d finished, he withdrew his hand with an effort, “You’re very good, my favorite.”

She felt her whole body flush with absurd gratification, “Thank you, my Prince.”

“Would you like to take a turn now, or perhaps I could grant my brave lioness a boon?”

“You’re not going to flay me alive, then?”

He licked his lips slowly, his eyes moving in concert under relaxed lids as if they were tasting her, genuinely considering the option, the apologetic irony in his smile admitting his inability to touch her, “Not...today.”

Her thoroughly tantalized imagination pouted over being teased, but she let it go, enjoying the elaborate torture of needing to wait and the sidelong approval in the way a future was implied. He was better than her at conveying assuredness, she thought, but he likely had the same doubts she did about how far to push, about what might seem foolishly pompous more than princely, whether these desires were inherently ridiculous, whether they were truly reciprocated. She smiled, feeling very feline, idly stroking the soft mane between her thighs with the backs of her fingertips, “I think the lioness would like to see the serpent fully bared, if she may.”

“As you wish,” he smiled subtly, “If I were selfish it would please me for you to kneel, but the floor is hard and cold and I don’t want to hurt you...unduly.”

She nodded, “Thank you,” kicking her discarded clothes towards the wall, taking a step and bringing her knees down into them, her face sinking level with his hands. He groaned softly as if she had taken him into her mouth, and she shivered at the sound.

With a motion his trousers fell off his hips, and with just a motion of his ankle he was naked, and she let herself stare. His erection was smooth, serviceable, with a slight curve towards his belly and a prominent head. She knew precisely how it felt pushing into her. It was ordinary. It was perfect. She wanted desperately to know how it might taste, to feel his fingers twine gently in her hair and coax her parted lips towards... She murmured again as his hand idly mirrored hers, stroking himself lightly, demonstratively, illustrating his contours for her inspection, confident in the privacy and respect of her willing submission, trusting her with that power, gathering her to him inside his armor, “Thank you.”

He looked down at himself, at her, his face dreamlike, the smoothness of his breathing beginning to fray with desire “Would you like to lie on the bed? To relieve yourself? I’m afraid I’m...rather limited.”

She considered it, then searched with her hand slowly and retrieved her wand from her tumbled robe, holding it up toward him on a flat palm, “Show me what you want me to do, my prince.”

“You will cast for me?” disbelief mingled with ravenous want.

She nodded, “I trust you. Or at least, I’m curious enough, and I trust myself.”

He murmured, snarling slightly, “Oh my favorite,” straightening, slowing and unhanding himself, assuming his instructive air, “Kneel on the bed.”

“I like it right here, my prince.” the thought of moving further from him seemed absurd. She knew he couldn’t touch her, and the proximity was torture, but she was loath to surrender the illusion that he
might, that their chastity was a matter of reserve rather than impossibility.

He went to one knee, eyes closed, “I need your help, Miss Granger. Please kneel on the bed.”

She realized he had his hand on his chest, thumb and forefinger distinctly resting on his collarbones. She was up in an instant and did as he asked, squaring her shoulders to accept control should it slip from him, “Are you alright, Severus?”

He nodded, rising and presenting his right hand palm up, “Very, I just can’t bear what’s in my head by myself any longer and I don’t want...it’s not safe to do on the floor. Please do as I do,” He held his palm flat, she mirrored by presenting her wand, then he curled her fingers around it, compelling her to level it at him.

He walked right to the limit of the foreground, his eyes closed, his head back, his instructions rapid, clipped, and precise, “Aim for my forehead. Picture a brightly glowing point between my eyes, like the tip of a thread, and you are going to reach out with a swift hook to pluck that thread-end and twine it to you, through a hole between your own eyes. Reach from there, not your hand, your wand is only for siting. The connection will contain my thoughts, my surface ideas, and you will subordinate my will and summon them to yourself with the word…”

...her mouth mimicked his, lips teeth and tongues aligned…

“Legillimensia.”

Time seemed to slow, though elements of it slipped and shifted rapidly, and with the barest beckon from her wand, he seemed to pounce from the painting and collide with her, engulfing her, on her and in her and blending with her. It didn’t happen sequentially but all at once, compressed to a moment that her own mind unraveled backwards and forwards, every element of his intent and desire vivid: fingers delving, tongues twining, hips levitated and limbs bound, tight grips and raking nails, engulfing, biting, pulling her onto him as she rode, driving into her as she knelt, working deep inside like her own pulse, his mouth and fingers and cock collaging and unfolding and fucking between her thighs and on her tongue, days and days of ecstatic torture and release compressed into one sensation and all like a many-faced pagan god, exploding from her mind fully-formed.

When she opened her eyes she was trembling, the sudden silence overpowering. Her whole body felt like one tingling nerve-ending, intensely and uniformly aroused, straining towards the place they’d flung their minds to on a stretched thread twanging taut. She had fallen back, her shoulders on the bed, her heels still under her buttocks, sloped and arched and bare, flashes of his intense fantasy still ricocheting around her brain and down her spine, saturating the flesh at the end of each neural filament, her skin bright pink all over. She touched her chest and was struck breathless by the explosion of heightened tactile awareness. Her little finger grazed her nipple as she slid her hand down towards her pulsing mons, and she gasped like a fish, writhing so that one foot came free and she propped her leg on the foot of the bed. She felt every inch the estrus-maddened alley-cat, her body howling to be mounted after the long ravishment of her mind.

She heard him then, his own voice saturated with the same tension she felt, a slow fleshy flapping noise painting an unmistakable image for her, “Slowly…”

She gasped and it was half a sob, tortured. She obeyed, gritting her teeth and cursing him roundly as the sensation swelled and her fingers finally twined into her dewed and downy hair. She could hear his breath getting short. She spread her fingers apart, drawing back the petals of her blooming flesh…
He whispered, “Yes...”

She pressed two fingers down hard inside herself, crooking their tips and pulling mercilessly the way she’d felt him want to do to her, pressing and rubbing her swollen pistil with her thumb, triggering the crossbow-tight energies that strained inside her. She screamed and felt like she’d been flung clear off the earth, convulsing so violently that she caught air and bounced, obliterated, her brains spinning wildly off into the dark with no sense of up or down, his full-throated cries bursting out like signal flares around her and fading to black.

When she came-to, dizzily, she felt as limp as a sea jelly and almost as weightless. Her wand was still clutched tightly in her hand.

“Accio!” her robe pounced upon her. She sprawled into it gradually.

When she finally sat up, he had his silken trousers back on but was otherwise laid out in his chair, one leg straight out to the floor, the other cast over an arm, head resting in one palm, hair utterly derelict. She could see the places on his waist where his softness bunched, where deep scars pulled, where his muscles waned on his elegant frame, where he was a man of flesh who had lived and aged and fought and died still in his prime. She was glad that she had told him he was beautiful. He was, but the courage to say it had flared out in the preceding blaze, down to a fond glow.

“Hi...”

He smiled at her lazily, a ripple of impulse going through him toward some sort of sitting up but being abandoned, “Hello.”

She glanced at him slyly, working buttons shut over her nakedness, “Have you done that before. With that spell I mean. Did you know what it would do?”

He made a quiet sound that was halfway between a sigh and a giggle, sounding just a bit loopy “Not even remotely. I had a theory. And what you might call a devout ambition. It seemed worth a try. Are you alright?”

“I feel...disoriented. Displaced in time. I feel like we’ve been in bed a week, like I know more about you than I do. That happened last time, too...does that happen to you as well?”

He nodded, “minds move faster than bodies.”

“Well your mind has wrecked my body. I can barely move.” She was grinning.

“Mmm,” he assented, waving comprehensively at the general flotsam-like nature of his posture.

“Your brilliant disguise seems to be malfunctioning.”

“I’m dabbling in still-life. Armchair with vegetable.” He glanced at her coyly, “Are you saying I’m not beautiful?”

She shook her head, “I would never say that. I’m just wondering how we’re ever going to write this experiment up for the benefit of future generations since we seem to have fucked our brains out, perhaps literally. Momentary weeks of work, wasted.”

He raised his eyebrows, sleepy-eyed, to make a retort.
There was a soft scraping sound from the main room. Hermione clutched her robes but realized it was not anything human.

A letter had come under the door.

Chapter End Notes

Our heroes experiment with power-exchange, taking turns ordering each other to take off items of clothing and pleasure themselves. They develop a visual language of how one should imitate the other's motions.

When Hermione has her shirt off, Severus notices her locket and asks about it, and she explains that she had it made from her wedding bands and a few other mementos after Ron died, and how the cord is made from his old wand-cores, since she couldn't give them away and couldn't bear to use them. She admits that she would rather take it off while they "play", and that she was enjoying the fairly intense consensual power-fantasy, on both ends. They give each other names to distinguish their personae, she calls him "my prince" and he calls her "my favorite", and both seem affected by the choice.

Severus asks if she would be willing to try casting legillimency on him, so he can show her what he would like to do with her if they were able to touch. At first she refuses, and he doesn't bring it up again, but eventually she decides she wants to. After a brief negotiation he lets her read his thoughts, and she lets his thoughts in, and they both experience an intense and instantaneous connection that leaves them both satisfied and a bit dopey. They laugh a little, fondly, about just how bad they've wrecked each other with just their brains, until they are interrupted by the sound of a letter coming under the door.

So, fair warning, the letter is more or less the jumping-off point where stuff is going to start getting all plot-focused and peculiar and less like a straightforward romance. Reality seeping in. Or out. Or something.
The handwriting was as graceful as the message was brief.


The clock chimed six-thirty. She hadn’t wanted to rush off to dinner anyway.

The signature at the bottom was comparatively large and stylized, but decipherable as “Stoke”.

She returned, gears turning, and he was dressed, sitting idly.

“I’ve been summoned to dinner in Hogsmeade. A late dinner. It seems I’ve got a couple of hours, if you think that’s enough time.”

He smiled sardonically, “I should have thought you were exhausted by now.”

She sighed, reluctantly serious, “I am. Utterly. You’re a masculine beast. A veritable golden god. I wasn’t talking about that. I just meant, whatever you wanted to show me, it needn’t wait until later if you think two hours is enough time.”

“Oh,” he didn’t move so much as stiffen, “Yes if you wish. Only...” his jaw worked, “I’m feeling a bit wrung out. More than I anticipated from our experiment. Golden goddess, force of nature, you understand, but,” he read her lack of a smile, paused, lips parted, pursed slightly, “you’re right, I should...”

She couldn’t help recognizing reluctance and shame in his posture, like any child, or really any grownup, trying to find the will to admit to a mistake that apologies were unlikely to fix. Reality seeping in. She cleared her throat, wishing he would just accept or refuse and stop with the dramatics, “So what shall we do?”

“I think it would be easiest if you took me through to the lab, now. If it’s upsetting, I don’t want you to have to deal with me just so you can sleep. I’ve as little interest in being your jailer as you have in being mine,” he smiled weakly, “at least platonically.”

She nodded, approaching and handling him gently, bringing him down first and then lifting the canvas from behind to avoid pressing against him awkwardly. It still felt awkward. His canvas felt unnervingly fragile and weightless in her hands.

The lab was still very bare, though she’d added one of the tables and a few of her mustier books. She looked about for someplace to hang him, but had to rest him against the wall instead.

“I’ll get a proper picture hook for you after dinner.”

He took that with indifference, “You’ll need a vial. With a stopper. And your wand.”

All right then. She had to go through to the classroom cupboard to get something ideal, suspecting she knew what was coming. The magic window in the classroom was pushing long shadows out the far side of the desks and chairs with mellow evening light. She brought a chair as well, and sat down by him when she’d returned.

She’d lived long enough to see people looking more miserable than he did in that moment, but not...
very many. It actually annoyed her. He could be such an inexhaustible stoic, why was he being so transparent about his feelings suddenly, of all times. Was he really that tired? Had she really broken him? She hated the thought of having damaged him, enough that the coward in her insisted that it had to be his fault, or, worse, a trick. She tried to sound patient but it came out bitter, passive aggressive, “I’ll trust you enough to forego this if you don’t trust me enough to go through with it.”

His head turned away as if she had slapped him. It was unconscionably satisfying. When he looked up again, he looked angry. The effect was similar. “We can’t all be Gryffindors,” he muttered.

She felt her diplomacy close over her, pressing down her impulse to bite back, “I just meant that if you need time…”

“Stop being patronizing, I know exactly what you meant.”

She was used to people wanting her to get angry, trying to trip her up for an interview, to brand her hysterical in a debate, or for the simple animal high of demonstrating power over someone else. She’d had tweenagers, for Archimedes’ sake. But he was being sincere. That was worse. It hurt. She missed their affectionate glow already, regretted snuffing it out for pride.

“Severus,” she took a deep breath, “just tell me. Whatever it is, I swear, on my life, on my love for the magical and mundane worlds both, I’ll believe you. I won’t punish you. I won’t abandon you. I won’t be your judge or jury or executioner. I won’t…hide you away or expose you or whatever it is you’re afraid I’ll do. Why won’t you just tell me?”

He shook his head, trying to soften, “I can’t. I can’t describe it. I have to show you,” he tapped his temple ruefully.

“And you don’t like what I’ll see.”

He gritted his teeth against yelling, mostly ineffectively, “I don’t know what you’ll see! Stop badgering me!”

Her heart went to him, but her mouth set itself in a line reflexively against being yelled at, bristling at the characterization of her concern. At least one of them had to be steady, calm, and it was plain that neither of them were, “I won’t do this. It will wait,” she stood up, putting the vial on the table as she turned to go, “I’ll let you alone until later. I will come back, I promise. I’m not punishing you, but I won’t do this. Not like this. You’re hurting me and I don’t want to return the favor any more than I already regret.”

“Wait!”

“No.”

He said it again, more softly, and it drew her up short, like a silken thread around her ribcage that lead to the crook of his finger.

She sighed bitterly, “How do you do that.”

He didn’t respond and she didn’t turn.

“Well?” she asked the doorway, “what am I waiting for?”

“Come and sit. Bring the vial,” his voice had found its deep instructive lilt again.
“No. It’s a bad idea.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry.”

“And I don’t want you to be frightened of me.”

“Nobody’s frightened of you.”

“I am.”

She felt her shoulders settle to turn her towards him, as surely as if he had pulled her, and she wondered if it made him feel unconscionably satisfied. He didn’t look it, but he did look calm, the old stoicism in place, just as she’d thought she wanted. She picked up the vial and sat, arraying her tools of negotiation in her mind. She knew quite a lot about memory collection, but wanted to see what he would say, “What would make this easier for you?”

He gazed at her apologetically, “We should just get on with it.”

“Is there anything dangerous about whatever it is we’re about to do?”

He shook his head, “Not for you.”

She gave him a warning look, feeling as though he were deliberately plucking at her regard for him to test it, “How do we minimize whatever danger there is for you?”

“I just need you to go slowly, so a copy of the memory can form and separate without tearing my...anything. The threads look smooth but have a tangled and sticky texture like candyfloss. They’re fragile.”

She nodded, “I’ve seen it done. The drawing-out of memories.”

He studied her and nodded once, soberly, “But with a slight difference. I’m not...or rather...I don’t know if I’m human. I might not be a living thing at all, I’m probably not. I might not be able to adapt or repair myself if anything goes wrong. I might not even be able to generate copies, we might just end up...tearing out pages.”

She gave him an incredulous look, unable to fathom why he thought this was a reasonable thing to ask her to do, “Then let’s don’t. I mean, honestly.”

He held up a hand, “a clean tear, clean edges, it should be fine. Paintings have suffered worse and been restored to perfect function, same as books. The problem is me, if I fight it, things might shred. It’s complicated. All I mean is that any mistakes, you shouldn’t blame yourself for.”

Fat chance of that she thought I’ve been known to blame myself for the weather, “Well then why don’t we try something easy to start. Something that makes you feel comfortable, relaxed.”

He smirked, “I’m a miserable pillock. I don’t have memories like that.”

“Oh surely you do,” his expression didn’t change, so she tried again, “Well what about something trivial you wouldn’t miss.”

He considered, grimacing uncomfortably, “You’d be surprised...how many memories like that you
don’t have when you don’t expect to be making any more. There’s nothing you don’t miss when you’re dead.”

“You’re not dead, and if you weren’t making new memories you’d forget me every time I left the room, and you’re being difficult.”

“It just is difficult. And you know what I mean.”

She did her very best to empathize through her annoyance. She thought about how she hadn’t been able to empty the wastebaskets or wash the dishes or pick up socks from where he’d left them after Ron had died, how the most ridiculous and mundane things became too precious to touch, how even the things that had always driven her up the wall about him became sacred, the shittiest memories limned with importance. Even after she’d forced herself to tidy up she’d cried for days. It had felt like something squandered.

“All right. But you’re just going to have to trust me then. At least a little. How about, something no one else was there to see but you wished someone had. Like a hole-in-one or one of those jokes that ‘you just had to be there’...or something nobody would believe or understand later. Something you want seen.”

He nodded, slowly, “It’s a thought.”

“I won’t even look at it if you don’t want me to.”

“Even if, by definition, I should,” he sounded needlessly snide.

She declined the bait and shrugged, “Or we could forget about it.”

He took the hint, and a moment to recover his clinical tone, “It’s the same incantation as earlier, but at the right temple, and it’s best done very gently, even non-verbally. It’s more essential that I release than that you pull, you understand?”

She nodded, “Your knowledge of occlumency should give you some ability to de-occlude the process.”

“True. Not my strongest suit, but it should be enough. All you’ll need to provide is a very slight push to get into my mind, and then a very gentle pull when you feel the memory-stuff I offer you adhere to your desire for it. Drawing out memories from a mind is very much like reaching for your own memories in situ...if either of us tries too hard it will slip further away, so just...gentle push, gentle pull. And reach from here,” he touched the lower tip of his sternum, “not from between your eyes.”

“I understand.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure.”

Her lips pursed and drew to one side. It was a terrible idea, and she was going to lose her mind trying to humor him. “I’m trying very hard not to be flip about being treated like an idiot because I realize the stakes are fairly serious for you, which incidentally is why I’m against this plan entirely, but yes: I do, I’m sure, I’m actually something of a prodigious genius, actually, and have been ever since I was a child which, of course, I now recall you didn’t notice then, either, or else treating me like a child
now would be less insulting. Honestly if you’re so worried that I’ll get this so wrong why on earth are you so keen? Why did you trust me to do it in bed as a...a...” she stopped groping for the word, “is this all just an elaborate suicide attempt or what?”

He scowled at her, the combative edge in his voice more urgent than hectoring, “Connecting thoughts is something different. It’s not a removal. Even if we had damaged one, the thoughts I have are mine, I know I can make more of those, they come and go in great abundance, particularly the ones about you if you must know. I have them because I’m me. But the memories...they make me, I’m theirs. They were made by the man that I was and he doesn’t exist anymore. Don’t you understand that? I’m not a...I might be nothing more than the thoughts his memories have, so lending them out...” his temper seemed to catch up to his words and he slowed, “...poses some danger to me, either in success or failure, in terms of unavoidable truths I’d rather avoid. And for the record, yes I did treat you abominably as a child, if memory serves me, but it was never because I didn’t recognize your genius. In fact-”

She put up a hand, her whole inside wincing, “Stop, stop, sorry, you’re right. Of course you are. I did know the difference, even as I said it. I read up on it just this afternoon, just, I’m anxious that I might hurt you, and seeing you reflect that fear and doubt at me is...but it’s reasonable. You’ve got every right to be exacting, to want me entirely on-board. And the childhood thing was just a cheap dig, I don’t even know how that got in there.”

He let his shoulders down deliberately, scanning her with an unspent ire that was being diluted with mystification, “So that was a place where I was meant to just accuse you of projecting and move on.”

She couldn’t help smiling, He really did take in everything, “Yes, seems so. You don’t ever need to put up arguments on behalf of my insecurities, they’re quite capable of making themselves heard.”

He ran a hand through his hair and sat back, “I belabored a point. I apologise. Shall we agree that neither of us is to use the other for the purposes of elaborate suicide then? Just as a matter of etiquette?”

She sighed, “It’s actually starting to terrify me that this is how you feel about it but you still think it’s easier this way than telling me.”

“Just easier. Not actually easy.”

“It is what it is. Have you got a pensieve, or have I got to go make up a story to borrow the headmaster’s? Because I’m godawful at lying.”

“The pool. One of the enchantments on the silver bands can substitute. Just fill it to the top of the lowest step, add the memory, and stir it with your wand.”

She remembered her dream, the pool that went down forever, freezing and burning her, the figures in the unbreathable dark, drowning in her own heart. She gave an involuntary shudder.

“Hermione?”

She looked at him with nothing to say.

“Where did you go?”

She opened her mouth to lie or evade and spoke as if entranced, “I had a dream when I first got here. Of that pool as something bottomless. It swallowed me up, took me down into the Black Lake, I was alone, I drowned.”
He looked grave, “You’re afraid.”

She nodded, then shook her head, “Yes, a little I suppose. It was a vivid dream. I get those a lot, ever since Ron. But I’m not afraid of pensieves. I’ve used them before. They have one in the damages courtroom at the ministry large enough for seven people to review evidence at once. Anyway, I’m always afraid, it’s just you haven’t ever seen me as I really am. I’ve sort of been taking a holiday from it with you. But we can’t all stay Gryffindors, I suppose,” she felt her face begin to leak and smiled badly at her own unfunny joke to cover it.

His expression was unchanged, “How did Ron die?”

She sniffed and shook her head, “No, not that. Not right now. But if we both get through this in one piece, I’ll show you. Alright? Does that sound fair?”

He gave her the same look that George had given her at Ron’s funeral. Bemused, naked, knowing. That look between widows that says You and I both know something that other people don’t, that we can’t talk about with them, that we needn’t talk about with each other. It was the look of people who encounter each other on the far side of a chasm from the rest of the living world, and simply seeing one another is the entire conversation. It was a look that said the offer was more than fair.

She cleared her throat, “Will you be in there with me?”

“I don’t know if I can. It would be rather experimental. I don’t feel very strong right now and...and it might be better if I were in here. So you would only have to see me when you were ready to. After.”

“Let’s just try an easy one now, then. Do the rest when I get back, if you’re feeling up to it.”

“Go fill the basin. I’ll try to think of something.”

It went fairly easily. When everything else was ready she sat with him, waited. He sat with his hands on his knees, eyes closed. A gentle push, and the tip of her wand seemed to pierce the slim invisible barrier between the air and the paint at his temple. Counting to ten, just to be very sure he had time to relax, barely whispering the word in her mind, then a gentle pull, and luminous threads came away from the canvas with the tip of her wand.

He gave her that look again, glancing at the bottle and then at her with a sort of inert and chronic longing, wanting without any sense of expectation, saying only, “Good. It copied.”

She nodded and left him, closed both doors, poured his memory into the pool and dived in after.
She was on a hardscrabble hillside. There was a tree that had apparently lived and died never having seen another tree, and a boy in its jagged shadow. His hair was black and messy in a way that reminded her acutely of Harry, except that it was fine and dirty instead of being naturally thick and unruly. There were houses in a row below, shabby. He looked at one house and not the book open in his lap. He had a bag beside him that had been promoted from a pillowcase. Just at the top there was an empty sandwich wrapper and a half-eaten chocolate bar. Just beneath she could see an apple and another wrapped sandwich and a small onion, and probably more edibles or entertainments underneath those. Filtering up from the house was some tinney shouting. Two adults. They were shouting at each other, not for the boy who had apparently just run away from home for the afternoon. He clutched a pen in his right hand like a wand. His lips were moving, over and over, like he were trying to hex the house.

She knelt down to look at the book. It was heavily underlined, the heading echoing what the boy whispered over and over in her ear as she knelt close enough to read.

“Expecto Patronum. ”

Down the hill, someone left the house. A small, smokey car pulled away, squealing tires.

The boy seemed to relax. He broke off a square of chocolate and put it in his mouth, letting it dissolve as he read.

There was a loud caw from above. He looked. A crow was hopping about the branches, studying him and eyeing his bag.

He closed his bag and gave the bird a dirty look which it seemed to return.

He went back to reading.

The bird landed ten feet away along the hill with an audible plunk. It preened at him and quorked an accusation. The boy narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips combatively, and Hermione couldn’t help smiling to see a look that was so definitively Severus on a face so young. The bird did a hopping half-dance that involved a lot of preening and turning about and noise-making but didn’t move closer or further away. Severus tried to read but his eyes kept going back to the bird.

Severus opened his pack and took out a small packet of peanuts. He cracked one open, eating the first nut himself and tossing the other one vaguely in the direction of the bird.

The bird danced forward, grabbed the nut, and only retreated half as far as it had come.
A tentative smile started by pulling the boy’s scalp back just a bit, then creeping to the back of one cheek, barely daring to touch his lip.

He got out another peanut and did the trick again, and the crow, after snatching its treat, remained closer again, dancing fervidly.

This went on until the bird was less than an arm’s length from him, and he had only three peanuts left. He cracked the first, putting the bird’s half on the knee of his jeans. Fearless, the bird jumped and landed on him to snatch it, having the gall to wipe its beak on his leg before hopping off. The next he balanced on the side of his outstretched hand, and the bird hopped up on his arm, ate and remained. He smiled, though the bird was obviously heavy and its claws left red marks.

He cracked the last shell one-handed, rolling the tasty prizes between his nimble fingers until he had the bird’s undivided attention.

He murmured “Expecto Patronum” and threw one nut towards the house as high and hard as he could. The bird burst from him to chase it, looking for all the world like the glossy black inverse of a real patronus.

The boy grinned and ate the other half of the nut, closing the book in his lap and running his hand over the cover. It was a tatty old copy of “The Dark Arts and Their Counters”. It was lightly embossed with the image of a single crow.

The image shifted, the same hill, a different day. The sun was going down. He was sitting on the opposite side of the tree, looking up the hill at the darkening sky. He was clutching something to his chest. It was a large folded piece of parchment with a red wax seal she recognized. He was holding a real wand. His face was beatific. He looked at the first twilight stars, then at his wand, then around at the empty lane, the quiet house, the absence of any cars or voices except for the shouts from some sort of sporting match far away on the other side of the factory whose inky shadow was slowly drowning the town. He swished the wand, “Expecto Patronum”.

A light flared and swirled and soared away on glossy white wings.

The boy barked a laugh and quickly shoved the wand into the folded paper, clutching both to his chest and one hand over his mouth as he rode out the waves of giddiness at his own brilliant indiscretion.

The scene changed. A cabin on the express. The train had just started to move. Severus was again sitting by himself. The door opened and a girl his age with auburn hair came in and plopped down intimately beside him. Seeing him next to a child his own age emphasized how small and birdlike he was. Lily was a rather small girl, and he was very close to her in size. He looked at her, smiling. She was smiling back. Neither needed to say anything. They were finally on their way. The girl’s smile faltered first. The boy’s face turned sour instantly.

“Petunia again?”

Lily nodded, “She wouldn’t say a thing to me all morning, but just as I was getting on the train she said—”

He held up his long-fingered hands to stop her with an idiosyncratic solemnity, “Don’t say it. Whatever it was, it doesn’t matter. Not to us. Not anymore. We’re among other wizards now, Lily. We’re going to have real friends. We’re going to have real teachers. We’re going to be together and you’re never going to be at another bully’s mercy because you’re going to be brilliant, and I’ll
always be right there and I’ll always be ready. You’re better off getting used to never caring what
pee-yewnia has to say ever again, starting right now.”

She gave him a half-hearted smile, and he sunned it with exaggerated coaxing faces until it
blossomed with more genuine delight. They settled back in their seats. They had a consonance in
their faces, a secret body language, that made them seem like twins. Though his mood was sunny
and excited, and she looked like too much noise might set her crying over her sister, they each found
calm in the other, counterparts. She expected they were like this often, though probably in opposite
roles. He opened a book. She took out her brand-new wand, studying it idly, and rested her head on
his narrow shoulder, her look still conflicted but comforted. He pressed his cheek to the top of her
head briefly in a weird little sort-of-hug that belonged only to them, and kept on in his book, certain
of the future as only a child can be.

This was the moment, Hermione thought, listening for the sound of delicate hooves, and a caw
fading into the distance. The compartment door rattled just as the scene started to fade, and Severus
and Hermione looked over in unison to see a taller boy that looked remarkably like Harry letting
himself in...

The world shifted and she was back in her bathroom, the empty vial and her wand still clutched in
either hand, her legs folded under her starting to go numb. She drew the memory back out of the cold
water and corked it firmly, then she stretched out her legs and accepted the shooting pins. The hem
of her robe and one lower leg of her trousers were soaked. She sighed, went to change, took out a
small label and wrote “One for sorrow” before fixing it to the bottle.

She checked the time. It was later than she thought. She’d wanted to get to Hogsmeade early and
visit George’s shop.

She left the lab door closed. She couldn’t think of what she might have said, anyway. Better to let
him rest. She would see him later. She headed out to have dinner with the person who could fix
everything.
Summer’s last hurrah hadn’t quite vacated Hogsmeade, and Hermione fancied it was showing its replacement around the town in a romantic whirl, warm gusts waltzing the first scatterings of fallen leaves along down lanes and up over rooftops. The observation felt sentimental, and the sentimentality made her feel old and out-of-step with a world that still knew how to change.

She and Ron had lived there a little while, before they were married and just a bit after, above the shop, before the kids. They’d stayed near to George in Diagon Alley and helped him keep the first shop going after the war, and then helped him open the new branch in Hogsmeade the next year. The first six months in Diagon Alley had been fairly easy. George had put on a desperately brave face and said all the right things about carrying on as Fred would have wanted. The three months after that were probably the worst, as that stupid part of his brain finally came around to realizing that there was no bargain to be struck, no authority to defy, no joke being played that he could brazen his way through until Fred finally gave up and came out of hiding. He had known it all along. Of course he had. But knowing and realizing could be so very different.

The inrush of reality was the most painful thing, she had learned, like the intense pins-and-needles of a limb waking up, prickling in every moment, every memory, everything you relied on the other person for that had gone numb when they died. Worse was that the kind of thoughts that used to give solace just shocked the tender limbs that reached for them reflexively, old touchstones transmuted to traps. Grief reduced its subject to an animal trapped in a sadistic experiment to see how long it took a human to learn, through pain, not to reach for the thing they loved most in the world. But George’s love was as unstoppable as Fred’s death was immovable, and one could have written a dissertation on force paradoxes just watching what had happened to Hermione’s brother-in-law as he was caught between them meeting, over and over for months, a dozen times a day, like an ingot on an anvil. Like a snail (or a god) pinned to a rock and pulverized by the pitiless beaks of birds.

It had nearly killed Ron. George had clung to him so tightly, frantic, pleading. He couldn’t sleep more than an hour without Ron beside him, and Ron had still been going through his auror training. When George had started hinting about killing himself Hermione had started to argue with both of them about getting him a doctor. George would apologize and swear he was fine and then make some gesture like taking a shower or having something to eat, and then hide from her for days. Ron would get angry. He had plainly been exhausted and grieving and trying desperately to save his brother, so ultimately she decided to stay when he called her suggestion “smug wooly muggle bullshit.” She’d been arguing the case of his worst fear; that love alone couldn’t fix it. And he did apologize later, and meant it, but those three months were hell. They might have gone on, or even ended with the death of another brother, if she hadn’t finally gone over their heads and called Madame Pomfrey and begged her to come see George as a favor. She’d done it knowing that neither of them might ever speak to her again, having given herself full permission to walk away, choosing to stay.

Poppy Pomfrey had been an absolute angel. She had insisted on sleep-draughts for George as well as Ron, and done a lot of talking to George, helping him to soothe the very worst of it with charms that
helped the shocks to hit more evenly, coaxing snarls out of the necessary grief, working to find just
the right combination and strength of tinctures to smooth the tides of his pain without blocking them
up. Hermione hadn’t known the specifics. She had focused on helping Ron to grieve, and on looking
into the feasibility of opening a shop in Hogsmeade so George would always have an excuse to visit
Poppy, as well as a chance to recruit new hires from the older students.

Everyone slowly got better. It never stopped hurting, but it eventually stopped hemorrhaging. George
was never the same, but who was? They’d fought a war. He was quieter. He read Keats. He got
back to laughing and joking, stopped shutting Angelina Johnson out of his life and eventually invited
her back in, which was an even greater blessing. But more of his humor was private since, little
smiles to himself and sudden laughter explained by “oh, nothing.” When Rose had been very small,
she had asked him what had happened to his ear. He had a million funny lines for children, but it was
the only time Hermione had ever overheard him telling anyone “my brother took it with him, so he
could whisper jokes to me and give me good ideas on how to spoil my niece.”

Hermione clutched her locket, remembering.

It had been a few little years before that, after Ron had quit the aurors to run the Diagon Alley shop
full-time and they’d been living near London for that and Hermione’s ministry work that he’d
confided his secret to her. That day Ron had gone off with Harry, Angelina, and Ginny for some
“brilliant” Quidditch thing that Ginny had been invited to write about and snagged extra tickets to.
George still hadn’t gotten back to enjoying Quidditch. He’d become sensitive to certain kinds of risk.
Hermione had been enormously pregnant with Hugo at the time, and George had come over to take
Rose to the playground and let Hermione put her feet up a bit before everyone got together for
dinner. She and George had never talked alone much, they were still always family more than
friends. But Rose had been down for her nap when he arrived, so he’d sat and had a cuppa. And
they’d talked. And she’d mentioned that one of the goldfish had gotten sick and died, and Rose had
been devastated all morning, and not to be surprised if she was grumpy at the park. And he’d come
out with the longest string of words she’d ever heard from him that didn’t have a punch line.

“She’ll be alright,” he’d said, stirring his cup, “Losing what you love isn’t so bad. I mean, sure,
regret can eat at you, but if you did the best you could there’s not much to regret. And sure, the
shock of change can make the world uncertain for a while, but that passes, becomes the new normal.
Letting go is never easy, but ultimately you only ever want what’s real when you love someone, and
you want all of it, including the end. You can’t just throw that part away. There was always an end
coming, after all. Always is.

“What there’s really no remedy for is losing something that’s made you feel loved. We’re just not
made for letting that feeling go. It’s the hardest drug there is, and the withdrawal is killer. No out-
thinking it. No lesson to learn that’s any good, just ‘never let yourself feel loved’ and that’s rubbish.
Just have to wait until it lets you put it away, until it lets you believe that endings aren’t failures, that
it still matters that they lived and it still matters that you live. And you just remind yourself that, well,
life isn’t forever, any more than the withdrawal is, so what’s the harm in riding it out. Living isn’t
any harder than out-living.”

She’d smiled at him fondly, clasped his hand and said, “I think that’s a bit heavy for a two-and-a-
half-year-old, George. But thank you for saying it.”

He’d laughed. Thank Merlin, he’d laughed. And when Rose had started fussing he’d taken her out
into the sunshine to make her feel loved. Later that year he and Angelina had finally tied the knot.

She walked by his shop in the lavender dark. It was bright and colorful inside. George was in there
with his protege’ Effy Gillikin, a sixth year, showing her how to snag errant joke mishaps mid-air
within the shop using a catching cauldron charm. He was smiling. He was laughing. That open-mou thed, tongue-out laugh of his prankster days. And a jaded teenager on an important internship was laughing and clapping her hands with delight like a child.

Hermione decided against going in. It seemed unkind to haunt. Sometimes widows had to stick together by letting each other alone.
Real quickly, thank you to everyone for the continuing comments and encouragement.
See you next Tuesday <3

The Dancing Dragon was a relatively new building at what used to be the far end of the town, though even more little shops and stands had straggled on down the road as Hogsmeade had grown. The sign was ornately carved, and enchanted so that when it swung the figures of a dragon and a king changed shape through a series of still poses and seemed to dance together, like a muggle hologram card.

Everything inside was in that peculiar post-wizarding-war style that was finally becoming passe’ and would, in another twenty years, become nostalgia: wizarding sensibility with a bizarrely interpretive muggle flair. The traditional dust-tone flagstone floor had been laid out in a chessboard pattern reminiscent of muggle “malt shop”. The traditional wizarding portraits had smart chrome or plastic frames, though the glass had been removed when the subjects complained of feeling like goldfish. The wall sconces burned LED bright, a few of them subtly changing colors like a pastel discotheque. Each table had a fat candle burning in the bottom of a ketchup or cola bottle, while actual ketchup was served from a small pot like sugar. Muggle sport paraphernalia were mounted on labeled and mis-labeled plaques like hunting trophies, which never stopped striking Hermione as threatening even though she knew the owners meant it as a demonstration of enthusiasm. An unfortunate frankensteinian approximation of a jukebox had, some years ago, been replaced by a trombone that the owners had insisted was called a gramophone, enchanted to play wizarding music with a quaint wax-cylinder hiss. She’d heard the owner once proudly tell an approving patron the hiss was to “simulate the electricity”. One table in the center of the floor had a patio umbrella that changed colors with the sconces. Behind the bar were several lovely chrome bar implements and also a toaster, presumably because it was also chrome-covered and food-related.

Hermione grimaced inwardly, wondering if Enith had chosen the restaurant to make the wizarding world’s most famous muggle-born witch comfortable. The enthusiasm was certainly sincere, but made no distinction about specific nationalities, eras, and uses of “muggle culture” in their borrowing, and couldn’t get their heads around how peculiar and lampoon-ish the effect was for a muggle-born. They certainly seemed to forget that English muggles and English wizards had a lot more in common than not. Much of their idea of “muggle” seemed to happen at an americanized remove, as if only the wizarding world ate fish and chips or read books.

She and Ron had eaten there a few times over the years, usually for his father’s birthday. The menu was similarly muggle-fusion, and had gradually evolved to being genuinely palatable. The first year, Father Weasley had asked her, very seriously, whether she found it offensive, being muggle-born, that her “native culture” was becoming trendy in the wake of the war. She hadn’t wanted to bring him down that evening, so she’d shrugged and tried to explain modern muggle portrayals of wizards in popular entertainment, particularly the “Dungeons and Dragons” cartoon she’d watched growing up. That didn’t exactly make it right or healthy, of course; muggles only speculated about the existence of magic; after all, while wizards knew that muggles were real but still felt a prerogative to reinterpret them at will; but since it meant there was a place in Hogsmeade to get a passable margarita that wasn’t pumpkin-flavored, she’d been willing to put the fight for muggle-wizard relations aside.
and smile for her father-in-law’s birthday.

The second time he’d asked about her “native culture”, she’d tried, very gently, to make him understand how she didn’t feel like the wizarding world was any less native to her, any less a part of her, any less her birthright. She didn’t think it had ever sunk in for Ron’s family, before then, that even without the polarizing bigotry of the war throwing her blood-status in her face all the time she was just accustomed to living in-between, and that the Dancing Dragon was far from the first wizarding foible regarding the muggle world she observed from a perspective quite different from their own.

She sighed at the memory as she looked around the room. The dining room was sparsely populated, and Enith was nowhere in sight. She decided to sit at the bar and ordered a beer to nurse while she waited. They served it proudly in a plastic cup that had the words “authentic plastic” embossed subtly at the base. That was new. The young fellow behind the bar didn’t recognize her, and left her mostly to herself and her meandering thoughts. She looked at the smattering of flashy car adverts framed above the back mirror, and the little brass plaque that declared “racing”.

Ron had once asked, when it was just the two of them, how it was that she wasn’t jumping out of her skin with her mental red-pen to correct all the mistakes in the room. That one had honestly stumped her for a few minutes, and annoyed her for reasons she couldn’t quite articulate. Because he was right, her usual instinct for insisting on precision and accuracy didn’t move her to open a conversation with well-meaning appropriators. Finally she had realized, and admitted, that she didn’t think it would help much, and it felt awkward to her to try and force people to care about her feelings more than they clearly did. Ron thought that was a little cynical, that she shouldn’t just assume mistakes and ignorance meant people didn’t or wouldn’t care. Harry had been raised by muggles, after all, and he clearly didn’t mind when Father Weasley pestered him for a better understanding of muggle artifacts. Hermione conceded that there were times she didn’t mind being the designated muggle-educator for curious wizards, but pointed out that Ron really had no concept of how many times a day she’d have to speak up if she was going to correct every hurtful misconception most wizards had about muggles.

He’d asked her what she meant.

She’d confessed the use of the word “muggle” sort of bothered her, for a start. It never had before the war. It had seemed like a harmless functional distinction, and a good one. Having felt a little freakish all her life, discovering that there was a word for what she was, “witch”, and that the opposite of that word wasn’t “normal” or “human” had been an enormous relief. But the longer she’d lived in it the more it had become apparent that her feeling of freakishness hadn’t been because of muggles, but because of the hidebound wizarding secrecy and supremacy that required children like her to grow up in a world of dangerous ignorance about themselves, and gave muggle and wizarding bigots alike free reign to concoct fears and lies unchallenged, even as they lived among one another. The problem of needing a word to describe people that were not wizards without branding either group as something other than human had not been solved. “Muggle” might not be the slur that “mudblood” was, but it clearly didn’t mean “users of technology” or “users of tools” or “users of the scientific method to amazing effect.” It didn’t mean “differently human” or "differently civilized". For most it meant “those benighted and deficient people that can’t use magic” while “wizard” meant “normal”. To the more dangerous wizards who had come to think of themselves as more-than-human in meant "merely human". "Disposable human."

She saw this distinction everywhere. It was in the centering of the wizarding world’s experience of the war and the relative short shrift given to recognizing how many muggles had been killed in a conflict they hadn’t even been allowed to know about, in a war that was, in large part, all about their inferiority to wizards. It was in how, somehow, it was still only referred to as a “wizarding war”. It
was in the way people noted her blood-status when complimenting or congratulating her, as if her
time in the muggle world were clearly a handicap she’d overcome to achieve all that she had as a
witch. It was in the use and abuse of oblivate on muggle witnesses to wizard mistakes, as if muggle
sentience were simply an inconvenient complication, and wizards, who knew so little of muggle
culture that toasters were a quaint oddity to them, thought they had the knowledge necessary to
rummage through the mind of a muggle without damaging anything of value or consequence. Or the
way large swaths of the wizarding world had been content to deny that anything unacceptable was
happening so long as it was only happening to muggles during Voldemort’s war. There was ample
evidence that, whether they recognized it or not, the majority of the wizarding world just didn’t think
of muggles as mattering as much as wizards did.

Since the war, it was most glaringly obvious in the way avid separationists utterly refused to hear any
talk of embassy between the two worlds, falling ever back on centuries-old grievances that bordered
on superstition, unwilling to hear, even from wizarding scholars, that much of what modern wizards
thought they knew of humanity’s shared past was false. As minister, she’d been bawled out dozens
of times by red-faced protesters who neither knew nor cared enough to distinguish between small
groups of opportunistic and fanatic muggles who had persecuted the use of magic in fits through
history, and muggles in general. She’d been opposed and literally spat on by wizards and witches
who refused to hear that the actual numbers of wizards killed by anti-magic muggles paled to the
quantities and percentages of their own fellow muggles they tried and killed for paranoia and moral
panic’s sake. They called evidence that Torquemada had, in fact, been a wizard “irrelevant”.

It drove her mad how wizards who liked to demonize muggles as justification for separatism
somehow went deaf when it was demonstrated that wizards killed one another just as often, and
muggles far more often, both deliberately and incidentally, than muggles had ever killed wizards,
even before the statute of secrecy. Maybe there were dangers to wizards in proposals to break or
soften the crushing separation of the last few centuries, but the pretense of adequacy that the current
system enjoyed was rooted entirely in anti-muggle and wizarding-supremacist bigotry. And it wasn’t
exactly a moot point. The most basic functions of the statute of secrecy were forged in a different era.
Magical and technological invention, to say nothing of population pressure, had increased
significantly just in the span of her own lifetime. The entire charade of secrecy was vulnerable to the
wizarding world’s ever-expanding use of more and more advanced and elaborate magics, and the
muggle world’s ever-expanding use of faster and more interconnected technology. It was only a
matter of time before the leaks in wizard culture started showing up on youtube, or physicists
discovered a form of radiation that would inadvertently expose magical protections to technological
scrutiny. Too many prominent people in the ministry were pure-bloods, and genuinely didn’t
understand that one can’t just obliviate the internet. They genuinely didn’t understand that muggles
weren’t bumbling incompetents, and that a meeting of worlds was inevitable, probably within the
next decade.

So, yes, it did bother her, a little, that even good-hearted wizards with muggle-born friends treated
“muggle culture” like a decoration they didn’t really need to understand to appreciate. And that it
bothered her didn’t mean she wasn’t giving them full-marks for being fundamentally good-hearted. It
was just a problem too deep and too wide and too personal to solve by scolding a restaurateur over
unexamined biases. She wanted so much more, so much better, for both her worlds.

She’d had such ambitious plans in that arena when she’d become minister, but hadn’t thought of
them at all in months, hadn’t once considered how she was abandoning them by stepping down from
leadership. In the end they were just one more thing she still loved but couldn’t reach for anymore.
Let it all fall apart something inside whispered whenever she tried, no point fighting, it doesn’t
matter. Losing grip of her foundational plan to grow old with Ron had made all plans seem
impossibly fragile and meaningless. She’d slipped out from between her two worlds in to one all her
own, while both worlds moved on without her.
She sipped at her beer until nine-thirty, trying to pull her head back together and have her intelligent, clever, careful, non-Severus-betraying questions all ready for Enith. She took a trip to the toilets, scanning other tables to make sure Enith hadn’t come in and sat elsewhere. At nine-forty-five she went ahead and ordered herself some dinner, moving over to a clean booth, supposing the artist had simply encountered a conflict. She wondered if it had been her own fault, having taken the proposal to mean “this is where I will be and you are welcome to show up”, but thinking about it, it could have meant “I can come out to dinner if you want to, let me know”. But the only question-mark in the sparsely worded invitation had certainly seemed rhetorical.

She sighed over the last of her chips, saluting with the last of her beer, “So much for brilliant plans.”

“That’s what I say,” said a jovial voice from the wall.

A portrait of a pug-nosed little round-faced man was smiling at her companionably. He had a brushy mustache, an ill-fitting bowler hat, and a snazzy tweed jacket. She didn’t recognize him at all. A small engraved tag at the bottom center of the frame read “Bellwart Grindle”. She didn’t really want to talk to a portrait, having been stood up by an artist, but he was right there, and she was nearly done eating.

She wrestled a moment with his peculiar accent, “You’re...American?”

He smiled, “I’m ambiance!” and chuckled heartily.

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I’m not familiar with who you are.”

“Bellwart’s the name. You c’n call me ‘Belly’. All the pretty young things do,” he gave her the sort of wink that salesmen tended to think was avuncular.

She smiled politely, since protesting her decrepitude might be mistaken for engaging with his line of bull, “And what do you do, Belly?”

“Oh, I just hang around.” He laughed again, his accent wandering vaguely Scots.

Her smile thinned, so she put a bite of her dinner in it, uninterested in triggering the remainder of his patter.

“Got this portrait made for two galleons!”

That seemed very inexpensive. His pigments were much brighter than she was used to, and his textures lacked detail. She wondered how old he was, “I see. And now here you are.”

“Yes indeedy!”

“How lucky.”

“I’ll say. Always wanted to travel.”

She smiled wanly, “To the scenic wall of a Hogsmeade theme-restaurant.”

He nodded proudly, “It’s just wonderful. I mean, sure, the gallery back here isn’t much to speak of, and my frame’s too small for visitors, but there’s interesting folk through all the time, the smell of good food, and between terms sometimes we get a couple of headmasters in,” he nodded at the far wall where a large ornately-framed canvas hung, painted with an empty table much like the ones about the restaurant, but with a calligraphed card in the middle that said “reserved” and a fat crow on the back of the chair apparently hoping for some scraps.
“That does sound lovely. Still, it’s hardly the Louvre.”

He shrugged, “Well who minds about that? All I’ve ever wanted is someone to talk to. Honestly, I think that’s everyone, deep down. Why hang around someplace behind a velvet rope? I ain’t exactly the Mona Lisa anyhow!” He beamed at her and Hermione imagined that, at this point, she should be presuming an elbow to be nudging her in the ribs.

“So when were you born, Belly?”

“Aught-nine!”

That would certainly explain the bowler, “Quite a good run, then.”

He shrugged, “I don’t keep such good track of time anymore. I’m here now, and that’s good enough for me. Good advice, really. Look at where you are and find the silver lining. Or in my case, chrome!”

She smiled amiably, wishing she could have brought Severus with her for some more interesting conversation, “Well, I’ve got to be going, Belly, it was very nice to meet you.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, little lady. You need any more advice you just come on down and find me!” He tipped his hat as she made her exit.
She knew she was getting maudlin again because even the canned rambling of a cheaply-made novelty portrait seemed significant if she weren’t actively thinking about something else. Just having someone to talk to. Finding your lining. Finding your frame. It didn’t mean anything so much as she needed it to mean something. She was desperate for context and had been stood-up by the person that could have given her some.

Sleep would be really marvelous, she realized. It hadn’t been three whole hours and all she wanted to do was to collapse into bed and dream of him, see if he wanted to try some more consensual cruelty, or receive some of hers, or trade back and forth, or just be held. Or anything. Everything. Whatever he was afraid of, it could wait until they were both rested, calm, confident, and had hashed out more of whatever this anguish in him was. Until she had his trust. Maybe he did have some terrible secret, but maybe not. Maybe it was just the way Severus had always felt about himself, or some bias in the way his portrait had been made to reflect him. Maybe some artificer had gotten a hold of all his worst memories and tried to make the best of it. Maybe his maker had included a protection against wanting to look too closely at himself. What if it weren’t healthy for portraits to dwell on their own existential situation, and Severus were just a bad fit for portraiture that way? A sort of self-immolating Promethean misfit? Too desperate for a definitive context for his own good.

She sighed. Projecting again, probably.

Without any new information, she had to return to what she already knew. It was him. It was absolutely him. The memory of the crow was real. The memory of Lily and the train was real, and it was his. It had to be, hadn’t it? She could check any recent developments in the process of memory counterfeiting, but it seemed implausible that anyone could forge one so specific and layered and coherent, particularly since he’d have had to work spontaneously without her help in the deception. It had none of the hallmarks of a forgery, and pensives didn’t allow for self-deception or alteration by the viewer the way dreams did.

Still, the pensieve she’d used had been his choice. She could inspect it closer. It was possible, perhaps, to put a charm on a pensieve. That had never occurred to her. What if you could make a pensieve that put a form of confundus or oblivious on a user, let them see what they wanted to see? What if you could make a pensieve with a dreamlike space, or two? Where you could step into whatever place you wanted with some scrap of another person, see whatever you might wish and believe it to be real? It would be beyond anything she’d seen. Possibly more addictive and dangerous than the mirror of Erised, able not just to enthrall someone, but to drown them in their heart’s desire...

Seductive and elegant and human and deadly. Where would such a thing exist except Hogwarts?

She didn’t realize she was running until she had to stop halfway up the castle’s front steps, out of breath. Encroaching middle-age was the absolute worst.

She pushed open the door to more commotion than she expected so late in the evening. Several teachers were gathered in the foyer, along with the castle ghosts, half a dozen elves, several people in uniform that she didn’t recognize, and one tall auror she very much did. He was standing in the middle trying to take notes as many people tried to talk at once to him or the other people in uniform.

Everyone stopped and turned as she closed the door.

“Hermione! Thank Merlin!”
She found she couldn’t move her hand off the door handle voluntarily until the auror with the perpetually unruly hair hidden under his cap rushed down the stairs and swept her up in a hug, “Bloody hell, Hermione, where have you been? Are you alright?”

The easily-amused part of her brain noted that this interview was being conducted in a profoundly ministry un-approved fashion “I just...dinner, Hogsmeade...Hi, Harry.”
Chapter Notes

Gonna go ahead and do two, they’re short.

He put her down but didn’t let go right away.

She withdrew and rested her hands gently on his broad shoulders, not pushing but sort of steadying him. He could be so emotional.

“Harry, calm down, I didn’t mean to upset anyone. I’m sorry. Are James and Albus and Lily alright?”

He drew away, cursorily wiping one eye as if it weren’t leaking just a bit, “Oh yes, yes they’re perfectly fine. All the students are fine. Full headcount. They don’t even know I’m here, I wouldn’t want to embarrass them.”

Hermione nodded sympathetically.

“Professor Granger wherever were you?” Sir Nicholas came floating through the small crowd.

She sighed, “Hogsmeade. Again, I apologise. I didn’t realize it would be such a-”

“You missed the meeting. After I reminded you. I thought there had to be something wrong.”

Her head was starting to hurt, “Meeting? Sorry, I…”

“Heads of house. After dinner. I sat in for you, of course, assumed you were unwell.”

She rubbed her forehead, “I was. I am, just a bit. I needed some air.”

Harry seemed to have calmed down and, mercifully, turned to Sir Nicholas, “It would perhaps be best to go through one thing at a time. Thank you so much for your help, Sir Nicholas.” The ghost withdrew and went to Minerva, who was looking concerned, hovering protectively at her shoulder.

“Harry, what is all this?”

“I’ll...come on and sit, you look exhausted.”

She remembered running. She remembered why, “Harry, I am. I’m so tired. If it’s not an emergency I’d really rather-”

“I think you’d better sit.”

That got her attention, “What is it? Are Rose and Hugo alright? Ginny?”

He nodded, putting a hand on her shoulder to draw her down onto one of the benches in the great hall with him, “They’re fine, Hermione, fine. It’s just, well, where have you been? I’m afraid it’s important.”
“Don’t you think it would be better if one of us handled this interview, sir?” a younger, pale, and fine-featured man in a patrol uniform had appeared at Harry’s shoulder.

Harry closed his eyes, then gave Hermione a significant look without turning to the other officer, “You’re welcome to sit in, of course, Creevy.”

Hermione boggled, “Dennis Creevey?”

He nodded curtly, with a peculiar hostility that might have just been the renown Creevy zeal as channeled into law enforcement. Was he Harry’s self-appointed bad-cop? “Professor.”

“Well,” Hermione folded her hands, desperate for someone to say something sensible and falling short, “Isn’t this cozy. Like a Gryffindor reunion all of a sudden.”

Harry grimaced uncomfortably. Dennis scowled, taking out a quick-quotes quill and pad and setting them on the table, “Could you please recount your whereabouts after five-fifty this evening, Professor?”

She looked from Harry to Dennis and back again, “Wait, what is this? Am I a suspect of some kind?”

Harry shook his head, “Hermione, no, it’s just that-”

“Please answer the question.”

Harry scowled and his lips worked as if he were actively swallowing his temper. He gave her that look again and, without turning, flicked his eyes shoulderward towards Dennis, indicating that she should answer.

Well, if Harry Weasley-Potter, nee The Boy Who Frequently Exploded, could get his temper under control she supposed she should at least try, “It was a long day, so I let the Gryffindor and Slytherin first-years go a little early. I went right to bed for a nap. I haven’t been sleeping well and wanted to be fresh for dinner. I lost track of time. I got out of bed at six thirty, still tired but reasonably refreshed,” she sincerely hoped she wasn’t blushing, “I found a letter under my door asking me to dinner at nine. I don’t know when it was delivered, I assumed it was by owl, I never heard a knock. I freshened up, did some work. I went out to Hogsmeade around eight, by the kitchen entrance, I don’t think anyone saw me go. I went to the Dancing Dragon, I have the receipt, but my friend never showed up, so I ate, chatted with a portrait named Belly, and came back here to you charming people. And now I’d really love to go to bed.”

“Who were you meeting?” It was Harry that asked. It was a completely reasonable auror question, but she detected a tone of nudging brotherly interest in his voice.

Half-unthinking, she narrowed her eyes at him, “None of your business.”

Dennis’ scowled, “Answer the question, Professor.”

She scowled back, “Enith Stoke. I met her yesterday while she was working on Professor McGonagall’s portrait. I’m interested in artifices and how they overlap with potion-making, I’m thinking of starting work on a book, so I asked if I might buy her dinner. I assume that’s why she sent me an invitation. I don’t know why she didn’t show up, but I understand she’s very busy.”

Dennis’ face hadn’t moved, but when she looked back at Harry she saw he’d gone rather pale.
“Hermione…” he put a hand on her hand, “Enith Stoke is missing.”
Chapter Notes

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So tomorrow through Tuesday are busy, so I'm gonna drop two chapters tonight and see you again next Saturday. :) I've tried to move the expository stuff quickly but it doesn't compress terribly cleanly for me. Godspede!
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“What? How? When?”

Harry sighed, put his hands on his knees, fingers turned inwards, and craned his neck around to look at Dennis, “Do you think I might be qualified to handle this part on my own, officer?”

Dennis nodded, “Yes, auror,” and strode away, leaving his quill scratching away at its pad.

Harry grabbed the thing and slapped it flat, running a hand through his hair.

“Well he’s fun.”

“Don’t get me started.”

“He grew up tall, too.”

Harry nodded, “Straight up his own arsehole, yeah.”

In spite of being exhausted and confused, or perhaps because of it, Hermione snorted a laugh.

Harry grinned, then sighed, “With missing-persons it’s really vital that we get all the information we can and make sure our timeline is good.”

“No, of course, anything you need, Harry, you know that. Enith seems like a really lovely person. Just an amazing artist, too. I hope she’s alright. I tell you what, why don’t you come downstairs with me, I’ll make some tea. Only I’m just dying to sit in a soft chair with a back and-”

He put up a hand, “That’s part of the problem, Hermione. That’s why we were so worried about you. Your quarters have been gone-through. Ransacked, actually.”

“What?” she bolted up and ran. She wasn’t thinking of how many aurors might follow her, or whatever it was Harry was yelling behind her, or whether she might have knocked Professors Bolger and Longbottom over when she pushed through the crowded foyer. Visions flashed through her mind; slashed canvas, splintered frames, ripped-out memories, and endless barren dreams.

Why had she left? She shouldn’t have left. He couldn’t even cast spells, couldn’t even hold a book, he was totally helpless. She was vicious, stupid, insane, irresponsible. And she’d wanted his trust, what a laugh.

She heard long strides running behind her and then beside her as she hit the dungeon corridor, then Harry’s tenor calling ahead of them, “it’s all right, Hawkins, let her through, she won’t touch
anything”, then muttering to her as quietly as he could, “slow down and don’t touch anything, ok? Please? Tell them you’re here to show me the letter you got.”

Bending rules and having each other’s backs, running through Hogwarts where they probably shouldn’t be. It was like old times. She slowed to a robe-billowing stride and touched her locket affectionately, begging Ron for any luck his spirit might have lying around, wishing it were the three of them together to figure things out, scrupulously shielding herself from what she might do if Severus had been destroyed.

Through the door, her table was overturned, the dirty teacups were in pieces, essays were everywhere. Everything atop the writing desk had been rifled, books had been pulled down off shelves and stacked haphazardly on the floor. The gryffindor banner she’d hung up over the fireplace had been ripped down, even the fireplace grate had been flung to the opposite wall, covering a wide arc of the floor, carpet, and surrounding clutter in ash and tiny singed holes. A couple aurors were moving very slowly and methodically about the room, wand-tips glowing pale green, looking for traces of anything unseen.

All three of the doors beyond the archway were open. An auror was scanning the handle of the bedroom door, making notes. Hermione walked very slowly, more out of dread than caution. She felt dizzy, and the view of the lab through the door seemed to circle her like an adversary as she approached. She heard a voice whispering, “My prince, my prince…”

Everything in the room was overturned or smashed or ripped to shreds.

It was the only silver lining she could see to the fact that he wasn’t there.

She sank to her knees, “My prince…” The floor was hard. It hurt.

She felt hands on her shoulders, Harry was bending over her, “Hermione, what is it? What prints?”

She pressed her lips together as if to reset them, “I had...in here I had a...a painting...and a...for the book I’m thinking of...just a few...or a small folio really, of...of prints.”

Harry nodded, “Good to know. That’s a big help. Were they rare?”

She nodded, dazed, “Very. Irreplaceable.”

Harry sighed in enormous relief, “It’s something we can work with. And if that’s missing, it’s less likely that whoever it was was here to try and hurt you. Is anything else missing that you can tell?”

She was numb, “I don’t know, I haven’t looked in the other two rooms yet.”

The auror had moved on from the door handle and was inspecting the floor, she raised her head slightly, keeping her eyes on the flagstones around the bed, “Please be very careful, Professor. It’s kind of a mess.”

It was a distinct understatement. Given the state of some of her furniture and papers, she was grateful that the quilts had simply been flung into a corner, though the mattress hadn’t been so lucky. It almost looked like it had exploded. There was fluff everywhere. The armoire was tipped sideways and had cracked, the drawers spilled out and rifled.

“Hermione?” a familiar strong, posh voice called from the classroom.

“Nick?” she called back reflexively.
“Yes, they won’t let me through. Are you all-“ then more muffled, “Oh my goodness, Captain Potter, it’s so wonderful to meet you in person…”

Hermione rolled her eyes, feeling Ron roll his eyes from beyond the grave, “Faustian fuckballs, Harry…” she muttered.

She got up and headed to the main room.

“…oh but of course, you and Hermione are friends, I’d forgotten, I mean, I hadn’t forgotten, I teach historian. I mean I’m a flying, I mean the opposite of that. Hi, Nikita Kalil, nice to meet you, but I mean you being an auror I’d missed the connection that you’re also you…context, I mean, historical. With Professor Granger. Anyway I’ve been talking to your friend Hermione about my book and Oh Hermione! Hello! I was just talking to Harry about…” he seemed to snap out of his dazzlement when he saw her face, “I mean, I’m so sorry about your rooms, are you ok? We were all worried to death but then I heard you’d just got back and-“

Having finally said his name loudly enough to grind the anxious young man to a halt, Hermione couldn’t really think of anything to say, “…what is it, Nick?”

Abashed, he searched her face, his own a model of amiable solicitous concern, “I was worried for you, flitter mouse. You weren’t at dinner and then you weren’t at the meeting, and then when Sir Nicholas and I came to check on you we found everything like this. I was about to send for a patrolman but there was already one here checking out a report on Enith Stoke,” he gazed around at the mess, “I expect you can understand our concern.”

The aurors had apparently finished their passive observations and had begun casting charms to undo certain aspects of the destruction, though they were more complicated than “reparo” and focused more on observing the trail of chaos in reverse. It was some remarkably complicated highly-localized time-magic, an innovation of the last five years. She was too familiar with the process to hope that they would bother to fix everything, only whatever seemed meaningful to observe in reverse or was more expediently moved via repair, Chrono-reversal of works, or CROW, spells were limited and taxing, and therefore used sparingly. She was grateful when Harry deemed it important to run the soot back into the fireplace in two great plumes with the grate jumping back in-between. He ran it back and forth once more, stopping the grate midair once, and “chalking” the impressions that formed in the soot before it flew by means of a spell that made a ghostly cast of the impression. He levitated the cast before his eyes and turned it, observing and making notes.

Heavily gloved fingers. Someone had done everything by hand. There would be no spell patterns, no “smoking wand”. Smart. Time-consuming. Brazen. Professional?

“I’ll bet you’re right.” Nick nodded, watching the process raptly.

The woman’s voice called from the bedroom, “Done sweeping, sir. What do you want crow’d?”

“Just the armoire. Look for gaps. They went by hand,” he gave Hermione that apologetic silver-lining smile-grimace, “shouldn’t be a big deal to reparo everything here if none of it was broken by magic. It doesn’t look like their objective was to permanently ruin anything. They were searching, and they wanted to get away with it as cleanly as possible.”

“Will ironies never cease?” she muttered, the adrenaline shock starting to wear off and leaving her with just a horrible mess, a creeping exhaustion, and an unutterable sense of urgency.

The voice called again, “There’s three sets of touch on the door and magic on the bed, though. Let me check…oh.”
Hermione cringed. What did she mean by “magic on the bed”? What did she mean by “oh”? She fell into step behind Harry as he bundled the ashes away into the fireplace and went to check on his investigator.

“There’s a protective circle, and an anti-motion charm on the bed frame along with a few others, but the bed’s been dragged a few inches beyond the circle,” she pointed her wand at the floor and runes lit up faintly, very old, and scarred in one place where the leg of the iron bedframe had scraped across them.

“Oh, I did that, when I moved in. There’s a draft by the…” she looked at the wall and had a realization, “by the bucketful at night along the walls. I hadn’t noticed the circle. Looks pretty standard though, anti-scry, anti-jinx, something about ghosts...probably anti-Peeves. Bit of overkill considering the spells on all the residences and most of Hogwarts in the first place. But it must have been there before I moved the bed since it’s scarred.”

“I concur,” Nick said over her shoulder, causing her to jump, “I wouldn’t be surprised if Severus Snape laid extra protections on the room where he slept, considering the enemies he was deceiving.”

Harry nodded, “I agree. Alright. Professor, let officer Braithwaite here crow the armoire and look for gaps, see if they took anything else, and you can get your life back in order.”

She gave him a wry look, and he gave her a hug, his voice slipping out of its professional register, “You know what I mean. And I can stick around and help, after I send Ginny an owl so she can stop losing her mind, and after I’m caught up with how things are going in McGonagall’s office.”

She pushed away from him and looked from him to Nick, who watched them in a sappy trance, then back to Harry, “What’s happened in McGonagall’s office?”

A peculiar-sounding groan startled Hermione as the armoire behind her broke apart in reverse, rising up and mending together, pausing on two of its stout legs so Braithwaite could look for anything that moved as if there ought to be something else there.

He sighed, making a sheet of paper covered in formal-looking print appear with a wave, “It was broken into, and all of the supplies Ms. Stoke had left to continue working on Professor McGonagall’s portrait are missing. Nothing else. Portraits, records, millions of galleons worth of artifacts and nothing else in the entire room seems to have been touched, and neither the door nor the window had been opened so far as we can tell. They got around needing to pass the guardian statue, somehow. So I’ll need to know more about the portrait and prints they took from here. It’s probably important. In the meantime, if you don’t mind signing the VS waiver, you should be free to start clearing up in here, at least.”

Nick blinked, “You want her to sign a what?”

Hermione gave Harry the same private apologetic look he’d given her for Dennis’ sake. He handed her the form and addressed Nick, “It’s for people who want to be able to access their property when there might still be evidence around that pertains to the wellbeing of a third party. It just states that they consent to being given veritaserum, should they find anything unusual in the course of cleaning up, if the investigator feels any reason to doubt their account of how they found it, or to having specific memories examined in a pensieve if their recollection of specific details is doubtful. Still requires a council order and a fairly specific pre-writing of information sought to be acted upon, but if you mean to stay and help you’ll need to sign one too.”

Hermione shook her head, signing, “Don’t worry yourself about it, Nick, it’s getting late. I think I’m just going to fix my bed, have a chat with Harry here and get some sleep. I don’t expect to be
Nick nodded, “Right. Right, I’ll just... I’ll hold onto your album until you’ve got someplace to put it then, shall I?”

She smiled warmly, “Thanks, Nick.”

Waivers signed, the auror’s trooped out, Harry lingering behind. Hermione headed for her bedroom to magic some fluff back into her mattress and clean her quilts. Harry followed. He wasn’t talking. Why wasn’t he talking?

He leaned against the doorframe, “Hermione.”

“All the time you’ve been talking I’ve been hearing you in my head, lying to get Ron and me off the hook when that troll had us cornered. It was the first time I’d ever heard you lie. And the first in a group small enough that, thirty years of friendship later, I can still count them without taking off my shoes.”

She finished closing up her mattress and leaned on the iron rail, saying nothing.

“You haven’t gotten better at it. Not even a little.”

She sighed, “I know.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’m not exactly sure yet. But I think Enith is missing on purpose.”

Harry folded his arms, “Go on.”

“Well who else would take her things from McGonagall’s office and nothing else? Or without entering? Maybe she summoned them or something. Goblin magic is strange. When I talked to her the other day, she mentioned how she went into hiding after Ollivander was grabbed during the war. I’ve got this feeling in my gut that something is happening, something to do with artificers, and she decided to go to ground.”

Harry grimaced, “You never go with your gut.”

“Well, my heart is broken and my brain is a mess so it’s all I’ve got to work with right now,” she was feeling testy, not even sure where she was going with what she was saying, “I mean, I have to assume that McGonagall’s office wasn’t torn to hell since you’re already fairly confident that nothing but the art supplies are missing from it. And I’m sure they’re reasonably valuable, but are they anything that someone couldn’t get elsewhere a lot more easily than breaking into the headmaster’s office?”

Harry gave a non-committal head-wobble, “We’re checking on a couple things but for the most part you’re right. The brush-heads in particular were insured to her, fine artificer make, but they’re attuned to her wand, from the same unicorn-tail as her wand’s core. They couldn’t be used well by anyone who hadn’t taken her wand from her, and her wand hasn’t transferred owners.”

“You can tell that?”

Harry nodded, “Goblin underwriting documents. They automatically declare themselves void if the
insured property changes ownership away from the policy holder via valid legal or magical means.”

“But you can’t tell whether someone else took the brushes?”

Harry sighed, “They technically belong to her wand, stealing them wouldn’t change that. It’s complicated. But it’s probably why she felt comfortable leaving them in McGonagall’s office in the first place, so it would certainly make sense that she’d be the only person interested in taking them.”

Hermione nodded, gears turning, “Unless she went to ground because someone was looking for her and they took them because the brushes’ bond to her wand and her wand’s bond to her would make her easier to find. Or their unique value to her would make them something to ransom.”

Harry nodded, “Or if they grabbed her first and wanted her to do some work for them. In any case, yeah, she’s probably the actual item of value in this scenario. She either got taken or is hiding, and in that process either she or someone holding her or someone looking for her took the brushes.”

Hermione sighed, “This is going to sound dopey, but are you sure there’s a connection between Enith missing and my room getting trashed? They seem like such different situations.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair, “Honestly, until you showed up and mentioned your missing art and the fact that you were supposed to be meeting with Enith at the time all this happened, I’d have been willing to say no.”

“Listen, the painting I had down here, it wasn’t cleverly hidden. It was the first thing you’d see the moment you opened the lab door. And it wasn’t small. Certainly not something you’d look for behind books or under the fireplace grate, or whose absence you could hide with a little chaos. But you said yourself they weren’t trying to permanently ruin my things, and we’re not looking at the results of some titanic magical struggle. Someone sat at the fireplace, dug through the ashes with gloved hands, tossed the grate out of their way and took another scoop. None of it hit anything midair, no footprints. Unless they were fighting completely blind or against one of the ethereal things that I’m pretty sure can’t even come in here, they were just digging. They were looking for something much smaller than the painting.”

Harry was nodding, “Possible. So a book or a wand or something like that. But what…”

“I don’t know. I don’t have anything. If they’d wanted something that Severus left behind the room’s been closed up for twenty years, but not hermetically. And, honestly, Hogwarts is shorthanded, anyone with enough magical chops to break into Hogwarts could have asked for the potions job before McGonagall was reduced to asking me. So I’m lead to think that this was either the first time someone decided they needed whatever-it-was, the first time they thought they could get it, or the first time they thought it was here. And it doesn’t feel like a coincidence that Enith would send me a letter telling me to be out of my room, then disappear, and then someone became sure enough that there was something in my room, something they wanted badly enough, to go to this much trouble to look for it. Maybe they thought she’d sent me something. Maybe...the brushes? But that’s ridiculous, the letter came under the door, they’d never have fit. This seems like it was done by someone who was sure that what they were looking for was here but not where, not even to the specific room.”

“Show me the letter..”

A few minutes rummaging through the wreckage of the table and Hermione produced the letter as well as her library book about artists, handing them both over, “I suppose it could have been a forgery, or something she was compelled to write. But the only two people who could have possibly known that I would have accepted a dinner invitation from her were Professor McGonagall and the chief porter, Happy, who served us lunch. They were the only ones who ever saw me talking to her,
and McGonagall was the only one there when...except for...oh...Harry…”

He looked up from the book and letter, “Hermione wh- “ and then his eyes got round.

“The portraits.”
Harry got the table righted and Hermione gathered books. They would need to check through the
history of the headmasters to narrow down likely suspects, then try to catalog all potential portraits
that might be somewhere else to establish a list of places to look. Hermione had just sat down with
her quill in hand when her stomach began to tremble. She couldn’t concentrate on wild guesses. She
had to find Severus. She needed to know if he was still alive.

“Harry…”

“Hmm?” he was already poring over her book on artists to try and make lists of portrait painters and
their subjects.

“I… I can’t do this right now. I’m going cross-eyed. I have to sleep. I’ve got classes to teach in the
morning, and you’ve got an owl to send and colleagues to confer with. I’ll have more for you in the
morning, I promise. I’ve got a lot of theories but…I feel so foggy. Just give me five hours and I’ll
jump right back in, I promise.”

Harry straightened up, nodding briskly, “Yeah, I think that’ll be all right. We’re just stabbing in the
dark anyway. But you’re right, it’s possible the portraits might have told somebody. Whether she’s
been grabbed or is in hiding, it’s unlikely anyone was after an artificer to harm her, especially if they
also stole art. I’ll get my people on some stuff, check in with you at breakfast. It’ll be easier once
we’ve gotten a few more facts together.”

She nodded vaguely, her mouth taking off in an over-tired grateful babble, “There are a few
things…a few other things…that might be relevant or might not. But I…there’s someone I need to
check-in with, first. Oh don’t look at me like that, please, I’m not trying to be maddening. I can’t tell
you yet. You have to trust me, ok?”

Harry stopped scowling but folded his arms, “I want to but…you know you signed a waiver, right? If
you give me or, Merlin forbid, anyone on my team reason to suspect you have evidence you’re not
sharing, they can sit you down and make you tell them. Stop with the eyebrow, I’m not trying to
threaten you, but it’s true Hermione. A woman is missing. I have to take that seriously.”

Hermione felt herself sagging inside, too tired to fight someone who already lived within her
defenses. He was completely right, but he was also…he was supposed to be on her side. That he
would even suggest that she wasn’t doing all she could… “You think I’m not taking this seriously?
Are you…you’re questioning my… Really? After all the times I…”

Harry groaned, “Oh not this…”

Old arguments volunteered themselves, the tenacious kind that only lived between best friends,
siblings, and married couples, propping her up, “Yes, this, Harry! How many times have I stuck by
you in the face of worse?”

His tone was maddeningly paternal, “You’re tired. I’ll see you at breakfast.”

“No. We’ve apparently got to take this all seriously, so let’s be serious. How many times?”

He sighed, but there was a peevish growl in it, and he spoke as if he were reciting an old and
obligatory catechism, “Depending on how you define it, probably thousands. You chose to be on my
side every time, minute by minute, and I’ll never be able to repay it and we both know it,” he
dropped the recitation and became extemporaneous, “But you know you never trusted me, so stop
getting all flushed and righteous, it’s not even remotely the sa-"

Hermione gaped at him, “What in the name of Medea’s mons are you talking about? I’ve always trusted you.”

“But never blindly. You held my feet to the fire every step of the way, questioned everything I did-”

She attempted to yell over him as he plowed on, “And stuck by you even when you completely ignored me!”

He roared, overriding her, “-and it kept me alive! No matter how fast I tried to run away, you always kept up, because you never trusted me to do it on my own. You trusted us. That we could do things if we stuck together.”

“So why does that suddenly not apply when I need a little latitude, when I need you to stick by me? Don’t you trust us? Or does it just not count anymore because now it’s just...us.”

His breath caught and he blinked, dumbfounded, “That...that’s not fair.”

She knew he was right but it only made her angry, “Of course it’s not fair! None of it is! None of it ever has been! And yet I’ve always had your back, always, don’t you even see that?”

He set his jaw, “You mean when we were kids, or do you mean lately? Because lately…”

She felt something freeze, “Don’t you dare.”

“Because the last six months there hasn’t been an ‘us’ at all, and not because of me, and I don’t think even you believe it’s because of Ron. It’s more like you’ve been hiding from me and Ginny. You were lonely for him after the party, we all were, but...”

Panic hit her square in the chest and her diplomacy closed over it instinctively, her lips trembling, her tone that of a sympathetic hostage negotiator, “Harry, don’t...you were right before, I’m just overtired, I took a cheap shot and I’m wrong. Can we drop it?”

He missed the change in her, she’d hit him too hard in a spot too strained, and his voice rose desperately, “No listen! We don’t hear from you, we barely see you when you drop Rose or Hugo by, Ginny keeps saying you’ll come around eventually but she’s falling apart trying to keep on believing it. And then you’re just abandoning your home and in-laws and coming to live in this...this...” he gestured helplessly at the shambles in a dungeon in the castle of their childhood.

Her hands started to shake, her tone flattening in bitter resignation, feeling like something had been crossed that wouldn’t permit a return, “Fine, yes. I’m a mess. I can’t help it. You got me. So just don’t, then. Don’t trust me. Why would you, after everything? You want me to be exactly as I was before? If that’s the price, I can’t possibly pay it so just...just let me sleep and you can bring your fucking veritaserum with you in the morning if you want. It shouldn’t take you even that long to get approval.”

“That’s not what I want.”

Viciously, “Well who fucking cares? The person you want doesn’t exist anymore. Welcome to the club.”

He took a deep breath, clearly trying to de-escalate, but there was still a tremor there she couldn’t interpret, “Hermione I...I understand, ok? That’s not what I’m asking for. I know what you’re going through. I know it’s bad. We’re all going through a tough time. We all lost him. But we can’t just run
away from each other like...

An invisible tripwire in her heart snapped and everything went cold. Power to her filters and gates went dark, and all her baffles hung slack as the flood began to spill over and erode the last of her walls, “You say that like you...How? How can you be such a...oh gods and goblins...” she felt dizzy, drunk, furious, turning fitfully in place without direction as her thoughts began to cyclone, hyperventilated, “You understand? You have advice? You have an opinion about what I ‘can’t just’ do? Don’t make me defend the unique god-awfulness of my ‘tough time’. Not to you. You of all people, you know it’s not the same. Yeah, he took stuff from all of us when he...he took the future, the story we all expected. He took…” her eyes burned dryly like volcanic ash, “he took our sense of continuity, he took us . I know, I know all of that, and I grieve for that, and for you, because I know you, I know just how strong you are and how hard it hit you and has gone on hitting you. You loved him. I know it’s real and it hurts and it’s not fair and you miss him but, Harry…” she shook her head, knowing she oughtn’t say it but having no means to stop it besides just physically holding her mouth shut, “fuck you and everyone because he took the whole shape of my life away with him, he took my us and my me and my home and it’s never coming back, he took things that never had or needed a name because they were just his and mine, and they were everything!” She was yelling, hectoring, she didn’t care.

Harry looked like a stag in headlights, “I didn’t mean it like that, please don’t-”

His hurt look made her furious, “And don’t make me defend being angry! Don’t make me defend the reasons why I’m an utter ruin! You know I can’t, I can’t stand it, there’s nothing I hate more than this, and hurting everyone all the time, and you bloody well know it. I’m not choosing to be...this,” she gestured wildly at her grim dungeon as it lay pillaged, “Or at least you would know, should know. If you’re worth fuck-all as a friend, if you’ve ever bothered to know anything about me. You’d know that I’m in here fighting it with everything I have and it’s just not enough. I didn’t do this, any of this, to myself, and this fucking mess you see before you is the very best I can do with all my not-inconsiderable genius. It’s literally the best option that was available to me, so don’t pretend you know.”

“Hermione-”

“No!” she was spitting, she could actually see spittle flying from her lips as she spoke and couldn’t stop, “You don’t get to say anything else. Because apparently you think you’re less of a mess because you’re stronger than I am, or smarter, or wiser, or because you’re trying harder, or planned better, or you value your children more. So fuck you, chosen one. If you don’t know me better than that, fuck you, and get the fuck out of my heart because you’re just grinding your heel into one more thing I thought I could count on and can’t. And don’t fucking try to compare lecturing me on how I ought to grieve and handle the shit I’m alone in with the way I chased you down on plans when we were kids because the difference between you right now and that teenage girl then was that she only opened her mouth when she had done her fucking homework!”

She sobbed, mostly spent. He stared, completely wound-up.

“I...Hermione, I do know...dammit,” he gripped his hair with both hands, “I mean I know that I don’t know, I know that it’s not the same and that I’m not...I’m not as...as anything as I should be, not as anything as you are. I mean,” he laughed weakly, desperately, “I mean who doesn’t know that? That’s not what I meant to say” he paced back and forth, his cheeks flaming, his eyes readying tears to cool them, “You’re asking me to trust you but...but I’ve been trusting you, just trusting our friendship, because I know I don’t understand what it’s like for you, and I hate that. So I’ve been trusting you but it’s only ever felt like abandoning you. I’ve counted on you to come to me if you’re not ok, but you’re so clearly not ok and I...I wouldn’t even,” he coughed another odd, desperate
laugh, “I wouldn’t even have gotten called tonight if it hadn’t seemed like maybe you’d been...I came here in a mad rush tonight thinking I might have to find your...that you could have been...” Hermione took a step towards him, wanting desperately to soothe the hurt she’d heaped on him but not quite able to extend a hand. He gritted his teeth, rushing to stay ahead of crying, “And maybe I’m a terrible stupid useless friend and believe me I definitely feel like I am, because until you walked through the door…” he gestured at her unintelligibly before digging the heel of his hand into his forehead, “…and that kills me. And Ginny...losing you on top of Ron within a few months of each other, and because of...what, not even a fight, just a drunken lonely party where we thought we could...I don’t even know what we thought we could...I barely even remember why...”

Her half-extended heart came rocketing back into her chest and dove into her stomach to hide, “Oh please Harry don’t please I can’t deal with it right now I’m sorry I just want someone to admit that they don’t understand and that they see me enough to see it but no one ever stops talking no one ever stops telling me how I should be no one listens but I’ll get better I will I just please I’m so sorry I know I ruined everything I didn’t mean to hurt her I didn’t mean to use you both please I didn’t mean to it was selfish and that’s just what I’m like when it feels like he’s within reach and that’s not an excuse and now...now...now...” she was trembling so hard all her words seemed to shake apart.

He stared at her oddly for a long beat and then held up both hands, “Stop...” He sighed, hard, lowering his eyes, “Hermione...ok, ok, stop, slow down, I won’t, ok? I promise. You’re right, I ought to be carrying my weight, not telling you how to carry yours, and I...I just will, ok? I’ve been making that mistake. I put too much on you...my own fears, my own need for someone to tell me how to do this. I always...I always do that to you and you’ve always...anyway that’s not your fault.”

Her eyes were wild, streaming, but she shrugged, struggling to direct her stampeding mind down some reliable diplomatic cattle-chute, “I, no, yeah, I’m sorry, I’m calm, you don’t have to apologise I’m just so...it was my fault, I’m just this black hole and I can’t let anyone pass too close without...I wish you did understand what it’s like so you’d have known why you just have to stay clear of me and I wouldn’t have been able to...I just crushed everything to me like some kind of bloody great squid. I did that and I’m sorry and there’s no going back to how it was, I know that, and I can’t ask...but I just...it’s not you I’m just so broken and...and such a coward I...I took advantage and then just ducked out and hid...”

He’d moved towards her very slowly, looking more and more bewildered until something clicked and the tightness around his damp eyes slackened, “Look I won’t...I won’t talk about that night because, yeah, by definition it’s complicated and I don’t think either of us...any of us right now has the...” He reached out and touched her hand, and she let him take it but winced. Finally he sighed, “Hermione, come here, come with me,” and he strode past her into the bedroom. She heard the edge of the bed creak.

Feeling more than a little defeated, she followed him, “Harry, I don’t think-”

He held up both hands, “I know. You’re tired and I’m probably still being an utter shit in a way I’ll figure out by next week. But please, just, come sit with me. I know you don’t want to talk, or for me to talk. And I’ll let you sleep, and I won’t treat you like a civilian in the morning, because you’re Hermione fucking Granger-Weasley and you are brilliant and I owe you, enormously, and I get the feeling that not-consulting you is the worst thing that could happen to this investigation. I’ll trust you. But I also...I need you to trust me. And you don’t,” his voice choked shut for a long moment, “I need that in my life so much, I didn’t even know how much until...” he shook his head and shrugged helplessly, taking a deep breath. “I haven’t earned it, in fact I’ve squandered it, but the world works better when you and I find a way to trust each other so, just, for one minute, sit. Let me prove something to you. Trust me.”
She went to him and sat, reaching out to him with the benefit of all her considerable doubt, trusting more in the certainty that it couldn’t get any worse.

He took her hands. The world somehow didn’t end. He didn’t fly apart into cinders. “Close your eyes.”

She looked at him steadily, searching his face. It was just Harry. She tried to justify her fears, but it was just Harry.

“Hermione, I promise, I’m not going to hurt you. I mean, everything hurts, but...I would never...”

She nodded, certain that he was making a huge mistake, “I know. That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“I know. I didn’t understand before, but I think I do now. Close your eyes.”

She obeyed him. He squeezed her hands, then up to her shoulders with an awkward stuttering stroke, and up the sides of her neck to cup her jaw gently. She felt the mattress shift as he leaned in, let him tilt her head just slightly to make an easy reach for his lips, let his mouth buss hers softly, then press, then part, tasting. He kissed her warmly, and she kissed him back. It was easy enough to do, pleasant even, oddly comforting, and about as erotic as licking stamps.

“Oh,” he murmured, taking her by the hands again, “I know it’s not proof positive, but...here,” he brought one of her hands up and held it against his heart. It was beating evenly, calmly, “I could put the other someplace else, but, for a study in how this doesn’t have to be weird, that might be a little weird. My point is...I adore you and I miss you and I trust you and I love you but I swear it’s not because of what happened, or that I long to go to bed with you or pursue something we’ve never been to each other, and you’re not going to break my heart by not wanting me, and I don’t exactly regret what happened but I’ll be damned if I can tell you I know how it did or that it matters to me if it ever does again. Ok? Whatever else needs to get hashed out or never spoken of, nothing got ruined. I don’t know what it’s like for you, but I know this. Ginny and I were never upset with each other, or with you. We just...it was confusing. Because I know how...when one thing changes that can never go back it feels like every other thing is just one mistake away from completely falling apart...but this, us, it isn’t one of them, ok? It’s not different now, or at least it’s not worse. I didn’t understand before...I didn’t understand that you were so scared. The idea of you being really that scared of anything just...I didn’t even know what that could look like. I thought you were...angry...offended. I thought that...that we had...had taken advantage. And then you didn’t want to ever see us...and we’d all been so damn drunk I couldn’t even be sure there hadn’t been something that I’d...”

Her mouth trembled with an unlikely smile. She lunged onto him in a Hagrid-sized hug, and he held onto her, still babbling.

“There’s nothing to figure out about you and me, nothing, I promise. Nobody’s mad at you, luv. We’re scared and we’re lost and I...I let that look like the same thing. I don’t have to know where you are, I don’t have to understand what it’s like for you to be on your side. You’re our Hermione, and maybe everything’s gone wrong, but nothing could ever go so wrong that we wouldn’t love you.”

“Harry,” she kissed him on the cheek, “I...I am so stupid. I’m sorry for scaring you, and for not trusting you, and for...about eighty percent of what I said before.”

He kissed her on the forehead, “Forgiven. And I’m probably sorry for the twenty percent I probably
totally deserved. We can haggle it out later. Get some sleep. I’ll need that big brain of yours in fighting form tomorrow.”

“You and me both. And send Ginny my love...or whatever form of that is least likely to get me killed the next time I see her. I know I’ve been awful. Nevermind, I’ll tell her, I just...”

“Go to bed.”

“Aye aye, Captain Potter.”

She waited until she heard the far door close. She was drained and relieved, but oddly wired, more certain than before that she had to be able to tell Harry and Ginny about the painting, and she had to have some kind of permission to do it before she did. Or at least it would do for a compelling excuse for just...needing to see Severus again. Needing to find him, despite the fact that it would probably be dangerous. She got up, shucking out of her robe and picking up her wand.

“Accio sorrow!”

The small memory labeled “one for sorrow” squirmed out from under some papers and flew to her hand. It was the only piece of him she had. Hopefully it would do. She still had the bed he’d enchanted, in the room he’d laid protections on. Wherever his canvas was, it still had her blood and tears and magical repairs on it. She would find him. She had to. It was the only way forward, and she’d spent too long feeling stuck, feeling lost, being wrong.

She wrapped herself in a clean nightgown, laid herself down in bed, clutched his memory and her wand and her locket tight to her chest, and pressed herself down into the dark.
Hermione in Underland

The main room was dark and chilly, unnaturally grey, and everything was covered in sheets. She went through to the classroom. It was gloomy, stiffly silent. The magic window was casting a murky grey light, the foggy glass reminding her of the witch’s magic mirror from Snow White.

“Show him to me. Show me where he is.” It was worth a try.

The window went black, showing her only a dim silhouette of herself cast by a pale light behind her.

“Well fuck you too,” she muttered, “I’m an actual witch. I don’t have to put up with your fairytale bullshit.”

She turned back to the door and noticed something glinting on the desk. It was a small vial full of clear, shining, mirrored liquid. Veritaserum.

She picked it up, “Curiouser and curiouser.” It reminded her of the waiver she’d signed, the aurors searching. And the thing they’d all overlooked, and that she had promptly forgotten again.

Tucking the vial into her pocket, she headed back through. The front room was different. It was a shambles. Everything was the color of cobwebs. Harry was sitting at the table, his head propped up on one hand over a book, eerily still. She looked closer. His eyes were moving, back and forth, unnaturally slow. Everything but her seemed strangely weightless and swaddled in silence, like the waking world was somehow underwater or on the moon compared to the denser time of dreaming. It was a familiar isolation, separated from people by difference more than distance, by the thickness of her corneas. How long had she been dreaming, really? She crossed to the antechamber.

There was a windy, cavernous sound behind the bathroom door. She didn’t go in. She remembered the monstrous things in there, even though she’d forgotten them before and longed to forget them again.

She went into the bedroom. She was lying in bed asleep, but she didn’t look at herself too closely, didn’t care to dwell on the weary helplessness of her grey face and how it betrayed the discomfort of her comfortable isolation. She looked at the tapestry behind the bed instead. Though the world around it was all cobweb-colored, it was still a shabby watermarked brown. Different, but not exactly contrasting. Its image was more distinct than she remembered. It was a wizard, brown-skinned and broad-mouthed, balding, with a sweeping white mustache and neatly trimmed beard. By his side was a squat wooden chair with arms, carved ornately and painted black, exactly like the one she’d sat in while taking lunch in McGonagall’s office.

“Well? You’re good at making people ignore you. You’re the only thing that didn’t get touched or taken or smashed to bits, and none of the aurors even gave you a second look. I’d have forgotten all about you too except for remembering that horrible draft. You’re an original, aren’t you? You’re a headmaster portrait. Back before oil paints and canvas became popular. You’re the first.”

The slightly caricaturish outline of the wizard’s head nodded.

“I imagine the magics of artificing have changed a fair bit in the last thousand years.”

He gave a rather ambivalent head-wobble.

“Are you aware of the others? The other portraits here in Hogwarts?”
“And the one that was here, are you aware of him now?”

A long listening pause. Headshake.

“But you were. Even though he hadn’t been framed into the gallery.”

Nod.

“Can you help me find him? Is there a way to get to him from here? A spell or a…”

Nod. Nod.

“What is it? What do I do?”

A finger, pointing at her left hand and the vial of sorrow.

“This? I should use this?”

Nod.

“What do I do? Do I open it?”

Nod.

She pulled the stopper and the white light of the memory sprang out like a shaken seltzer. It circled the room on shimmering white wings. The wizard reached towards the edge of his tapestry and gripped it, pulling the embroidered edge back and revealing a dark, drafty archway behind. The bird dove through the opening and off down a long stone tunnel with a loud caw.

Hermione took a step after it, but the wizard let the tapestry’s side drop. She pushed the fabric aside and the archway was gone.

“What? Wait, please, what did I do wrong? Please let me pass! It’s important!”

A hand held out, palm up.

“What, you want a price? A toll?”

Nod.

“Oh for the love of...you could have said. Well what do you want?”

He pointed past her hip at the head of the bed.

“You...you want a bed?”

Headshake. Point, point.

Hermione looked from the bed to the tapestry, “The pillow. You want a pillow?”

Nod.
She smiled, “I don’t blame you. That chair is bloody awful.”

Emphatic nod.

“Ok, just...let me think.”

She leaned on the rail and reached for the pillow, but her hand passed right through the fabric of it without touching. She tried to concentrate, make her hand more...useful. She reached for the pillow again, but this time sleeping-Hermione’s arm moved, “Oh I think I get it,” She tucked the empty vial into her pocket and brought her hand up to the opposite shoulder. Then she tried to let the reality seep in, just a little, closing her eyes. In her sleep, Hermione reached out her arm and wrapped it around her spare pillow. When she opened her eyes again, she was standing over her sleeping self, clutching a pillow to her chest.

“Here,” she held it towards him, trying not to think too hard about what ought to be possible. He reached out and took it, beaming, then reached for the edge of the tapestry, revealing the tunnel for her.

As she passed he leaned down close to her ear and whispered, in a voice she recognized but couldn’t place, “Keep...your...temper.”
The White Knight

She wandered in the dark for what felt like a long time before the shimmering crow came back to her, and then it flew off again in an indeterminate curving gyre.

“Dammit,” she muttered, “what am I supposed to do? If that’s as straight as that crow can fly what I really need is a…”

She smacked herself in the forehead and took out her wand, “Expecto Patronum!”

A phosphorescent Jack Russell terrier bounded out of her locket and through the end of her wand, ran twice around her feet, sniffing, then raced off in a straight line into the dark. She hurried after it at a moderate pace, trying to keep calm and not go haring off blindly.

She drew up short when she saw another figure, tall and lean and so pale he was almost translucent...no, he actually was translucent...walking toward her out of the dark, the little dog in his arms licking his face enthusiastically. Ron beamed at her, putting the little fellow down to run back and forth between their feet.

“Hello.”

She gawped, frozen in place, “Hi.”

He looked around and shrugged, his face lopsided with bemusement, “Nice weather we’re having?”

“Ron...” she walked briskly towards him, knowing in the back of her mind that he was, at best, a ghost, that she would pass right through, that her legs wouldn’t run because they knew better than her heart, that she’d need to be able to stop herself from falling after flinging herself at him as if he were real, tumbling through the empty air to the solid world, but she couldn’t help it, couldn’t refuse to fling. It never matters that it never works, it’s just what one does when there’s an illusion, a mirage, an impossible glimpse of their face in the crowd, that moment of waking when you’re sure they’re beside you; you reach, you leap, and you faceplant, and it crushes you, but that momentary holiday of hope is so sweet you just can’t let it go by unobserved. It’s just what you do when you’ve wandered too far on feet starved for a path towards the place you belong.

When she reached him he held her tight, simply factual, pressing kisses into her hair. A sob burst out of her like a guest at a surprise party, joyful and alarming and joined by a host of others.

He kissed her ears, her tears, her cheeks, her chin, her lips, her lips, her lips.

She brushed his bangs back from his face and looked at him, his eyes, his grin, his scrub of awful beard, the runic record of their life in his smile-lines. Innumerable details she’d lost but knew by heart.

She held his face gently between her hands in a paradox of confirmation and denial, “You’re not...you’re not really him are you. There’s no coming back. I know that. I’m glad you’re here, but you’re not really him.”

He looked pained and kissed her forehead, “Hermione, I am. I am. Maybe I’m just the part you carry with you, but what have I ever been that was worth anything except that?”

She gripped his arms and wanted to shake him, simultaneously annoyed and awed by him and his remarkable solidity, “Shut up, that’s not true. You were yourself. You were alive, and now you’re
gone. That’s the reality.”

He smirked, practically daring her to hit him, knowing she never would, “Oh, Meanie, don’t be such a muggle. I might not be living, but I’m alive.”

She tightened her grip and did give him a shake, unwilling to banter like they used to when they thought they had all the time in the world, “Don’t tease me. Don’t. You died. I didn’t even get to say goodbye to you, or that I’m sorry, or that I love you, or anything, so why would you come back now? That’s...that’s bloody sadistic.”

His face sobered, and fell, “I didn’t want to say goodbye. I wasn’t...I’m not strong enough to bear letting you down but...I wasn’t going to survive. I did try, but it was no use. So I just...I sort of...” he shrugged, ashamed, “I ducked out.”

She balled her fists in his pullover, gritting her teeth against yelling, “You did. Oh god, Ron, I hate you so much. It’s the forest all over again and I need you but you’re never coming back,” she sighed helplessly, “But you did that time...and all the other times I thought we were dead for sure but we survived, so I keep...I keep waiting for you even though I know...” suddenly she couldn’t say it.

He nodded, pulling her in, “I know. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Lover. I wish I could take it back. I’m angry about all the plans we had, everything I’m going to miss. One moment not going how you expect can take so much else down with it, it’s mental. It’s not fair, it’s not right. It’s awful that we apparently save the worst days of our lives for last.”

She gasped a cry that was almost a laugh, nodding, “Maybe you did, procrastinator. Me I’m getting my work done well ahead of time,” he smiled and she sniffled, poking him in the chest and trying to sound matter-of-fact, “And I would even rather live that day again, any of our worst days; the marriage counselling after Hugo was born, the fights about George, the week when the whole Burrow had stomach flu, or just something simple like fighting a war or walking through hell with you, or anything but living without you. Anything, even though I’m so...oh Ron I’m so unspeakably mad at you...and myself...for not being enough to hold you here. And at life. Life and magic and love, for being pointless rubbish that pretend to be so meaningful and true and grand but can’t even buy us the difference of a moment, after everything else we survived, after everything we did to save the world, that the whole stupid ungrateful world isn’t enough to fix just one small heavy absurd moment that ought to be fixable, that ought to be subject to review and I...I can’t reconcile it. I won’t. I can’t just...forgive that.”

Ron nodded grimly, tenderly, “We really let you down, though, the world and me.”

As usual his gentle culpability utterly derailed her anger and she struggled to get it back, “Me and Rose and Hugo and your parents and my parents and George and Harry and Ginny...and the cats...Grimshanks Jr. went right off her food for almost a week over you...and our house and everything we built, everything we learned along the way, how could you just leave us!? Why!??” the last finally became a scream, and for just a moment his pullover felt like quilts, and she struggled to get her temper under control, to stay with him as he petted her patiently. She was used to not focusing on the anger, to coming struggling out of the vast unworkable places that just went on forever, shutting them out. She gulped hard, “It’s a bad joke, is all,” she smirked, tugging on his sleeves in a half-hearted shake, “even for you.”

He cradled her jaw in both hands and pressed her mouth to his lips again, and when he pressed his forehead to hers she felt his tears patter down onto her fists, melting them, “Because I’m an idiot and a coward.”
She rolled her forehead against his, gently, “You’re not. The Ron I carry with me knows he’s not. I’ve seen behind that dopey act. He’s brilliant. Sloppy and lazy and silly but...just brilliant,” she coughed a little laugh, “always was.”

He squeezed a handful of her curls, “He knows he is when he’s with you. Everyone knows that. He loves you, and he never once doubted how much you...” his voice choked shut for a moment and his thought seemed to have moved on by the time he cleared it, “He’s got no regrets, none, except that last dumb thing he did, dying on you. And it’s a pretty small thing, for being so huge.”

She sniffled, “Yeah. Everyone wants me to talk about it and I can’t. I try to plan how to compensate Rose and Hugo for the loss of their father, and it seems silly because they’ve got no end of uncles and parents about. I say my husband died and that sounds like...like something that happens to other people. Husbands, and death. Children and fathers. But you...you’re my you, my us. We were a team. We were a plan. You’re my Ron, my knight, my lover, my you, and you just...ended. You ended, you vanished, like a clerical error, and there’s just no words for that, for everything that’s gone. I didn’t need words for it before because we both knew, and now it’s just me...I’m the only one who knows now...all our moments and our signs, everything we learned...how I so-much-more-than-love you. And there’s no words for what it’s been like since...just a big dangling full-stop with no sentence...I just stare into it, down and down, and it just...fractellates. The deeper I get the slower I go and the smaller I feel and everything just repeats and repeats and I never get any closer to...a word or a feeling or a meaning...or a point...” she gulped down a sob, took a deep breath, and brought up a thumb to brush away his tears and her own.

Her thumb throbbed sharply, under the nail. She remembered.

“Oh no, oh blasted bleeding...Ron, I have to go, there’s...” something rabbeted in the back of her mind I’m late I’m late I’m late...

He grinned weakly through his tears, “I know. I know, I mostly just came back for this guy. He can’t go where you’re going, there’s going to be too much else going on, and he’d just keep leading you back to me anyways. This job is for the birds,” he put his hands down and the dog jumped up into his arms, whining and licking at tears.

She shook her head, “What? Don’t take him. Not my little dog, too. Not yet...please...you’ve seen what a mess I am, I can’t do any of this without you.”

He gazed at her sadly, gratefully, “You’re still absolute shit at telling lies, even when you believe them. It beggars belief what an accomplished politician you are.”

She sighed, grasping for anything other than an ending, “You always used to help me, remember? I miss that. And your cinnamon rolls. I tried to make them the other day, they came out all wrong.”

She brushed his hair back from his face again, “And I’m...I’m not mad at you. You’re maybe the only thing I’m not mad at but...oh Lover I miss you, so much. I miss who I became with you. I miss what you saw in me.”

His cheeks tried valiantly to make his eyes accept a smile, “We’ll be ok, lover. In a big stupid fatal universe, we got to be an us. That’s twenty years I got to love you that will never stop existing. We can’t go back, but it’s there. We made it. That happened. It’s real, forever. It’s not enough but what could ever have been? Every story ends, and it’s never good enough. Every life is a bedtime story we tell before we sleep.” He hooded the puppy with a hand and leaned over to meet her lips again.

She gripped his sleeves below the shoulders, trying valiantly to savor one last kiss, then becoming frantically unable to let it be the last once it was done, pulling him back in, and over and over. He wrapped her up one more time and held her tight, the little dog squirming up onto his shoulder to...
avoid being smooshed, and she relished his solidity but also wished that they might blend together and just stay.

“Hermione…it’s time to say—”

“No. Not now,” but she forced herself to let him go a little, pushing gently away, “Maybe I’ll see you again.”

“Eventually. But there’s things to be getting on with in the meantime. Life, death. Work. Coming home at the end of the day. We have to make room for that, now. I don’t want to either. I got scared. I do that. But I’ve never been far. I wouldn’t be if I could. So send everyone my love, would you?”

She smirked, backing up one step, slowly, then another, shaking her head, eyes streaming, “Wooly wizard bullshit. You’re a dream, Weasley.”

He smiled, ”Your face is going to be red in fifty or sixty years when I prove you wrong.”

She smiled, “Oh? Will you have dinner waiting?”

He backed away slowly, reluctantly, “I will. And there’ll be enough for company, so don’t worry about making new friends...just choose wisely, alright?” he grinned, “Take care of Harry, now that I’m not around to save him. And keep Ginny out of trouble.”

She laughed, grateful that he wasn’t trying to admonish her about their children, that in his mind it still went without saying, “Oh Merlin, I couldn’t possibly. But I’ll try. And the whole world else besides, now that you’re retired from idiotic heroics.”

He preened just a little, cleared his throat, “And if you...um...find someone who you...you know...who helps you with all the stuff that I can’t...well...I want that for you. Not as much as I probably should, but I do.”

She tried not to blush too obviously, “Same goes for you, I guess. It’ll be weird but...I think I’m ok. If you’re happy. Promise you won’t spy on me if I’m naked with someone?”

He rolled his eyes, “You couldn’t pay me enough. But live, Hermione. It matters. It all matters.”

She sniffled, pouting a little the way she never could do around anyone else, “I don’t want to. Life is rubbish. It’s stupid and unreliable and broken.”

He nodded, ignoring her the way she always needed him to when she got in a sulk, “And don’t look for me in the water. Don’t look for me anywhere. That’s not where I am. It’s important.”

She felt tears leaking over her smile as his words broke something apart, and she knew she wasn’t going to be having any more crushing momentary holidays of reaching for him, and it hurt, “And what if...what if when I wake up I don’t believe in you anymore?”

“Then we’ll call it a bet and you’ll do the dishes.”

“You still have to do dishes in the afterlife?”

“Not after you lose this bet I won’t.”

She laughed. He always made her laugh, “You matter too, Ron. To all of us. You matter enormously, still. I love you.”
“I know. You always did have terrible taste. Speaking of which,” he pointed back past her, "he’s that way.”

She grimaced at him, but decided not to argue or joke along right in that moment. He was leaving, and there was still something she hadn’t had a chance to say that she really ought to, if she were strong, if she were going to do this right, “Good…” it caught in her throat and she still couldn’t say it. She clutched her locket, “goodnight, my Ron.”

He sniffled manfully, his grin lopsided and brave, “Goodnight, my Hermione,” he kissed his fingertips and blew across them, and a small bright thread rippled around her heart as if plucked by the air, sounding in well-worn grooves.

She turned and walked, not sure she could go if she looked back, not sure the puppy wouldn’t chase her if she ran.

“I love you too,” he murmured, and walked back the way he had come, letting tears fall like breadcrumbs in a bedtime story.
Professor Granger stumbled a bit on her way through the dark, as though her eyes and ears disagreed about the pitch of the featureless ground. And this was odd because there was nothing for her eyes to have an opinion about. The cavernous void before her was so blank, so featureless, that odd blobs of vaporous color undulated at the corners of her vision, her optic nerves having begun a sort of hallucinatory test pattern from sheer boredom. But it wasn’t true darkness. She could see her arm if she held it out ahead of herself, could see her body if she looked down, but she couldn’t find an angle that made her fingers cast any shadow on her palm. She didn’t look especially luminous to herself, just sort of sketched, and could detect no source or direction of ambient light. She could simply see herself and nothing else.

She smirked a little at that. Ginny would have needled her, gently, rightly, with parallels of her nigh-implosive navel-gazing. She missed it, with all her heart, that steady goad and guide, trustworthy and ungentle. She wished she could talk to Ginny, as she had to Harry, get it out and in the clear, or at least explain that she didn’t know how to be clear the way she used to be, that that was just what she was like now, but she dreaded that as much as she wished for it, and couldn’t quite explain. Her sense of something ruined went deeper with Ginny. Not the us of them. She and Ginny didn’t us, really, didn’t make each other different, didn’t draw each other into a different world of their own. She didn’t change when Ginny was nearby. There were no missing pieces that forced them to fit together for comfort, they just fit. They’d grown into shape with one another, like a river and a rock. Friendship wasn’t a thing they blended into so much as a brilliant energy they poured into the space between them. She never had to round off her corners or stifle her momentum. Ginny always saw her, admired her, called her out, and vice versa.

And that was the problem. When Hermione looked at herself, her fractured weary half-self, it was nothing she wanted Ginny to see. It was alright with Harry, Harry was…well…a bloke. He was so often content to ignore the details, but Ginny was like a homing harpoon in a way that would have made Ahab jealous. She could hit her mark from a mile away and drag it into the light, probe it until it gave up its secrets...in a good way. Hermione had been fleeing that gravitational draw, that knowledge that Ginny wanted her near, ever since the very worst of the sheltering anguish had begun to give her some freedom to move again. She didn’t want Ginny to see. Didn’t want to be pulled, even gently. Didn’t know why.

*Home is where the harm is.* The thought was almost a sound, and sounded like George, harmonized with Fred, some playful nonsense of theirs from long ago when they would speak in unison just to bother people.

“I better get moving,” she said aloud, “if my ears are getting bored as well.”

She turned her own hand over, unable to stop looking. She reached out in a circle, wondering if any side of the matte blackness and dead silence were actually a wall. Nothing but open air surrounded her, but when she reached a certain point in her compass arc, the spot under her thumbnail flared bright with pain, the wound homing back to its source. She sucked at her thumbnail instinctively and put out her other hand to feel ahead of her as she walked.

She stumbled again, inexplicably, her bare feet meeting no irregularity in the smooth terrain. Just for an experiment, she closed her eyes, dark over dark, treacle and ink. She nodded her head a few times and settled on what the waters of her inner ear told her was level, confirming again that the earth she was treading was reasonably flat. But when she opened her eyes again and looked into the featureless dark, indistinguishable from the insides of her eyelids, she again got that sense of
unbalance, certain that the ground sloped downhill and rocked vaguely this way and that underneath her. She sighed. Maybe it was her sleeping body interfering again, rapid eye movement or something. She reached out her hand again and resolved herself forward with her eyes closed.

The strange apparitions still promenaded along the deserted halls of her optic nerves, and occasionally her ears decided that they, too, lacked for diversion.

Close to her left ear, she heard Enith’s voice, as if the little woman had her chin right on her shoulder, The paintings, they are artifice. Indifferent. Like a book. Like a wand. They wait. They sleep. They pantomime. They give beauty. They do not suffer, they do not struggle, they do not wonder though they can speak of how they have always wondered. Like dreams. Like memories.

It felt like advice, and she rejected it vocally, “He still matters to me.”

They are not real, only true.

“He still matters, and I’m not turning back without him.”

The voice lost a little of its Enith-ness, sounding a bit resigned, Tis love, tis love that makes the world go round.

Hermione opened her eyes again, just to check that the darkness was still unchanged. Certainly it felt as if the world went round when she did so. She took some steps along the swirling plane, seeing if she could get her sea-legs under her.

“Oh see-legs,” she muttered to herself, “such a lot of nonsense.”

She checked the invisible horizon again with her compass-thumb and found that either she’d wandered to the left or her target had wandered to the right. She held still a moment, wincing through the pain, and found that, indeed, either her position was pivoting or her target was moving. But then why should anything move straight in dreams? They were always shifting and back-filling, changing their speed and timing. Vanishing into nothing. She wished she could get up above the shifting ground. She had a vision of flying straight at him like a crow in the air or a rook on the chessboard to its opposite member.

And that was odd because rooks didn’t make much sense as an analogy for them as a pair. Towers. He and she were dungeon dwellers, after all. But there wasn’t so much difference, she reasoned as the world pitched slightly sideways. One could be locked away in either. In terms of away, up wasn’t so different from down. So what if one was for ravens and the other for writing desks?

It was Ron that had loved chess. Hermione had learned to appreciate it, but she didn’t enjoy maneuvering in little spaces and trying to make meaningful patterns out of black and white nonsense rules. For almost no reason, as she groped through the dark, she recalled the Alice Through the Looking Glass chessboard Ron’s mum had given him as a child. It was the one he’d taught her to play on when she’d refused to engage with wizard’s chess. The rooks had been the twins, Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. Ginny liked chess, and was good at it, and sometimes the three of them would play in rotations, but since it was a two-player game, when it was her turn to sit out she would take the captured pieces and play with them like action figures, making up stories.

Ginny always said she liked the Kings and Queens and Rooks the best, though of course she never got to play with a king...as soon as one would go out the game was over. But all the other characters had made no sense in sets of two, and were different on each side of the board: two white Hatters and no March Hares, two black Walruses and no Carpenters, two of the White Knight as knights on the white side, two Caterpillars on the black...but there were never two caterpillars in the story, or
two white knights. There certainly hadn’t been eight white rabbits as the pawns portrayed...or at least that would be a very different take on the story...there was nothing to say that any given rabbit Alice chased was the same one, certainly. But both sides had a pair of Tweedle rooks, two black and two white, twins for towers.

It made one wonder, which two made a pair? They all started equally far from each other, so did a white Tweedle go with the other white Tweedle, or did one white and one black make a pair? The latter would certainly make the duplications make more sense...then one could just assume that the centerline of the board between the king and queen was a mirror that turned four white rabbits into eight and one caterpillar into two, and that each Tweedle had picked a different side, determined to have the battle from their poem. That would mean that Alice, as the queen, really was just the looking-glass double of the king, but then the Tweedles had said that, too, when they’d pointed out the king asleep in the grass.

*You’re just a kind of thing in his dream. And if he left off dreaming about you where do you suppose you’d be? You’d go out, bang, like a candle.* The voice was like George’s, teasing, swapping with Fred here and there.

Hermione felt her hackles rise, and a need to speak if she were going to be spoken to, “But candles don’t go bang, when they die. Mirrors go bang, when they break. Glass ceilings and windows and skylights go bang. Candles just waver and then they’re noplace. Out, silently, never to come in. Does that sound like me?”

That seemed to silence the voice, but not her musings.

If Alice were the king’s dream, his mirror-self, she wouldn’t go out when he woke, she would go in, bang, through the mirror, back into her box in his mind when he stopped being Lewis Carroll the dreamer and went back to being Charles Lutwidge Dodgson the stammering Anglican deacon, a man fixing a real live little girl into his dreams with all the controlling, objectifying fervor of the creative victorian male, longing both to possess her utterly and unleash her to live her childlike freedom in her stead. She felt a deeper chill than just the fear of going out like a candle or in like a dream. She didn’t want to be Alice, chasing rabbits. She wanted even less to be Dodgson, chasing Alice. When did she lose herself?

Someplace high up and far away behind her, she heard voices filtering down. Children’s voices. Her own, and Harry, and Ginny, and Ron. Others, everyone, dozens of years earlier at Hogwarts, laughing and bickering. Much closer she heard someone reciting, sounding very much like her daughter, Rose:

*A tale begun in other days,*  
*When summer suns were glowing -*  
*A simple chime, that served to time*  
*The rhythm of your rowing -*  
*Whose echoes live in memory yet,*  
*Though envious years would say 'forget'.*

She shook her head, refusing to be put off her path, though the path ahead of her looked nothing like a path at all, and the sounds behind her were so jolly, like an ironclad reminder that she was heading the wrong way, ‘I haven’t forgotten. And I won’t. I know I’ve changed, ever for the worse, and maybe I’ve...but I’m still...I just...I have to find him. I can’t look back now. I have to go on. He’s my way back. I can’t just leave him down here. Can you imagine being down here alone?’

She looked around herself and sighed, realizing what she’d said.
Ginny’s voice, *You’re mad*

She shook her head, “I’m not, not at you.”

*You must be or you wouldn’t have come here.*

Hermione recognized the text, the Cheshire catechism, but still couldn’t resist answering the double entendre, “I swear, I’m not doing it to spite anyone. I’m not. This is just...” she stopped short of asserting that it was where she belonged, what she deserved, “this is just where I am right now.”

The harder she tried to keep her path straight, the further her mind wandered, her thoughts curving in on themselves. The vaporous ghosts began swimming in her vision again, though she did not fear them. If they were real and not just figments of her neglected senses, they would bar her way, bump against her. Something in her had begun to suspect that the reason it was so dark was that even light would be too real, an obstruction. If she could hug a ghost, mightn’t she hit her head on a sunbeam? Trip over a candle flame that had gone out for a walk, banging the screen-door behind it?

She sighed, studying her quizzically visible hand again as she scanned the arc of her travel for pain. She knew a fair bit about material physics, for a witch. She was familiar, theoretically, with how the perceptible solidity of matter was, in some senses, an illusion, a misapprehension; that atoms contained more relative empty space than a stadium, that the property of materials to collide and resist melding had everything to do with forces maintaining that space for the possible and the probable and nothing that a human-level observer would consider physical matter. Even walking around in her arguably real skin, she was more a matter of valences and held spaces than any of the things she was for the purposes of her life to-scale. So here...outside herself...

*An unwavering band of light.* Severus’ voice, of all things, more in her chest than her ears.

Hermione smiled. Breakfast of Champions. That one literal ray of hope in all its crushed sentiment and cavalier writerly dominion, the part she’d hoped Severus had understood. The assertion by a painter that all people, of all circumstances, are unwavering bands of light. Even awkward intellectuals groping about for their youth. Even the figments of that youth. Even writers. It didn’t matter, ultimately, whether the writer believed the painter he created. He was believable. He was true. She checked again. Her visibility certainly didn’t seem to waver. That was comforting. She really didn’t need wonderland and its leaky mirrors. As Vonnegut knew, the real world was surreal enough.

Suddenly the floor seemed to lurch beneath her sickeningly, the gravity pressing on her like a centrifuge. Her head hurt as if caught in a cold draft, slammed in a book. There was a heavy, acrid smell in the air, like printer’s ink or acetone, strange fuel, electrical burning, and an inorganic roaring that made her think of the end of the chapter and the poem about the Tweedles, where a monstrous crow like a massive black cloud came to frighten them away, even if all Alice ever saw was a fluttering white shawl that had gotten away from its owner. There was something wrong, something different than the rest of the darkness. Something nightmare. It spoke to her spine like a ferris-wheel drop, pulling uneasy and surreal ideas to the surface, spinning her like the teacups at the fair.

With the clarity of detachment common to crises, she remembered the summer fair. As she held her hands over her ears against the roaring, she heard Rose speaking, very young, a poem she’d made up in the field beyond the glittering amusement, when they’d been lying out in the twilight, finishing their ice cream and waiting for the hazy light to finally fade and the stars to come out, trying to get Rose to rest and digest before getting on the teacups a third time. She hadn’t thought of it in years. It had haunted her at the time, though Rose had chanted it idly as she spun in place, chattering about the mirror maze and the carousel and the bright lights and darkening sky, and it was really no more surreal than any other skip-rop rhym:
What goes up must come down,
what goes out must come in,
circle smile, circle frown,
spin and spin and spin and spin.

Her thumb hurt terribly, like it had been slammed in a door. She felt another lurch, another drop in pressure, though the sickening spin slowed to a halt. She tried to gather herself together before opening her eyes. It was all nonsense, spilling out of her own mind like club soda when the pressure drops. There was no answer for it, like Carroll’s old saw about writing desks, just a pretension, something to be pushed at people when you didn’t want them to have an answer, to make them feel lost and ignorant. She ignored it. No sense crying over spilled club soda. What would you even clean it up with? She had a quest. She had someone to save.

She opened her eyes slowly, and was surprised to see a fat black crow standing and gazing at her matter-of-factly, black as molasses against the inky floor yet as apparent to her eyes as her own hand. She looked around and found the rest of the lack-of-landscape unchanged.

She picked herself up off the ground, unsure of when she'd fallen, “I really hope you’re not just a further elaboration of my hallucinations.”

The crow croaked and jumped at her alarmingly, landing on her shoulder in a battering of wings before settling, gripping tightly with sharp little claws.

Hermione spluttered but grinned, “My, aren’t we vivid.”

The crow cawed loudly, sounding affirmative.

Hermione sighed, trying to understand, “Are you...are you that same crow? The patronus I sent down here? You’re in the same family as rooks, anyway. Are you the black Tweedle?”

The bird thumped the side of her head in a way that wasn’t quite a peck, but was definitely punitive. Hermione sighed and raised her aching thumb, though no direction seemed able to make it worse.

“Blast,” she muttered, “I really hope you’re his patronus, because I don’t have any other tricks for finding him.”

The crow cawed so loudly it hurt Hermione’s ears.

“Ow, damn,” she swatted at the bird reflexively and it bit her tender thumb. She doubled over in pain. The crow just hopped along the ridge of her back and called loudly again.

And a caw, in echo, answered. Somewhere off to the left, the dark didn’t go on uninterrupted and unanswered forever.

Hermione straightened and the crow preened, “Alright alright,” she sighed, “nobody asked your opinion.”

It flew off towards where its wing-beats echoed, and Hermione followed, staggering slightly.
A dim paper lantern hovered in the distance, though as she moved towards it she realized the lack of a horizon had deceived her about its proximity and size, and it was more like a tall rectangular tent filled with dim amber light. And a chair. And a familiar silhouette, pacing back and forth slowly. The crow had perched itself on one corner, preening. As she approached, she had to pass four others to get to his, canvas-like boxes a few feet apart, so opaque and lightless they were practically invisible until she was nearly running into them. Their contents, if they had any, were silent. The uprights had a texture like wood but denser, the canvas sides creased outwards against them and were hashed with dark iron staples. The place gave a strong sense of storage, incarceration.

Moving closer, his walls seemed increasingly translucent. The chair’s back was to her, and when Severus moved he was not made of brushstrokes. She murmured a hex-detection and moved her wand close to the canvas as it glowed pale blue, then pale green to illuminate anything hidden. There were no runes or traps, just a thin invisible seam where the cloth could apparently be parted. If anything it gave the impression of being anti-magical.

“Severus?”

He kept pacing, smoothly, restlessly, unhearing. The seam parted easily to her finger, and a very faint electrical tingle along the plane of the cloth made her thumb throb sharply. She flinched back. He stopped and looked around, his face such a composition of menace that she withdrew a step. He stalked to the wall between them, surveying it hatefully. He pressed it, but it seemed as solid as glass on his side. Mirroring him, she put her own hand up against his. It gave like canvas, like a projection screen, without any hint of shock from him or it. His expression trembled for a moment, she thought, but his eyes kept roving over the surface, unseeing as his surface bowed.

She moved her hand to the seam and pushed again, and the cloth parted for her. Her thumb hurt as she passed but stopped as soon as she was through. He backed away smoothly, without a motion wasted save his right hand closing instinctively to grip a wand he did not have, his left hand moving back to duel.

She stepped in, “Severus.”

His posture didn’t waver, he squinted at her, “Who in Hecate’s handbasket are you?”

Her blood rushed coldly. The edge of the canvas slipped her nerveless fingers and closed behind her with a strangely solid thud, “You don’t...” she blinked back tears, her mind whirling. Did he really not make new memories? Had something happened? Had he been damaged? Had he been reset by changing locations? “Well, it’s not important now. Do you remember what’s happened to you? Can you tell me where you are?”

“Run and tell whatever hack conjured you that I’ve no interest in pretty women in flimsy nightshirts, no matter how vulnerable and clueless they feign to be.”
Understanding dawned, boiling the flood of fear away into impatience, “It’s me, you paranoid pillock.”

“This deception is embarrassing. I don’t even know who this person is.”

She held up her left hand to silence him, then her right hand with her wand. From old memory, she cast the series of charms around the small tent-like space she had used when she and Harry and Ron had been camping, on-the-run, as Voldemort’s most-wanted fugitives. She didn’t even have to use the words, hadn’t for years, but she said them anyway, for his sake. She looked at him plainly, “If anyone was listening or watching, they aren’t now. If you want to read my thoughts to see if I’m real, here,” she put her wand on the dark paint-mottled floor and rolled it towards his foot, “I won’t fight with you,” the stupid part of her mind that was just so excited to see him murmured ...unless you wish it.

Wordlessly he made the wand jump into his hand, examining the handle, rolling it between his fingers and clearly relishing the feel, “Tempting. But as I’m sure you know there are such things as mind-traps for incautious legilimens, and deceptions like you are easily drawn from an object made from memories. Such traps might resemble anyone I’ve ever seen or heard. But...some things always go unseen and unsaid,” he brought his hands together casually, seeming to study her wand, “So I suppose if you know the proper word for ‘yes’, I might talk about what I know.”

Silently, she mirrored him, tracing on the back of her left hand with her right. Then, both palms down, she turned her left over to crook a finger into the pit of her right wrist, beckoning gently.

His mask crumbled and he released a sigh of equal parts relief and rue, “Hermione…” She took a step towards him and he raised a warning hand, “Don’t. Don’t, you have to go. I won’t have you trapped here.”

She held herself still with a will, “But where is ‘here’? I came back and you’d been taken, and there’s an artificer missing. Someone destroyed my rooms, your old rooms, looking for something more besides. I have to find you, isn’t there anything you can tell me that might help me understand who took your painting, or where, or why?”

“Are you here dreaming?”

“Yes, I can wake up whenever I want, and I’ve got someone coming to wake me in case I don’t. I feel like I’ve been searching for days, I don’t know how much time we have. I passed your silly riddle, so talk to me. Please.”

He set his mouth in a line, but his shoulders lowered fractionally, trusting her over his better judgement, “If anyone comes, if there’s any sound from beyond that wall,” he pointed in the direction the chair was facing, “you go and you don’t come back. You leave me. You can’t be seen here. Promise.”

She grimaced impatiently, “There’s more at stake than my-”

“Yes, there is more at stake, but your safety very much is as well. The place that I am, I’m not the only one here, but I think I’m the only one currently awake. Someone has gathered others, and they’re going to figure out how to wake them, possibly how to unleash them. If they realize I’ve broken my stasis, they will try to find out how. If they suspect you have anything to do with it, they’ll be after you as well.”

“You were in my room, they likely already suspect.”
“They were my...Snape’s old rooms, it would make enough sense that I would be there that they might not assume otherwise. They certainly seemed to time their attack to avoid you.”

It seemed pointless to to argue hypotheticals, “Who? Who has you?”

He shook his head, “I don’t know. I think I’m in a cellar with the others somewhere, covered. There were low rough voices, maybe an hour ago, talking indistinctly about getting going to...somewhere, someone. Sometimes I hear dripping, echoes, but nothing helpful. It’s harder to hear when there’s no one looking.”

“What do you mean by ‘others’? How do you know they’re here? What are they?”

He grimaced and flicked open his sleeve, pulling it back to show the dark mark livid on his forearm like a burning infection.

“What Voldemort?”

He shook his head, “No, I think you were right when you said he’s dead. But other things that bear the mark...I think someone might be trying to stir us up, gather artifacts together,” he trailed off.

She swallowed, cleared her throat, trying to think rather than dwell, “What happened when you were grabbed?”

He shook his head again, “I was sleeping, I was...very tired. The door was closed. I heard a muffled crack from the bedroom, I think. I heard doors opening; bedroom, bathroom, then lab...I couldn’t open my eyes, I only heard it...then the classroom door opened. And then a scuffle, a low voice and a high voice, no words just sounds, sharp cries, collisions. The scuffle moved into the lab, I think the painting got knocked over, then there was a much more distinct crack and some low cursing. Then a lot of crashing, I don’t remember a specific progression, I mostly listened for your voice. There was the sound...the sound of a crow cawing, strangely sharp. Then silence, a long silence. Then footsteps, and I fell very hard asleep. I woke up in the dark, covered, being moved. I was afraid at first that I might still be at Hogwarts, because my mark...I just had this displaced sense that death eaters had gotten into Hogwarts but I...I don’t think they did. It just feels different here. I feel...heavier, pressed in. And dizzy, sometimes. But I don’t hear any distant echoes of the Hogwarts gallery of paintings like I could before. That’s all I know.”

She nodded, “Alright. There are aurors at Hogwarts now, we’re going to find you.”

He stiffened “Hermione no…”

“Don’t worry, Harry won’t let them-”

He said it more softly, “Hermione, no.”

As usual it brought her up short, “Severus, what?”

“You can’t leave me here.”

“Then how do I bring you along?”

He winced, his eyes flicking back and forth, thinking, holding out her wand to her, handle first, “I think...mean...you have to end me. Before I’m of any use.”

She tried to keep calm, “I don’t have to do anything of the sort. You’re panicking. You need to calm down and think about-”
“Hermione,” his face was implacably calm, his tone rational, but his breath was trembling the way it did when he was struggling, “if it’s a choice of being used by someone who has taken the trouble of making a collection of things like me, or being discovered by the aurors as I am, you’re bloody well right I’m panicking,” he drew himself up and swallowed hard, like he was trying to sheathe the blade that had crept into his voice, “Of course I wouldn’t presume, but if you care about me at all…”

“Don’t you dare,” she struggled to make an argument, bristling with anger, “If I care about you at all? Do you know what I’ve gone through to get here? Do you realize that ‘you have to end me’ is only the third most painful conversation I’ll have had since I decided to come find you? Or that my being willing, not to mention able, to find you here in the ass-end of a nightmare might tell you something about whether or not I care about you at all? And I’m here, Severus, and all I want to do is just touch your face once before I have to get back to trying to rescue you; with apparently nothing more to go on, thanks; and you won’t even-”

She reached for him and, quick as an adder, he changed his grip on her wand, took a step back and leveled it at her, “Hermione, don’t. Don’t touch me. Please, you have to look around you, you have to understand.”

She clenched her fists, trying to keep claws out of her voice and failing terribly, “Understand what? That you’re such a poor rendition of the real Severus Snape that suddenly you can’t bear the idea of enduring danger to help people? That you’re frightened of death eaters all of a sudden? Or is it just that I’m such a poor rendition of Lily that it’s not worth it to you?”

He closed his eyes and lowered her wand, his low voice clear in the small space, “I know you’re angry, but please tell me you know better than that.”

She felt herself trembling, “Tell me why I can’t touch you. Don’t make me guess. Don’t be vague. It’s cruel. You’ve said so many cryptic things I don’t even know what you believe and what you’re making up to push me away, let alone why. If you know more, then tell me.”

“You have to let me go.”

“Oh do I? Fine, easy, no problem, you’re your own, free and clear. I’ve got no claim on you. But I won’t let you die. Not on general principle and not on account of what an absolute ass you can be. Is this nonsense meant to protect me or to punish yourself?”

“I’m nothing to be felt-for…”

“But you don’t really know that, do you? You don’t know what’s happening. You’re guessing at the worst because it’s all you trust in.”

“I’m a trap, Hermione. I’m a...a...”

“You don’t know that. You don’t really know for certain or you would tell me, with a snide flourish, just to shut me up, or at least you’d have a convincing lie ready that would square with anything I might find out. You certainly don’t know what you are to me, not at all.”

He set his jaw, speaking softly, “Not entirely, but I know what you are.”

She let that linger in the air a moment, trying to fathom what he might mean, “I hope you will choose your next words carefully.”

He took a breath and paced around to the far side of the chair, “Imagine…” he took another breath and started again, “Imagine if, right now, I could step beyond this box with you, stop being a
painting, become a real boy with no strings attached because I’ve been so very good,” he shook a sneer from his lips, correcting to dispassion, “If I were to call on you like your teacher friend, have tea, eat lunch, have a job, find a flat, keep...fish or pigeons or something, you…” he gestured at her face, seeming to lose himself in looking at her for a moment, “you wouldn’t want me then, for the same reason I can’t leave this cage. Because I am this cage. Because I can’t be anything more. Anything more is just drudgery and unpleasantness. The lie is what you’re so hungry for, an oubliette where you can throw your soul away, and you’ll...I won’t watch you starve to death on the illusory banquets of dreams, or wither in the halls of the dead. Not on general principle. Not because of what an ass you undeniably are.”

She shook her head, stunned and disbelieving, “Then what’s all this been about?”

He looked down at his hands and away, “I thought it might be alright if we’d content ourselves with looking at one another across a small, safe distance, but you’ve come here. You have no idea how mad that is. We agreed, didn’t we? No elaborate suicide?”

She worked her mouth, “We agreed that you would show me what you are and you haven’t yet. And now I think you’ve given up and you’re trying to...to what, break up with me? To keep me from finding out? That’s a bit precious given the circumstances just at the moment, wouldn’t you say?”

“I meant to show you, you might even have understood but we’ve run out of time and now I’m trying to tell you.”

“No, you’re trying to upset me. You’ve decided that you know what will happen and you don’t want to be the only one whose heart is breaking because of it. Where do you get this idea that I wouldn’t want you, free of this? Even if you decide you don’t want me anymore, that you need to retreat into your own inability to handle more, I would still rather live in a world with you in it, where you’re having a life and doing the work you love and feeding fish and—”

“You only believe that because part of you knows it’s not possible, that it’s safe to believe it, adds savor to the uncomplicated fantasy, but if I were real—”

“Stop it, you are real.”

“You’re wrong!”

“And you’re...projecting!” she sounded desperate because she was.

His voice was harsh, snide, too aggressive, “Oh now who’s being precious? I’m a thing. I was made. By a monster and for his purpose. You can’t make a venom wholesome with faith. Yes, people are complicated, people can grow, but objects have a nature, magical objects especially. So you tell me, Professor, for each time we’ve been together, do you feel sated, or do you just feel more hunger? Disorientation? An addict’s desire to crawl inside your obsession and hide? Since the first time I slithered into your bed, have you ever felt anything but more urgent, more confused? I’m only real enough for you because you’ve stopped wanting to be real yourself. I’m not your vacation from feeling want, I’m your exile from recognizing your needs, and some part of you knows that. I’m a better lie than you can tell on your own.”

His words sliced mercilessly at her already overtaxed supports and something that had been inflated inside her began to collapse. She studied his face, the chair, the walls, seeking evidence of what it was he was accusing himself of, some hint of the lie, the trap, the misty edges of the illusion. She thought for a moment that it was working but it was just her eyes swimming in salt water. He was right about one thing, though; she had compelling reason to doubt her own understanding as much as
his, and as strong a motive for irrational denial of his premise as he had for irrational belief in it. But if there was a way to the truth through either end of belief, she didn’t know what it was. Time was getting away from them. She felt her locket, thought of crows and terriers vanishing into the distance.

“Severus.”

He didn’t look at her, he was leaning on his elbows on the wing of the chair, his neck bowed like a man waiting for the axe to fall on it.

“Severus, I’m trying to believe you. I don’t want to and, honestly, I don’t think you want me to. But you are real to me, and though it makes no sense I owe it to you to try and… and hear you, take you at your word, if you say you’re not real. I won’t ignore what you’re saying, though I can’t help thinking there could be a lot of different reasons you would say it. Because…I think that even if you believed you were real, even if you were free of this box, that you’d still be trying to force a conversation very much like this one. Whatever else you are, I think you’re as bad at this… this feeling, as afraid of it, as I am. So much so that you can’t even see the larger picture and the importance of helping me to figure out where you are and why.”

“It isn’t that.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Fine, it isn’t just that,” he muttered.

“Severus, I don’t know what you are, or what this is, but the only difference between us is that I actually want to know. And I want you with me on that much, at least.”

“Because you think that’s how to… how to strike a bargain with it, how to deserve better. You’ve lost someone you love. You want to… you want there to be proof that there’s… something you can keep or… someone you can save, but… whatever I am I know I’m not that. I’m… this doesn’t end with you in my arms, or at least I hope very much that it doesn’t. I can’t be what you want.”

“You don’t know what I want. I’m not afraid, and I’m not naive.”

“No, you’re brave. That’s worse. You think I’m the prize, what if I’m the bait? Look where you’re willing to go, just to touch my face.”

“There’s more at stake than that.”

He scoffed, “Well yes, but if there wasn’t?”

She frowned, “Alright, yes, I still would probably have come to find you. And still will.”

“And that doesn’t seem just a little mad to you?”

“I’m willing to find out. It will hurt terribly if you’re right but…”

“I could-” he caught himself, anger blowing like smoke from a smouldering fear, “-it could more than hurt! And if you’re saying you don’t care about that then I’m-”

She cut in, catching from his sparks and unwilling to hear an ultimatum, “You think you’re inherently fatal? You’re my triwizard cup? Is that why you think I oughtn’t touch you?”

“I don’t know.”
“Well that’s my point, isn’t it?”

“But there isn’t any point! There’s no reason to risk yourself! No reason but an active desire to suffer, possibly die, blundering after white rabbits into oblivion.”

She put her hands on the back of the chair, “I’m just returning the favor.”

He clutched his head, “Oh gods and goblins, woman! I’m not really him! I never died to save the world! And even if I had, you can’t honor some tragic dead fool by becoming one yourself!”

She shook her head vigorously, “That isn’t what I meant. There’s so much you don’t know and can’t know about where I was before you slithered into my bed, as you call it, and where I’ve been since. I...I promise you that I will go forward crediting what you say, accepting that my hunger for you is less wholesome or genuine than a love affair with someone witty and clever and—” she faltered, wishing he would look at her but unable to wait for him, “I’ll keep my eyes open on that count. I’ll get my friends to check me. But in exchange I want you to hear me out, too: Whatever else it might be, wanting you feels like wanting to live, like caring what comes next, like being able to move, to heal, to...to wake up. Nothing else,” she choked a little on the admission, knowing how cruel it would sound to anyone else in her life, “Nothing else makes me feel that. Maybe that means I’m not real, or don’t want to be. Maybe neither of us are, quite yet. But I didn’t get to this twilight place because you dragged me down from someplace bright. I was dead. I was dead and buried and just waiting for my mind to catch up and stop bothering me, and maybe you were too, but we found each other down here, and I feel like maybe we’re struggling upwards. And I want to keep going, deeper or higher or through...whatever this is. I can’t live and not want you living also.”

His voice was uneven, he did not look up, “You have to care whether this will end badly.”

“No, actually, I bloody well don’t. Because things end, all the time. Suddenly and slowly and in the cruelest possible ways, they end. That they existed to end in the first place still matters. What we do, even though we are doomed, ultimately, to end...to end...to live and hurt and heal and die...it still matters. And part of you knows that. We’ve been to that worst place, you and I, the hard and impenetrable death of love. The absolute failure. We’ve been there, and it makes sense to be scared of everything after that, angry at everything, because there’s no denying that letting anything matter will always, always mean wandering towards an end, crushing and unbearable. I’ll take that pain if it means you’ll let me try to figure out what we are in the meantime, but I won’t skip to it a moment before I have to. I want every bit of...whatever this is...that I can take, even pointless arguing in the ass-end of a nightmare, even knowing that it might be agony in the end. If agony later is part of loving you now, I want it. So yes, I do care for you, and I won’t end you, and I won’t leave off looking for you. Not for anything, and don’t bring it up again.”

He stayed as stubbornly still as the first time they’d met.

She leaned on the chair and felt the very last thing she’d brought with her, her very last argument, poking at her from her pocket. She closed her hand around it.

“I met Ron on the way here. A version of him, at least. A cathartic one, a test, maybe; neat and clean and clarifying. True but not real, probably. I don’t know. I...I can’t possibly be objective about it. I could have given him this,” she held up the small ornate vial, “to be sure of what he was saying but,” she swallowed hard, “...it wouldn’t matter. Not because I don’t still love him desperately, I do. Not because I’m not longing to know if we’ll ever meet again, I am, so much so that I can’t even let myself think about it most of the time, but because...because truth is all that’s left of him. He...he died. Loving him means...it means remembering that...honoring his whole life, including the fact...trusting the cold hard truth...that it ended.”
When he didn’t look up she sighed, “He died, suddenly, unfairly, and there’s utterly, utterly nothing to be done about that, not even learning. We’ve studied death at the ministry, and that’s the closest thing we have to knowing anything about it: that we simply can’t know, can’t learn about it, can’t figure it out. Not what it is, or why, or what it’s for. It is impenetrable, it is impenetrability itself, heavy and simple and small and bottomless. If it didn’t confound us utterly, end all our stories with a martinet ‘Time’s up! Quills down!’...it wouldn’t be death.

“So I can’t define it to defend to you why...why I know that it’s important that we...that you and I go on...that I can need to know whether what you’re saying is true when symbols and finished stories can’t lie. It’s just a feeling I have, through my skin when I’m near you. He’s someplace beyond knowing or learning now. He belongs to whoever remembers him. You’re not like that. You still belong to yourself. Maybe you can’t defy whatever nature you’ve been handed, but I know you make decisions. I think you get a chance to choose, like anybody. And I can’t force you, I won’t try to trick you into accepting what I believe if you don’t but...you made this,” she held up the vial, “It was awfully important to you then,” she smiled, “Maddeningly so. Is it still?”

He looked up, recognized it, nodded, his sulk derailed by surprise, “When I thought...um...It’s...” he cleared his throat and stood up a little straighter, keeping his hands clasped tight together atop the back of the chair, pointing two fingers and wagging them didactically, unable to resist some chance, finally, to answer with authority and purpose, “under very specialized conditions, in theory, it can be used...” he looked at her, his expression bemused but calm, almost fond, “it can be used to extract memories, gently and safely. I began making it because I’d...promised you one of those.”

She shrugged, nodded, “What do you need me to do?”

He stood, smoothing the front of his cassock, taking refuge from doubt in a task, a theory, a certain quantity of abstraction and planning. He put his hand on hers to take the vial, and nothing cataclysmic happened. His touch was ordinary. It was perfect, though lingering overlong. They silently agreed not to acknowledge it.

“First, I drink it,” he took out the stopper and raised the vial in toast.

She put a hand over it quickly, “All of it? That’s easily fifteen doses.”

He nodded, “Seventeen. Don’t interrupt,” he brushed her hand aside and downed the potion, coughed harshly, and cleared his throat, “It's dream-brewed, but I’m not dreaming now. It will only respond to inquiry from someone who is dreaming. You, for example. Although,” he smacked his lips critically, “it’s got rather an impassioned aftertaste. Probably tainted. It might be too much attuned to our bodies. Which might make this next bit awkward.”

Sincere embarrassment had crept into what was clearly a well-honed and self-satirizing pitch. She feigned concern to play along, relieved that he would play, “Oh dear, how so?”

“Well...and you understand that I blush to suggest it, Professor, but you may have to kiss me.”

She coughed a laugh, trying to scrabble her expression back into a grave deadpan, “My goodness.”

He nodded sagely, “Steady on, Gryffindor. It’s very much like extracting a memory with a wand. You must want it, and I must be willing, though the potion will have lubricated that process enormously. It’s still best to go very slowly, a series of small, gentle motions. Wordless, obviously.”

She nodded, resting a hand on his cheek, “I think I get the concept.”

“Are you sure?”
“Yes.”

“But are you s-”

She stopped his mouth by bringing hers to meet it, a motion like a wave hitching up against a sandcastle. She held very still against him until she felt his lips soften and then, with a gentle push and a gentle pull, drew on his mouth lightly and firmly, like working honey through a straw. With each small tidal incursion and subsidence, their bodies crept closer together, eroding the negative space, meeting at one hip, then fingertip, arms sneaking surreptitiously about waists to arrange rendezvous between bellies and then chests, fingers nestling into the small valleys of the vertebral column that seemed carved for that express purpose, their embrace conversing while their mouths were otherwise engaged, breaths swirling together and lapping against their lips.

And he was real, alive in her arms, in that way that is fragile and dense and far too quick, more uncanny and more difficult than dreams and words, mixed into breath and pulse and the strange cotton elasticity of skin.

She had to check his pace once. He lost track of what they were working to accomplish and began kissing her harder, deeper, seeming like he might wander off unhelpfully over her cheeks and neck, trailing memory like a cat with yarn. A tight grip, close to his scalp, easily brought him to heel. He had to check her, once, when she’d thought of how he had begun the potion after their first night, making a practical excuse to kiss her that she’d preempted by sitting her bare bottom on his desk and then...a hand closing tightly on the flesh of her buttock through her nightgown brought her back to the present moment and she moderated her pace, though her thigh hitched up around his hips in a sort of reflex. He perched her hips against the arm of the chair and pressed against her as they worked. Gentle push...

Through her eyelids she could see that there was light upon their lips, and she tasted a strangely sweet, cool thread of tingling air coiling as she nursed it from his mouth with her own. It rested on the tip of her tongue like an unspoken vow. Gentle pull...

When it seemed that the thread had ended, she separated from him in small reluctant motions, and he raised the wand, tracing its smooth point over her bottom lip with a comical vulgarity that made her smile, and the thready memory adhered to the wand-tip as she brought out the vial the crow’s departure had emptied.

With the memory safely stored, he stroked her hair back from her face, his own expression flickering darker, signaling the end of intermission and ordering everyone back to their assigned places, “You should go. Please. I don’t know how long until they decide to look in on me, there’s still danger if you’re seen, if they know there’s someone living who matters to me.”

She tried to smile, “They might not even be dangerous. They might just be some overly-aggressive collector of beautiful men. They might just be opening a Hogsmeade gay bar and need-”

He kissed her, curling his fingers loosely around her ear and stroking along its length with his thumb, “Please, I can make you go, I don’t want to but I will try if you won’t.”

“But what if I can’t get back this way again?”

“It would be better if you didn’t try. Every thread between us could give you away. And, well, a lot will depend...on what you see,” he glanced at her pocket, “and believe of me after.”

She closed her eyes against the wretched unfairness of finally being next to his body, hearing his voice and touching his skin, and leaving without even unbuttoning his collar, but she steeled herself
to do it properly if she must. She gripped his shoulders firmly and pressed him away, straightening, opening her palms and nodding, the motion apart burning in her gut like friction, “It’s likely almost dawn by now. If you don’t come find me tonight, I’ll come find you. In the meantime find out everything you can, and I’ll do the same. Look and listen for a woman named Enith Stoke. She’s a painter, she went missing about the same time that you did. Right now she’s the only one the aurors know about, but I’m going to tell Harry everything. And Ginny, if she’ll listen. We can trust them.”

He nodded, his jaw so tight she worried his teeth might shatter. She stroked his cheek lightly and he eased fractionally, nodding again, “Alright. Maybe they can talk sense into you.”

Crossing to the front wall of the oddly lacquered prison and pressing it with her palms, she continued, Severus hovering after her, rigid and jumpy, “Keep my wand. It might make for a nasty surprise if anyone tries to hurt you.” The crow cawed outside the seam, and Hermione felt it as a warning that something outside was moving. Still she muttered, “shut up, stupid bird,” and pressed her ear to the wall. She had to see if there was any sound at all that would help her understand where they were. There was a vibration, strange and low, like rushing air or...or...she couldn’t place it. There was no time. She closed her eyes, tried to let the sound unspool into images, let the recognition come, gentle push, gentle pull. There was no time, her brain wouldn’t stop scrabbling at it. Soft and low, muffled, repeating...like the whooshing of a fetal heart monitor...but also the feel of the chill dark and...intimate… alien… nightmares...then a harsh caw and a growl from closer by and her eyes shot open.

Severus was looking over her shoulder, his expression frozen in a snarl of fear and aggression, his grip tightening on her arm protectively as she craned around to see. Through the gauzy left wall that had been opaque before, she could see a faint golden glow and a hulking silhouette moving several feet away.

His fingers dug firmly, pressing her back against the wall “Go! Now! Wake up!”

With a will she turned away from the monster to look at him, “Stay alive. Please, it matters. I’ll find you.”

“Go!”

He pressed one hand to each side of her head and seized onto her lips with his own. She felt the space around her ache strangely as he brought some form of occlumency to bear. It felt like a punch in the chest that disapparated her and sent her away from his cage, shutting her out.

She opened her eyes in the dark, her arms tight about her pillow, a piece of pillowcase caught in the corner of her mouth, her body aching after him where his warmth faded. She reached into her pocket and brought out the vial. It still bore the same label, but the thready mist inside moved differently, seemed thicker and bluer. She shook her head, “There’s no way that could have worked.”

She heard Ron’s voice, teasing her gently, Oh, Meanie, don’t be such a muggle.

And she remembered dreaming of him, that they’d spoken. What she’d let go.

And she clutched her locket and sobbed until Harry came to look in on her.
Present Continuous

Tuesday chapter. A little one between two fairly hefty ones.

It was a good cry. Ugly, but good. Possibly her best ever, by her own measures. When she was finally able to let Harry go, having latched onto him like some sort of cross between a drowning pit bull and an emotionally needy boa constrictor, she felt better. Not perfect, but better. Better enough to feel angry at herself for everything she’d done to keep that cry in and her friends out, being so worried that it would be awkward if she came apart in front of people. And it was. Completely, utterly awkward, with Harry trying reflexively to pet her and soothe her with nonsense sounds like she were a collicky infant, and that, to her horror, actually helping. Worse was when she’d mostly stopped, and he’d thumped her gently on the nose with the soft edge of his fist and said “Ginny says hi,” and she’d started sobbing and snorting and laughing and honking uncontrollably.

The absolute worst was when she’d gotten back to intelligible sounds and looked Harry in the face and said apologetically, “Ron sends his love…” and she could tell he didn’t understand, that she sounded mental and looked like a madwoman to the point that it actually scared him, but then he started to cry anyway, hard and racking, grabbing her tight, hard crying building to screaming into her shoulder, reason and reserve no match for missing his Ron, and she held him, holding him up since nothing could hold him in.

Having gotten an earlier start, she’d cried herself out before he had, and so it fell to her, once he finally began to subside, to get the cold washcloths and bring the lights up just enough that they could doctor one another’s hideous, goopy, swollen faces without needing to face the damage in too much gory detail.

He refolded his to make sure most of the snot was on the inside, leaning into pressing the cold cloth to the back of her neck, “Ginny wants to talk to you.”

She gave his wrist a squeeze, sighing, “I know, I will. Maybe this weekend I’ll-”

“No, I mean she’s coming to the school. For lunch. Today.”

“Oh…” Hermione let that thought crash against her sense of crisis and found that it didn’t make much of a dent. She wanted to see Ginny. Desperately, in fact. Like hunger after illness. She nodded, “I’m glad. I’ve missed her.”

Harry gave her a hug that was weird with gratitude and relief.

“There’s a lot I need to tell you,” she said over his shoulder, patting him on the back, “and it’s…well it’s pretty odd.”

Harry released her and let out a laugh, pantomiming panic, “Oh no, anything but that.”

She pressed her lips together in annoyance, “No, Harry, it’s really, really odd.”

He looked at her incredulously and raised one eyebrow to wrinkle the lightning scar on his forehead.
that had marked him for an odd life since infancy.

“Oh stop it, chosen one, you don’t have a monopoly on weird crazy shit happening to you.”

“All right, all right, what is it? I’m listening.”

“I think we should wait for Ginny. There’s a lot to tell. What time is it?”

“Four.”

“Four a.m.? Tuesday?”

He nodded, “You said five hours.”

She nodded, disbelieving, “I know but..I feel like I’ve been asleep for a week. I actually feel pretty amazing.”

He nodded again, wearily, “I’ll have what you’re having.”

She pulled the other pillow over, pitching the soggy one away, “Get some sleep, I’ll get caught up and wake you for breakfast,”

“That sounds brilliant. All the files so far are on the table. And there’s coffee.”

“You really are the best friend ever.” She gave his face one last maternal dab, dimmed the lights out, and left the door open just a crack behind her. Between the archway and the door to the bath, she struggled to decide whether she should look into the pensieve or review the case files first. She grimaced, fingering the bottle in her hand and feeling an unsettling, unmistakable yearning to open it and crawl inside.
“Harry! Wake up! I made you a plate so you could sleep in a little, but your team will be here soon, and there’s a lot to go over.”

Hermione prodded him gently in the side and did her best to waft the smell of bacon and porridge in his direction.

“Smism?” he replied.

“It’s almost nine. Come on, I think I’ve put a few things together. Well, maybe more than a few. Hurry up so I can get you up to speed and you can pretend you thought of everything.”

“Marite, jussasek.”

“Don’t use the shower, it’s wretched, but the bath heats up pretty quickly.”

“Mgay.”

Harry stumbled into the bathroom. Hermione heard the shower, and then a sharp scream. She sighed, “Oh this is going to go well.” He came to the table mostly washed and a bit blue around the edges.

“I said don’t use the shower.”

“I heard ‘wake up’ something something ‘shower’ something something ‘quickly’.”

“Sorry.”

He prodded his porridge, “You aren’t. Yet. So what have you got for me that isn’t hypothermia and the world’s least-subtle amusement at my suffering?”

“Something odd is going on with Hogwarts.”

“That would be a record. It’s only the second day of classes.”

“I know, but I think it’s been going on a while. I went to see Madame Pomfrey while you were asleep.”

“Why?”

She sighed, “Because I’m a shambling disaster with a lot of responsibilities and I need to take better care of myself. I’ve got class in thirty minutes, don’t interrupt.”

Harry dutifully shoveled some porridge into his mouth.

“I went up to ask her about these crying fits I get. She was so great with George, I don’t know if I
ever really told you. She saved his life. Anyway, I go up there and Beasley Bolger, the new
Divination and Arithmancy teacher is up there, in a bed, not asleep just doing some work and sort of...having an eye kept on her. So I said hi and she told me she’d gone up there because she’s been having these really disruptive dreams. About Neville.”

Harry chewed more slowly but otherwise declined to react, possibly out of fraternal loyalty.

“So I asked her, you know, why was that such a problem, and she said well they were so vivid and so...well...they were making her question reality and yesterday evening she may have...kind of...made a pass at him...for real.”

Harry looked at her steadily, chewing, “If you’re trying to shock me you’re going to have to try a lot harder than that. I’m an auror now, remember? Have been for a while.”

“All right all right. Well, she was mortified. She didn’t know he was married, let alone how happily, and she felt like she must have just gone mad or something. And, well, she told me some other things that she asked me not to tell anyone else so I’ll just say that eventually it occurred to me that she might have been dreaming about Nick. Mister Kalil. He’d been acting very peculiar as well. Very...familiar. Towards me. I thought it just might be that he’s young or that he’s one of those fellows that has a thing for inappropriately older women but, well, it occurs to me that he’s a bit of a legilimens. I thought at first it was just some combination of him being presumptuous and having studied up on me, but I think there were a few times he answered me when I hadn’t been speaking, completely unawares. How many legilimens have you ever met that didn't know they were one?”

Harry nodded indifferently, "Pretty weird.”

“So I did some reading and it um...it seems that if two people are in an environment that permits that sort of thing and they’ve both got the same sort of desires, they can sort of...dream in the same space, but it’s not completely reliable. They’d only experience what’s comfortable for them,” and she modeled the situation of adjacent dreaming with her hands as Severus had done.

“Okay. So...this turned them into kidnappers and art thieves?”

“Well no, but it made me wonder if anyone else was having odd encounters. Besides them, I mean, and...well...me.”

Harry’s face remained devoutly blank, possibly just to annoy her, “You’ve been having...encounters?”

“Yes and it’s weird and a much longer story that I promise I’ll tell you later because it’s definitely relevant just not to this part of it ok?”

He gestured a maddeningly indifferent permission with a strip of bacon, “Pray continue.”

“Well, I didn’t quite have the gall to go turning people out of bed quizzing them on their spectral snogging, but it did occur to me about Professor Binns.”

“What about him?”

“He’s decided to retire.”

Harry spat a mouthful of porridge noisily into his bowl.

“Oh that you react to.”
“Well that’s really peculiar, isn’t it! Gah, I’ve got porridge in my sinuses now.”

“Well why did you think Nikita was working at taking over in History?”

“I didn’t know he was, to me he only mentioned his book, teaching flying, and how really marvelous his best friend Hermione is.”

Hermione sighed, “And Binns made this extraordinary decision three years ago, which made me think that whatever’s going on has been going on a while. That and Madame Hooch eloping out of nowhere. I mean, more power to her but it didn’t seem like her to go off and leave Minerva in such a lurch.”

“So you think there’s something...what?”

“I think there’s something expanding people’s dreams. Not much, not in a way you’d think of as a red flag, but just their sense of the possible, their connection to other people that want to connect with them. And that’s a good thing, though it does cause some chaos if they’re not prepared to recognize what they’re looking at...I looked into the reprimand records just for Gryffindor house, and fights over relationships are having something of a renaissance in frequency and inventiveness the last couple years, even for a boarding school. I’d joked to the Headmaster that there must be something in the water, but that wouldn’t have affected Binns.”

Harry nodded, “Or Nick.”

Hermione rolled his eyes, “Don’t be mean. Nikita’s human, Harry. And he drinks water, I’ve seen him.”

“No no, not the junior Hermione fan club, I mean Sir Nicholas. You mean you didn’t notice?”

Hermione blushed, “I...I haven’t been noticing much. Life’s been needing to club me over the head pretty hard the last couple days. What’s going on with Nick?”

“Well, don’t start drinking anything...I think he’s been courting Minerva.”

“What?”

“On my unbreakable oath. When I was taking statements, he barely left her side. When Creevey got shirty with her Nick got in his face. I thought he was literally going to shout both their heads off. He turned red. I didn’t even know ghosts could do that.”

“Now that you mention it, he was really interested in making sure I did everything I could to help her. I thought it was because he was so keen to have an official role, or just general gallantry but...yeah, I think you’re right.”

“And if the effect goes back a ways, well, it’s tasteless to speculate I guess. But also kind of...”

“Sweet?”

“Yeah.”

She shrugged, “So I did a little digging and—”

“Bloody bludgers, Hermione, please tell me you’re not fiddling with time-turners again, where do you get the energy?”

“It’s amazing what you can accomplish when you can use the library whenever you want without
having to hide under a cloak. Anyway I found a record of an object rumored to have belonged to the first headmaster of Hogwarts. The only clear reference calls it ‘texentes somnia’ so at first I thought it was a spell because that’s really more of a verb than a noun for—"

“-dream weaving?”

She glared at him.

“What?”

“Now you’ve learned Latin? Seven years of cribbing off me and now—”

“Well I had to help James learn for his NEWTs, didn’t I? He wasn’t lucky enough to get a Hermione of his own.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

He glanced at his watch, “Ten minutes. Keep going.”

She took a deep breath, “Long story short the founders commissioned it for him as a kind of inspiration engine, help him and the first teachers here take the ideals of the founders and turn them into ideas for action, try new things, find best practices. It was meant to be used sparingly. References to it indicate it was in the headmaster’s office, but the references were weird, incongruous, so I checked. McGonagall’s wasn’t always the headmaster’s office. It was moved to higher ground during the kraken invasion of 1237 when the dungeon flooded. Guess where it used to be.”

“In the suspiciously spacious dungeon?”

“The very root of the castle, yes.”

“But it’s not here. Or if it is...what does it even look like?”

“Big counterweighted astrolabe-y loom thing, seems like.”

“Then it can’t be here.”

“I think it is.”

“Where?”

“Look,” she got up and headed to the bedroom, “Tell me what’s in here.”

“Bed, tapestry, armoire, end table…”

“Go slower, describe each thing, like you’re having to imagine them,”

“Black iron bed frame, tapestry, tall wooden armoire…”

“Do you hear what you did there? Describe the tapestry again.”

“Um...just...beige...indistinct...water damaged...and oh bloody hell, waving at me…”

“Brilliant isn’t it? I’m not sure how it does it, but it’s maybe absorbed some of the properties of dreams so you don’t notice it, or maybe they used the texentes to make headmaster tapestries back then somehow. That’s probably why it got left here during the flood, why your aurors didn’t notice it
“Why whoever was searching couldn’t find what they were looking for. They weren’t looking for an object, they were looking for a secret passage. But who…”

“I don’t know yet, but I expect I know who does. You want to do the honors?”

“You haven’t checked yet?”

She shook her head, “I didn’t want to wake you. And I’m sort of scared to go into potentially mind-bending situations by myself. The capacity for self-deception is considerable.”

He checked his watch, “You’ve got class in five minutes.”

“Bugger all. Well, listen, let your people work on it if you like, and I think I know who’s been winding the thing, discreetly.”

“Do you suspect the chief porter too?”

Hermione shook her head, “only of the winding, not of the destruction. I think she let someone else in, though, someone she thought she could trust.”

“You saw the door handle reports, though, her hands had touched every single one.”

“Exactly, and when does an elf ever bother with a door when they’re not helping someone else? If I’m right, she’s been keeping the textentes wound and the rooms dusted for at least three years, but when I moved in all the door hinges cracked like they hadn’t moved in twenty.”

He sighed, “You’re really scary sometimes.”

She shook her head, “I had some insider help. But that’s for after lunch.”

Harry clasped his hands behind his back and gave her a coolly paternal I’m-not-judging clever look, “I thought at first it might have been the Nikita fellow, the forward one that’s apparently been dreaming about you by mistake, but he’d only touched two of the four doors. I expect you can account for both of those?”

Hermione answered him with a you’re-really-not-clever-and-I-am-judging moue, chin tucked, wishing she wore spectacles so she could look at him over their tops, “See if you can get all your people in here in one bunch between classes, I don’t want them trooping back and forth through my room and upsetting everything while I’m trying to teach,” she softened a little, smiling, “I’m rubbish enough as it is. And for Merlin’s sake keep Dennis Creevey out of it. I’m not angry at Happy and I won’t have him terrorizing her with his hard-boiled half-baked bad-cop nonsense. I’m sure she has a good reason. Or at least a good-enough one. Elves still never get punishments that aren’t completely outsized to their crimes.”

“And if you’re right, she’s our best hope of finding Enith.”

Hermione grinned and scoffed, “Yeah, ‘if’ I’m right.”

He rolled his eyes, “Don’t overdo it. Your head won’t fit through the door.”

She sighed, “I know. It just feels so good to be scary again. It’s been a while.”
Friends and Lovers

Hermione didn’t have much time to think during her fourth and fifth-year classes. Their projects were much more precise, demanding, and potentially dangerous. The fifth-years in particular were a handful. The quarter of the class that cared enormously about their NEWT exams were constantly trying to get her attention or advice or validation, and the fraction that had resigned themselves to the idea that they were failing their NEWTs had a tendency to be careless to the point that endangered themselves and others. Vigorous awarding and docking of house points seemed to be the only way to keep most of them in line. But she was doing it. She felt awake and in-control, like there was enormous work to do and it was no match for her whatever.

The aurors came through between classes, a much smaller group than the previous evening; Braithwaite, Creevey, Harry, and Hawkins. Creevy gave her a bit of a hairy eyeball, which Harry bookended with an apologetic shrug. She spent her second section trying not to wonder about the suspicious silences behind her apartment door, focusing instead on keeping Harry’s eldest son, James, from blowing his hands off without that seeming like a sort of favoritism. She thought about nudging him in the shoulder and letting him know that a family luncheon was in the works, but backed off when his cauldron partner (Corbin? Conroy?) asked if he wanted to work on homework over lunch. James declined, saying he had “Library with my cousin”.

She couldn’t help smirking to herself, “Didn’t get a Hermione of his own’ my broom-bane buttocks,” but it pleased her. Harry doted on his children’s education, and Rose had an easier and more equally beneficial academic relationship with her cousins for it.

As teenagers crashed up the stairs like a reverse avalanche for lunch, Ginny breezed through the classroom door, giving that lopsided Weasley smile across the room like a secret handshake, and Hermione rushed to embrace her before she’d crossed a third of the floor. Being near her Ginny again burned horribly in every fiber that missed Ron, every raw nerve-ending of her capacity for love and anxiety, but the sensation of aching misery it relieved made it worthwhile.

Ginny sniffed, “You’re a-”

“I know.”

“You shouldn’t have-”

“I know.”

“Then why didn’t you-”

“I don’t know.”

Ginny left off trying to talk and just gave her a fractional punch in the shoulder.

Hermione didn’t let her go, “Albus did really well yesterday. He’s got a real-”

“Shut up.”

“Ok.”

Ginny pulled back and sniffled, “You scared me.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, “Nothing scares you.”
Ginny grimaced, looking like she wanted to shake her, “You did.”

“I’m sorry. I got...lost. I thought everything was going to go wrong so I pre-empted it by...doing everything wrong as fast as possible.”

Ginny’s hard look crumpled and she kissed Hermione on the cheek before hugging her tight again, “I’m sorry too. I mean I don’t...not for the whole...you know...just the rest of it. I should have-”

Hermione felt a clutch in her chest, and she pulled back to try and read Ginny’s face, not following the stumbling nuance of her apology.

“Hey mum! Hi aunt Ginny!” Hugo skipped in and wrapped his arms around them both, “Is uncle Harry here too? You guys really can’t get by without Lily and me around huh? Barely made it two whole days! Well don’t worry, she’s on her way down right behind me.”

The mothers grimaced at each other and let the eleven-year-old smoosh between them, ruffling his hair and heading for the apartment just as aurors started coming out. Hermione was oddly heartened by the noise difference. The door had completely blocked some fairly loud arguing that continued on into the classroom; Dennis Creevy walking backwards, advanced upon by Harry in a towering rage. The smaller man was clearly resistant to being cowed, proclaiming loudly, “...crooked cover-up for your sister-in-law!”

“You go write that up, Lieutenant. You’ll be lucky if they don’t put you in St. Mungos for hallucinating.”

“Is that a threat Captain?”

Harry’s resonant tenor cracked with exasperation, “No it’s not a threat, you jumped-up-” he caught sight of his youngest child as she bounced through the door, “-just get out of my sight before I put you in for a reprimand for bug...bu...bungling up two missing persons cases in as many days.”

Dennis stormed off, glaring daggers at everyone present. Hugo cringed. Lily stuck her tongue out at his retreating back.

Harry was panting, the color slowly draining out of his face as he tried to affect a fatherly ease, “Well hey, everyone.”

Lily bounced down the stairs and threw her arms around her dad’s waist, “That was brilliant! What did he do? Why didn’t you hit him?”

Harry traded a bemused look for Ginny’s warning one, “Don’t look at me like that, she gets it from you.”

Ginny looked at Hermione for support, but she only nodded and shrugged.

“Alright well, Wooly...” Hermione beamed at the kitchen elf as he popped promptly into the classroom, “Would it be a problem to have some lunch in here for...eight?”

Wooly shook his head, “Not at all. We had some trays ready for the aurors, probably enough for ten.”

In minutes there was a large tray of meat pasties and sliced fruit in Hermione’s quarters, and Harry was plucking her aside while everyone else ate and Hugo and Lily contradicted each other to Ginny about who had managed to misbehave worst in the preceding forty-eight hours.
Harry’s face was grim, “I’m going to need you to talk to Happy.”

“What happened?”

“Creevey. She got indignant and he got…”

“Creevey?”

“That would be the adjective, yeah. She’s some combination of intimidated and sulking, but she told me she’d talk to you once he was gone.”

“I asked you to keep him out of it.”

“There’s only so much I can do. Technically I outrank him, but we’re different departments, and technically I’m the one intruding. He’s patrol. He’s the one that fielded the initial complaint that Enith was missing, and sent out the message that apparently you were, too. Unless we find Enith quickly or find a way to link this to dark wizards, I might have to turn the case back over to him pretty soon. I do a good bluster.”

“You really do.”

“Thanks, but it’ll only take him so long to get me out of here if I can’t find a lead.”

“After lunch. I think I’ve got something that will qualify.”

“Good. Because the complete lack of dark magic used on either scene is really not helpful.”

“Mum,” Lily piped up, “was that Colin’s dad?”

Ginny nodded, “Yes honey. He works with your dad.”

Hermione squinted at Harry, “I don’t have a Colin Creevey. I’m sure I’d have noticed.”

Harry sighed heavily, “Dennis is...protective.”

“So Colin isn’t taking potions?”

“Potions nor herbology.”

“Allergies?”

Ginny sighed loudly, “You could call it that. I expect he'll drop defense, too, if Dennis finds out who teaches it.”

“Wait he’s…” Hermione lowered her voice and turned away from the kids, “does Dennis have a problem with me and Neville?”

Harry nodded, “He’s got a bit of a chip on his shoulder about some stuff, yeah. Not the biggest fan of ours either,” he gestured between Ginny and himself, “After the war he finished school fast, married a muggle, became a policeman, but he applied to become a patroller for the ministry a handful of years ago. I try to remind myself that...I mean, he was such a sweet kid, and then he and his family had to go on the run for being muggle-born, and then his big brother died trying to protect this school in my name and...well it doesn’t seem to have healed at all. He thinks the DA were a bunch of arrogant phonies, that we should have protected everyone somehow.”

Hermione swallowed a scowl, “He has to know that’s absurd. We were kids.”
Harry nodded, “I think deep down he does. I mean, he hasn’t been twenty-four seven sheer misery to work with all this time. Usually he's professional. He’s just kinda bad this year because, well, Colin is his only child and I expect he’s scared. And macho-scared is anger.”

Hermione shrugged, looking over at her own son, “I guess I understand that. It’s frightening when you can’t be there for them. And you’re letting him get to you because...?”

Harry sighed, “I’ve been macho-scared to death over you for almost a year, you’re going to have to let me be a little protective.”

“A little? I thought I was going to have to clean up blood. But it got him out of here, at least.”

Harry sighed, “Yeah. But it puts a little pressure on. I expect he’ll cool down, and he probably knows that mistakenly reporting you missing without even checking Hogsmeade gives him less traction for leading the investigation, but it would be better if we could get this cleared up fast. It’s not impossible that he’ll try to go over my head. It won’t look good for him, considering it’s his fault I got dragged in. I’ve got some leeway because I’m a big fish and you’re family, but that can backfire if enough things go wrong,” Harry ran a hand through his hair, sighing heavily, “And it’s not like I don’t want his help, or to help him instead if it comes to that. He’s a good officer, a good person. He gets a little caught-up in the idea that wizarding investigators should be more like muggle police in ways that don’t fit our community but...I mean that’s not worth Ms. Stoke being trapped someplace while the people that are supposed to be finding her play silly power games over old grudges.”

Hermione nodded emphatically, not thinking exclusively of Enith. She headed back toward the bedroom as Harry began loading up a plate for himself, followed by Hugo’s stage whisper, “Lily, is your dad going to fight Colin’s dad?”
The bed was pulled away from the wall practically to the armoire, and Happy was sitting on it, hands and feet folded patiently.

“Happy, are you ok?”

She sniffled pointedly, “Did Harry Potter send the pissy man away?”

“Practically by the scruff of the neck, yes.”

Happy shook her head, her expression fierce and her eyes damp, “I will not be talked to like that. He does not get to raise his voice to me in my own home.”

Hermione nodded earnestly, “I couldn’t agree more, and I’m so sorry you had to deal with that. I’ll let Harry know that if any of the aurors come asking for you, they’ll need to have me or Minerva present before they’re allowed to talk to you, or any of the elves, alright?”

Happy considered this and nodded.

“But, Happy, there’s not a lot of time. Could you tell me what’s been going on?”

Happy blinked her softball eyes and patted one hand with the other fretfully, her spine straight, “I’m at fault for your room being damaged. I am sorry.”

Hermione sat and shrugged, “You’re also to credit for it having been anything like a room in the first place, so I’m not that worried. It will all mend. But there’s a woman missing. I need to know what happened last night, and if you want to explain what you’ve been doing here,” she inclined her head at the tapestry, ”that would probably be good too. I can’t imagine Minerva’s going to be too upset, because I can’t imagine you had anything but the best intentions.”

Happy sighed skeptically, “Come, look, let me show you.”

The two women skirted around the headboard, and Happy pulled back the tapestry to reveal a smaller version of the archway outside the bedroom, and another tapestry across the other side that permitted no light through except a few pinholes at the very top where it had started to fray against the pins securing it, and through these leaked a bluish light. The cold sweet air made her lips tingle with the acute recollection of tasting Severus’ memory on her mouth. She grimaced thoughtfully.

The arch was small enough that it was more than covered by the wide tapestry, but large enough that Hermione felt foolish to have missed seeing it when she’d discovered Severus. It had been very dark, and she’d been cold and rushed, but all the same...

Happy pushed the second tapestry aside and Hermione stepped into a cylindrical stone room that seemed like a separate world. The small high-ceilinged space was filled entirely with blue light and cold wind, and almost as entirely with a large silver lattice sphere at the center of an artful contrivance of copper and brass. The improbable machinery whirled through a precisely-layered changement of motions. It had spanning hoops graduated with runes and numbers, bouquets of thorny button hooks that snatched at threads of light and disappeared around and under the sphere, orbiting pendulums themselves orbited by spinning bobbin arms in twos and threes, spinnerets of carved bone, and pedipalps of jointed brass. The net effect of components and gestures at once resembled a treadle loom, a cat’s cradle, a spinning wheel, a steam-powered spider, a rube goldberg typewriter, a six-dimensional pendulum clock, and a hula-hooping circus contortionist en jete’ entrelace’. It was impossible to tell whether the wind spun it, or vice versa, though the longer and
less directly Hermione looked the more she got the impression that the light and wind were themselves just more arms of the machine, the whole thing being driven by something else entirely.

Happy beamed at it, “I have been winding the texentes somnia every three days for...five years. Never to cause harm, only to affect change. I need those who work here to believe, sincerely, that the ongoing generations of elves deserve a place here as equals...students, teachers, perhaps someday even a headmaster. I need the elves to believe it as well. It is not such an easy thing, when you have lived as slaves, to make others believe in you or to let you believe it yourself.”

Hermione struggled with dazzlement, “But I thought McGonagall promised you already that your grandchildren would have a place here.”

Happy gave Hermione a pitying look, “Promises are fragile. Dreams are much stronger. It takes more than one leader...one outgoing leader...to secure even a small change for my kind. The council that makes decisions for the school are beyond my reach, so when it comes time to change, every teacher and student and staff member and alumnus must be ready to believe in the fundamental equal rights of elves. Being true does nothing for an idea. It must also be believed. I refuse to gamble our future on promises. I think you understand this, who are known to us by name.”

Hermione longed to discuss plans with Happy, wondering what she might have accomplished in her long life if she hadn’t been enslaved and compelled to menial work, but the task at hand required doggedness, “So, you needed to come in and wind it again, but you wanted to be assured that I would be away, is that it?”

Happy nodded, “I recognized my chance when I heard Ms. Stoke speaking, outside the headmaster’s door while I balanced the tray, talking about the painting she wished could exist. I heard you, outside the door while I waited to retrieve the tray, asking for a chance to talk to her at some later dinner. I thought...” she sighed, “I thought you meant to tell her anyway so I...I told a lie. I told her you meant to drive a hard bargain for information, and it would be to her advantage to see the painting first, so you could not lie to her. Humans...have a rather bad reputation in their deals with goblins, as far as goblins are concerned. We elves enjoy,” she shrugged with a semi-apologetic ironical smile, “a reputation for simplicity and mandated honesty, even now.”

Hermione sighed, “I suppose I have only my own kind to blame for that set of perceptions. But why did you do it? Surely there would have been some other chance. I’m hardly watchful, and I wouldn’t have heard if you’d gone in during classes. The doors are so thick.”

Happy nodded, blushing, “I have too many duties during the day. But I admit it was also...to head you off. I wished to be of service to Ms. Stoke before you could be. She is a very influential artist in academic circles, as you might imagine. I felt I needed her good will more than you did, and I did not think it would...be any harm. So we made a deal. She would send you a letter, and let me know when you would be away, and I would let her in to look at your painting,” Happy shook her head regretfully, “She only meant to see it, and then go meet with you after to discuss it. At least that is what she told me. She said she’d been seeking it for some time.”

“She already knew about the painting?”

“She did. She suspected you had it. I confirmed.”

“How did she know about it?”

Happy shrugged, “I don’t know. Her interest seemed genuine, urgent even. She wanted to know how many other people might know, but she was silent on why that should matter to her.”
“Alright but...how did you know about it? Were you the one that hid it here?”

“No, I found it behind the tapestry, same as you I presume, back when I started using the texentes.”

“So, back when the room was still empty, and no humans had been in or out for a long time?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how it got there?”

“No. But it had been for a long time. I remember the dust.”

“So, you made a deal, then what happened? Enith sent the letter?”

“She wrote it, I delivered it, she does not trust owls,” Happy gripped her ears, seeming flustered again, “I hope she is safe. She even offered to take my commission for the first headmaster portrait of the elf school. So prestigious, you have no idea.”

“Happy, please. What happened then?”

“I watched until you left by the kitchens, then I came here to wind the texentes. When I had done that, I noticed the painting was not in its usual place, so I looked, and he was in the lab. He was sleeping. I cast a spell so he would not wake up fully for some time, so Enith could see him and he would not be upset, would not tell on me. I went to let Enith in, but it was not Enith. It was a man with a mask over his face. He pushed his way in and I was afraid. I did not know what he wanted. I thought it must be the texentes, what else could anyone want? I didn’t recognize what he was holding until later.”

“What was he holding?”

“I thought it was a book, I barely looked, but it wasn’t, I’m sure the more I think about it. It was a painting, a small one.”

Hermione boggled, “A painting of what?”

She shook her head sadly, “I didn’t see. It almost seemed blank, brownish. But all my thoughts were about protecting the texentes. So I ran to the lab to mislead him. He crashed after me, knocking things over, and I apparated to the kitchens. I thought I might wait until he tried to leave, or that I would catch you as you returned, to keep you from walking in on a violent person, but neither of you came by me. The Nicks found your room open and wrecked and no one in it, Creevey came looking for Enith, so they told him of the mess, and then Harry Potter was called, and then you returned. Everyone seemed so excited I thought I should wait to talk to you myself, having...” she looked away, her back still straight, “having bungled everything so badly.”

“Were you able to fight him at all? Leave a mark, take a souvenir?”

Happy blanched, seeming just for a moment like other elves Hermione had known who became struck with taboo by things Hermione took for granted, “The same magics on the castle that prevent your kind from apparition prevent my kind from taking any action to inflict magic on a human unless directly ordered in defense of the school.”

“Can you at least describe him?”

Happy frowned, “Enormous and angry is what I remember, but I was frightened, he might have been more average. He had pale skin, thick hands in big gloves. He had a man voice, rough but not so
very low as some. He did not cast, I do not know if he had a wand. The only thing I heard him say was ‘oof’ when he bowled the table over.”

“So you expect he wrecked the room and took the painting?”

“It seems likely, but I do not know how he would have gotten away with it. He could not have gotten it out of the castle without going by me, unless he went by the front door, carrying a very large painting.”

“Have you heard from Enith since? I don’t want to get her in trouble, I would just like to know if she’s alright.”

Happy shook her head, “I am sorry, I have not. I would tell you.”

“What about her brushes? Any idea what happened to them?”

“No, and it’s enormously puzzling. Not even I can get in there without the door being willing to admit me, and even then it would mark my passage. They say the door saw no one pass.”

“Is there anything else you can think of? Anything at all?”

Happy smiled, “I remember noticing that he was not such an ugly painting anymore.”

Hermione smiled in spite of herself, glancing at the sublimely fanciful contraption, trying to stay on track as the cold wind spun around her, “So...you said every three days. When did you wind it previously?”

“When you first arrived, when you slept in the classroom.”

“Not the next morning, when I left you alone to work and went to breakfast with Minerva?”

Happy shook her head, “It was already wound then. It has to wind down before it can be reset and wound”

“So you really did just want to help me.”

Happy wobbled her head ambivalently, “Still confused by that? Yes, I did, and do. And to get your trust, perhaps your help, to tell you about my work eventually. But I did not help you to make you leave, no. And I did not lie then. Even when I did lie, I did not mean to betray you so terribly. I would have made it up to you, and will.”

“How did you find the texentes in the first place?”

“I was cleaning and, well, complaining to myself, and Headmaster Hogwart decided to get my attention.” she tilted her head in the direction of the tapestry they’d come through.

“Hogwart? I thought that was just the chief architect’s name. Hogwart is a-”

Happy nodded, “Goblinish name, yes. Headmaster Hogwart was part goblin. A much larger part than is evident in the tapestry rendering. Even then there were biases, but you can see it in his mouth, like with Enith. And he was the chief architect, too, I think, just in more senses than are remembered.”

“I never realized...”

Happy shrugged, “Do you wonder why they say those records were lost after the first goblin
Hermione couldn’t think of anything to respond to that, “Will you confirm your story with Harry if he needs you to?”

Happy nodded, the whirling blue light etching deep shadows in the solemn lines of her face, “I promise.”

Hermione sighed, “Is there any way to know if you’re lying to me now?”

Happy nodded, “Do you feel how prone you are to believe me?”

Hermione thought for a second and realized, yes. The air was crisp with veracity. She recognized the flavor. She nodded, “I...is that the texentes’ doing?”

Happy nodded, smiling, “It does not like...confusion, obfuscation. Spinning lies here would interfere with the truth I want to spread. But if you are done with questions we should go out to the others.”

Leaving the surreal glowing mechanism for the contrastingly surreal mundanity of her bedroom less than a foot away was disorienting. The miraculous engine seemed to stop existing completely once the ratty old tapestries were hanging freely again, like snuffing a candle flame, despite being only a few feet away.

“So, one last question, Happy. I’ll just trust you on this one. It’s sort of what I was going to ask Enith about anyway. You said you can’t cast spells on humans, but you cast one on the painting, to make him sleep, is that right?”

Happy nodded.

“Does that...does that mean he’s not human?”

Happy blinked, “No, it doesn’t mean that. I cast it on the painting. I told it to make him sleep, and it did.”

“So then, paintings can count as being human? Or I suppose I should say, being alive?”

Happy shrugged, “Only if they are. I don’t have time to worry about it, so I let the object handle its subject. We do this often when Sir Cadogan becomes a bother but we cannot find him.”

“But sometimes they are? Human? Living?”

Happy patted Hermione’s hand with a perplexing intensity of gentleness, “Sometimes.”

“How would you tell?”

She shook her head, “I don’t, it would be presumptuous. Not to mention unnecessary. The object always works. If you can find it.”

Hermione gave in, not really certain she understood but getting too hungry to keep on, “Thank you for your help, Happy. Come have some lunch with us. I’ll make sure to ask your opinion of the food so if anyone enquires you can claim you’re still being questioned. Unless you’d rather just lie.”

Happy’s grin twinkled, “Thank you for forgiving me, Hermione Granger.”

Hermione sighed pointedly, “I’m sure I’ll get there.”
Happy was unfazed, “Certainly, if you put your mind to it. Thank you in advance then.”

“There’s a significant downside to having a reputation for being able to do anything.”

Happy nodded sagely, “I couldn’t agree more.”
When Hugo and Lily had had their fill and bounded off, Hermione asked Harry if his aurors would check the bathtub for charms and hexes, promising she would explain why as they looked. Then she sat Harry and Ginny down and told them everything, including all her doubts about her own ethics and sanity, her reservations about talking about horcruxes with anyone else, and the strange non-place she’d traversed between her dream and his painting. It was as she was holding up the bottle of sorrow that had been transmuted into something else that Braithwaite came out with a full inventory of the enchantments in the bathroom, which was the better part of a page. Harry studied it as his fellow aurors packed up to leave for the day.

“Well that’s interesting.”

Hermione tensed, “What is?”

“There is actually an incantation for making the shower run hot, you just have to cast it on the stove in the next room. These old castles…”

“Harry!” she snatched the paper from him and looked down the list. It was all fairly straightforward. Heating charms. Cleaning charms. Opening and closing the drain. The lights. Some fairly severe anti-breakage, anti-leak, anti rupture spells, possibly held over from the kraken invasion.

The pensieve itself could apparently fit three, but was otherwise unextraordinary.

Hermione looked at Ginny, who hadn’t said anything for a long time, “You think I’m an idiot.”

Ginny shook her head distractedly, “No. I think you did the right things, mostly.”

“Really?”

She sighed, “Well, I’m sure it felt foolish. It wasn’t the per-Hoyle Hermione thing to have done, but it’s probably what I would have done.”

Harry gave her a look.

Ginny rolled her eyes, “I don’t mean banging Snape, I mean, just...giving someone a chance when they’re vulnerable. Taking a leap rather than endlessly re-checking the math. And it’s not like you let him completely off the hook. You did your homework and tried to get him to talk, checked his claims while earning his trust. I mean I know you’re…” she stopped and took a breath, “you’re not real confident in your perceptions right now, but you’re not an idiot. And I don’t think you did anything wrong, Hermes.”
Hermione blanched a little, but her cheeks tingled to hear her old nickname invoked lightly, “I may have overstated my diligence, Djinn,” she returned the countersign, which ached like home on her tongue.

Ginny nodded and shrugged, a small smile tugging at her sober expression, “Somehow I doubt it. Even so, I’m glad you found something to...something that’s been helping you. It could have been bad, but I don’t think it has been. I mean look at you,” she grinned, “Even if he is some kind of trap, at this point I’d say it’s been worth it. And you’ve only been here what, three days?”

“I also went to see Madame Pomfrey-”

“Oh thank Merlin,” Ginny interjected into the air.

Hermione pressed her lips together but let it go. Ginny always seemed to know her mind and speak it at the first invitation, just like her mother, and there’d have been no doing anything about it even if Hermione didn’t love it as much as she did, “-though I mostly did it because when I got that memory from him he gave me twelve kinds of hell about how I had to be crazy to be coming after him.”

“Well see, that’s what I mean. I can see why you’d be bracing up for me to pitch a fit at you about horcruxes, but...Hermione, the diary was evil. Occasional-nightmares-thirty-years-later evil. Even as a kid I felt it and actively ignored it. But the red flags of abuse were all over the place. That’s why it felt like it was all my fault, even though it wasn’t. Whatever the painting is, I don’t think it’s trying to hurt you or control you. I mean, correct me if I’m wrong, Harry, but she went to its lair like a shucked oyster, handed it her fecking wand, and it just sent her away. At that point, if it’s evil, it’s playing way too long a game for me to see.”

Harry nodded.

“So...so you’re not mad?”

Ginny’s mouth migrated entirely to one side of her face and pulled her gaze away from Hermione, “Not about this. Seems like the first good decision you’ve made in a while, honestly. The only danger is you.”

Harry clicked his tongue, “Gin, don’t...”

Ginny shot her husband a rather articulate glare of the do-you-want-to-be-next variety and he held up his hands.

Hermione nodded, “No it’s ok. Go ahead, I probably already know.”

Ginny rolled her eyes, “No, you don’t. You make yourself think you know because you’re brilliant and passionate and it’s way easier to let passion steer when you’ve chosen a huge goal. And it works for you. When there’s something you want, you head towards it full-bore and you’re bloody unstoppable. Anything you believe, you don’t stop until the entire rest of the world believes it too. Anything you know, heaven help anyone who dares to get it wrong in your presence. But when there’s something you don’t want to believe, or don’t want to see...well...there’s no catching you. Everyone that loves you, we’ve gotten used to waiting you out sometimes,” she dropped her eyes, her tone softening, “So, yeah, I don’t think this particular thing is trying to kill you, but I don’t think any of us can stop you from getting yourself killed if it’s what you’ve decided to do.”

Silence had a moment, then, “You understand that’s not why, though, right? That’s not what I’m running at.”
Ginny nodded, “I think I do. But I also remember George. I mean...you understand why I’ve...why I want to run after you,” she smiled crookedly and glanced at Harry, “and you more than anyone know I don’t do that for anyone.”

Hermione shook her head vigorously, “No. I mean, yes, I understand why you’re worried. But that’s not me. George was...he was in a place where all he wanted was to go after Fred. And I...I’ve had that thought. I’ve had my dark nights, when I should have called you, but I couldn’t because...I didn’t want to bring you down to where I was...” she wanted to reach out and put a hand on Ginny’s but just twisted one in the other instead, “...or scare you...because I need you not to run towards me. I’m not...I’ve got so much hurt inside me and I’ve got to run it out or I’ll just be spreading it around. And I know you could probably bear it if I did that, but I couldn’t. I can’t.”

Ginny’s face was hard the way it always became when she was trying to affect a journalistic neutrality, but her eyes were wet, “I get it. If you need me to leave...”

Hermione shook her head vigorously again, “No. If you want to be here, I want you here, I just...just be patient, ok? Don’t try to dive into my head thinking there’s something you need to fix. I’ll let you know if I need help just...part of the mess is me working to fix it. Trust that I’m going as fast as I can, ok?”

Ginny nodded, her calm seeming more genuine, “You got it, Hermes.”

Hermione nodded, glancing at Harry as well, “And I am glad you’re here. I have been hiding, from everything. But I’m not now. I want to know what’s going on, I want to protect the school from whatever it is, and I want to save him if he’s something that can be saved and I have this feeling it’s too big for me to do alone.”

Ginny nodded, smiling grimly, “We’re with you. Same as you’d be. But there’s a bigger problem as well.”

Harry and Hermione both blinked at her.

“Unless either of you can pull the kind of strings it would take to orchestrate the sort of ‘crooked cover-up’ Dennis was ranting about when I got here, we’ve got to get this resolved before Creevy gathers his wits and starts interfering. We can’t risk any talk of horcruxes getting attached to an official investigation. Too many people have died in the hopes of killing that secret forever.”

Hermione frowned, “I don’t know about an actual cover-up but I feel like we could probably handle him. He’s only interested in finding Enith. Even if he did find out about a weird painting, we’re the only three people that know anything about horcruxes. We’re not even sure the painting is one. As long as we don’t bring it up....”

Harry groaned and put a hand to his forehead, “Except for the waiver. It’s the first thing he’ll think to try.”

Hermione squinted, feeling slow, “The veritaserum waiver...”

Ginny nodded, “If he pursues a warrant to look for a cover-up or a conspiracy, he’ll ask ‘what are you avoiding telling me’ and that will be it.”

Hermione closed her eyes briefly, trying to think if there were a way to foil veritaserum or magical waivers that wouldn’t eat up time they didn’t have, but those were only a few steps below unbreakable oaths. Even trying would leave unmistakable evidence of a cover-up. She shook her head, packing away her self-castigation about why she hadn’t just called on her friends in the first
place. She gripped the little vial, swallowing, “You’re right. We have to work as quickly as we can. And that’s why I’m hoping, if you have time, that you’ll look at this memory in the pensieve first. I need your eyes on it because...I don’t trust my impulses. Will you? I’d think about going with you but I have class in a minute. Can you stay?”

Ginny reached out with uncharacteristic reserve and squeezed Hermione's hand, “Your wish is my command.”

Hermione squeezed back, smiling, her heart aching as Ginny crashed in, “And you say I’m unstoppable.”

Ginny shrugged, “Separately, I think we’re mostly just unreasonable. Together though...”

Hermione grinned in a way that made Harry groan wearily.

It was hard to go through the door to the classroom and shut it behind her as students began filtering in, knowing that Harry and Ginny were about to head into the pensieve for answers she was craving and dreading in equal measure. It was even harder when students in her first section had questions and requests that lingered them after dismissal right up until the second section was filtering in, so she hadn’t gotten a chance to check in before needing to launch into the last class of the day. Harry and Ginny hadn’t come out to check with her, either, which seemed like a bad sign.

When the last class was over and the last student was reassured about their concerns, she took a deep breath and opened the door to her apartment. The front room was empty, as was the bathroom, though the tub was still full to the top of the first step and the memory was in its jar right beside it. She found Harry and Ginny curled up around each other in her bed, sleeping soundly with the lights low.

She walked to the edge of the bed and sat, watching them, Harry spooned around his wife, his nose against her neck and one arm over her waist and up under her shirt, her face half turned back towards him, her hand over his hand. With a parent’s sense of being stared at while sleeping, Ginny opened her eyes and blinked a few times before silently mouthing the word “Hi” and extending her mostly-free hand out to Hermione, tugging on her gently when she took it.

Hermione lay down and scootched in close like it was one of the many hundred sleepovers and late-night gossip/cuddle/commiseration sessions they’d shared as students in Gryffindor tower, face to face across their clasped hands. Hermione went first, smiling fatalistically, whispering almost silently, “That bad, huh?”

Ginny shook her head and stroked Hermione’s cheek, “Nothing we can’t handle. It just brought back some intense memories for Harry. He needed a break.”

An anxious shiver went through her joints, prickling her skin, “Just tell me, I don’t need to see it.”

Ginny shook her head again, “You do. There’s something in there that he left just for you. It wouldn’t speak to us.”

Embarrassing tears leaked from her eyes and she shook her head, “Sorry, I’m fine, this is just a thing my face does now. You know how it is.”

Ginny eased forward very slightly, and Hermione came to meet her so she didn’t have to disturb Harry. She kissed Hermione’s tears and forehead, and her lips very gently, “Just what my face does when that’s what your face does. You should go look. We’ll be here when you get back.”

“I love you.”
Ginny smiled serenely over weariness and doubt, “I know, how could you not?”

Hermione feigned to poke her in the ticklish spot of her stomach and Ginny grinned enormously and flinched minimally, pointing over her shoulder, “Hey, hey hey, don’t wake him up. He’s dreaming about something really astonishingly dirty. It’s adorable.”

Hermione smiled, genuinely amused but also leaning into their old ritual of bluff assurances when faced with insurmountable fears, “Well, get back in there, seeker. I’ll be here when you get back, too.”

Quietly she closed the doors between herself and her friends and dove into the second worst memory of her life.
She knew the place, she knew the corridor. She knew the door by heart, and didn’t wonder that Harry had needed a rest after being led towards it in a dreamlike forced march. She was headed for the department of mysteries in the ministry of magic, towards the heavy wooden door as it had looked decades earlier, before the post-war security upgrade.

She was walking beside Severus Snape, who was walking by himself at his usual brisk glide, as though he were flanked by impatient guards. They went through the first door, and through into the chamber of the veil, the room where the cleverest of the unspeakables studied death, or tried to.

The room was shaped as she remembered it: round, with steep steps forming an amphitheater, down to a dais bearing a freestanding archway that seemed impossibly ancient and ineffably indifferent, hung with a cloudy black curtain that billowed and swayed in the still air. On the dias with the arch were a pile of what looked like light construction materials and one tall mirror in an ornate standing frame. Along the wall on the far side, difficult to see in the shadowy upper reaches, were cloaked figures standing about a few large rectangular canvasses propped up among them, painted with indistinct images. Severus clasped his hands behind his back and strolled down the steps, affecting nonchalance though she recognized the tension around his eyes as he stared at the ominous arch.

As they reached the bottom stair together, a high, cold voice spoke right over Hermione’s shoulder, making her jump and stumble away, while Severus barely blinked, “Ah, Severus, always the last to come when I call.”

He went smoothly to one knee, “I do beg your pardon, my Lord. There has been some little trouble at the school and-”

“Yesss, Amycus and Alecto were telling me. New titles always bring difficulty to the bearer, Headmaster Snape. But no more than I had expected, and trusted you to handle.”

“It is being handled. And I am here.”

Voldemort circled him. There was some muttering from the gallery and a titter of feminine laughter.

“You are late, and time is short. You are, of course, one of my most trusted and most talented. As such I have called you here to make you a gift, and will overlook your lack of punctuality yet again. Rise.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” He stood and folded his arms before him so that each hand was holding the opposite wrist, ostensibly relaxed but with one finger on the reassuring burl of the wand-end under his tightly-buttoned sleeve.
With a curt gesture from Voldemort, the figures in the far gallery began to filter down, spreading out. Hermione glanced at them but had a hard time taking her eyes off Severus. His eyes were fixed forward, and though the memory was informed by all his senses and prior knowledge, certain aspects of the image became indistinct if they were not directly in his line of sight. She recognized a few outlines, the top-heavy feral bulk of Fenrir, the rolling swagger of Alecto Carrow, the stalking sidelong hunch of Antonin Dolohov, the silken mince of Lucius Malfoy, a small handful of others, and of course-

“Bellatrix.”

“My Lord?” the wild-haired witch with dark, simmering eyes stepped forward, writhing in her perpetual malevolent simper.

“Prepare him.”

She turned to Severus. A pulse of recognition flashed between them on the cruelty of her smile and the motion of her wand, and Severus closed his eyes a moment before she spoke.

“Crucio!”

He crumpled instantly like an unstrung marionette, knees cracking against stone, his hands sliding up their opposite arms until his clawed fingers were digging into his shoulders. He pitched forward in two sharp, retching spasms, his mouth distended open but seeming to choke silently on too large a cry trying to force its way out. Hermione fell beside him, unable to divorce her sense of reality from the vivid illusion and stand aloof, her forearm burning and her stomach clenched. His eyes stared through her, unsurprised and yet disbelieving, and she knew the sensation despite all the years it had been since her own turn at the end of Bellatrix’s wand: faculties spinning to try to outthink, outsmart, outlast the pain that grew like a shrilling scream, like trying to will oneself not to go blind while staring into the sun. She watched him go blind, the whole of the vision blurring into white light around him, the sound of a man screaming; high and hideous and full-throated, far away and all around, mounting and echoing; reverberating around and through them. The sound continued, though as she watched him he took a breath and closed his eyes again, lips trembling. The sound of his own screaming still thundered through the light but other sounds filtered in as well as he shut down something vital so he could listen.

“Not too much, Bellatrix. As before, you must only strip him. He must be conscious. And sane.”

“Of course, my Lord. But, trust me, he is very stubborn, many layers. It takes a lot to really hurt him. This is for our own good, as you say. It would likely do him more harm to undergo the gift with his resistance intact. It will grow back, it always does.”

“Indeed.”

There was another surge and then the dissociated Severus on the floor began screaming, eyes bulging, tipping onto his side and racked with tremors. The light started to pulse and darkness bled upwards from the edges of the floor in vaporous waves, and then the light went out.

There was still the sound of screaming, cut through by Voldemort’s hiss of annoyance.

“...too eager. He was about to pass out. I don’t have time to waste on your intemperate games. Give me that. Lucius!”

“My Lord.”
“Raise him.”

The darkness around them slowly resolved into figures again and Lucius Malfoy stepped forward, wand out.

“Levicorpus.”

Severus was lifted into the air, though to Hermione it seemed that the rest of the room descended while the two of them remained in place, the floor sinking away from their knees. Lucius moved his wand and the room seemed to pivot around them until they were mere feet from the arch, hanging suspended several feet off the ground.

“You must relax your mind, Severus,” Voldemort drawled, gesturing soothingly with Bellatrix’s noxious wand, his free hand flicking a curt gesture that made death-eaters swarm over the materials and take up the standing mirror. Hermione could hear more than see the figures rustling and working, assembling a frame and stretching a blank canvas across it with mumbled incantations. Her eyes were, as Severus’ had been, on the mirror that was being moved out of sight to the far side of the arch.

Voldemort gave an airy sigh, “Such marvelous tools being squandered by the timid muggle-loving scribblers of this ministry, Severus. It is embarrassing that paltry playthings like death and desire are treated with such fawning cowardice and awe when they should be used by the strong. Can you see the mirror, Severus?”

Numbly, Severus stared at the sooty curtain and shook his head.

“Closer, Lucius.”

Hermione gasped as the room and the arch seemed to shift with a reckless lurch that left mere centimeters between the whispering cloth and the potion master’s face. It smelled of smog and bookbinding and lilies.

“How about now, Severus?”

Hermione looked. Like the canvas sides of the cells she had seen in her dream, the curtain became more translucent the closer one was to it, and through it she could see the mirror in its frame, and read the words Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

“You are, of course, familiar with the mirror of Erised. After Dumbledore used it to defeat Quirrell I developed rather the obsession with understanding its powers. After penetrating the ministry and discovering the existence of this decrepit relic,” he gestured at the veil, “I felt sure there was some utility in it for one who has broken the very bonds of death. It seems the right time for it to bend to a master.”

Severus was staring fixedly at the mirror through the veil. Hermione’s only assurance that he was taking in Voldemort’s words at all being that she could hear them in his memory. She looked across and saw in the mirror a young woman, heartbreakingly young, with Harry’s eyes, in front of a cradle, arms outstretched, screaming silently. Voldemort continued talking, “So many flavors of desire, you see, so many things that bind the common heart and feeble mind to the pursuit of death. What do you see in the mirror of desire beyond the illusion of death, Severus?”

His voice was dry as parchment, “Power. Over my enemies. Over death.”

The woman in the mirror was crying, pleading.
A green bolt of light flashed as she stood between death and her child.

A dark shape shot across her path as fast as a diving falcon, wrapping the bolt within its black wings and crumpling to the ground.

Voldemort seemed completely unaware of the drama in the mirror, or the strain on his victim to keep tears from falling. The dark lord was too busy tracing patterns with Bellatrix’s twisted walnut wand, conjuring threads of red light that wove and slithered in the air between the mirror and the veil, murmuring mostly to himself, “Lesser men see love, money, petty pleasures, things that we have conquered, things that we no longer need…even the desires of the wise and the strong are not necessary…”

The woman in the mirror was on her knees, holding her fallen hero to her heart, rocking him and caressing dark hairs back from his sallow, beakish profile, “but all are things that can be used in powerful spells, like so many discarded hairs or superfluous pints of blood. Peter!”

Peter Pettigrew groveled and truckled forward, caressing the silver hand that had replaced the one that his master had deemed superfluous. He stepped behind Severus and began tracing shapes in the air of his own. Hermione was grateful that Severus turned his face, his eyes straining to the side to keep watching the mirror but flicking briefly over his shoulder to the work happening behind him. The others had assembled a canvas of large, familiar dimensions. Pettigrew was etching lines of light in the air before it in a thorny and sinuous knotwork.

In the mirror, a wand had been leveled at the woman, and when a second flash of green light had dissipated, there was a lightning-shaped scar on her forehead, and she continued to hold the serene corpse of a young Severus Snape and weep.

“It would not be efficient, I think, to give each of you a gift like I have given Peter, but the time for a great confrontation is close, and I wish to give my most faithful, my most trusted, those I most rely upon not to betray me, something similar, to break you and make of you something more.”

The woman in the mirror kissed the man in her arms, bathing him in her tears, and like a hero in a bedtime story, he opened his eyes and returned her embrace. The Severus floating beside Hermione ground his teeth and closed his eyes, flayed by hopeless desire. As the couple in the mirror got the child from his crib and comforted him, the reflection changed to a family portrait, Severus and Lily, a young Harry, and a little girl. The youngest child had Lily’s eyes, wispy dark hair, birdlike hands, and a sweet smile that crinkled when her father stooped to embrace her.

Voldemort had stopped talking and had started chanting, the threads of his spell having resolved into an ornate thorny circle that hovered between the mirror and the veil. As he chanted, his words appeared in the frame he was creating, “Worros otre irra bonsier eht…” he wove his wand and chanted over and over, “Esromer tse taerg, erutrot tse taerg, terger tse taerg, worros tse taerg…”

A red mist formed in the center of the hovering ring, and through it the image in the mirror changed. The family vanished and the man was alone, his face a smoulder of wrath that, as the chanting continued, became a rictus of righteous rage, staring at his incapacitated double with animate loathing. Hermione glanced at the Snape beside her, his mirror’s opposite; weary, broken, placidly resigned.

The others had taken up the chant, voices blending, the glass of the mirror beating with the reverberating sound. Voldemort pointed the wand at the image in the glass that was invisible to everyone in the room but Severus and Hermione. As the chanting reached its peak, he flicked the wand’s tip in an arc towards Severus with an air of disregard. The mirror exploded outwards as the mirror-man leaped like an animal in an airborne lunge, passing through the red ring to become a
black bird, passing through the grey veil to become a white doe, impacting the suspended Severus squarely in the chest and out the other side like a geyser through a sieve, launching and dragging him backwards, causing the room to lurch around Hermione as the canvas seemed to rush forward and engulf them, white strands of magic slamming shut across the dark box where they landed.

Looking out through the window of the new prison, Hermione could see Severus Snape looking in at her, picking himself off the dias where he had fallen, his face a careful mask closing over his horror as he smoothed the front of his cassock.

Voldemort’s voice seemed far away, “Well, I suppose that’s the last one, unless we can find another mirror. Flimsy thing. But I suppose seven is an ideal number. Rowle and Rookwood will be disappointed.”

“And Draco, my Lord.”

“Yes, poor boy. So eager. Convey our condolences, Lucius. And clean up this mess.”

“Yes Lord.”

She looked about her and saw the golden velvet chair at her side, another Severus sitting in it, fingers steepled, contemplating himself beyond the barrier, watching Voldemort sidle up to his double.

“This, Severus, is my gift to you. Your own place in my immortality and trust. Should you die in my service, it shall be an inexhaustible spirit of vengeance on my behalf against the one who killed you. Should you somehow fail to die in my service, fail to serve me to the utmost when I have given you such privilege and latitude, well, it shall also then be a spirit of vengeance on my behalf.”

“You are ingenious my Lord.”

“And you are invaluable. I will never permit you to be lost to me. Never forget that.”

“No my Lord.”

Voldemort smiled a chilling, toothy smile and swept away, barking orders, “Bellatrix, take your charges to the manor, Alecto, take yours to the school, Dolohov, take up the other two and follow me.”

In chorus, “Yes my Lord.”

The last thing Hermione saw before the window into the ministry went dark was the sour smile of Alecto Carrow as she lifted her wand, pointed it at the painting, and intoned, “Somnulum Semper.”
“So now you know,” Severus’ voice was jarring in the dark. The dim golden light gradually seeped in around the edges of the darkness, illuminating him in his chair like a theatergoer who had just enjoyed a private screening.

She nodded, bewildered, “I don’t know what I just saw. That ritual had a lot of moving parts, a lot of actors, a lot of assumptions. I mean I...I don’t blame you for thinking that I would think…” she sighed, shoulders falling, “but you’re not really here are you?”

He shook his head, “I’m just a placeholder. A messenger. One way.”

She nodded, moving to sit by him on the arm of the chair, “Is this going to be another maudlin attempt to lecture me about your worthlessness and my incompetence?”

He took her hand, seeming tired, and kissed it lightly, rolling his thumb over the backs of her fingers as if memorizing, “No. I find I can’t. I want to, desperately, but these things, memories, are harder to falsify than words. Particularly when someone marvelous is pressed against you, pulling them out of you with her lips,” he looked up at her with a sort of helpless longing, “in my defense I did try to put words here that would send you away, but between the serum and your...my...our,” he gestured weakly back and forth between them with the flat of his palm before waving his hand dismissively, “anyway you wouldn’t have been fooled. It would just be sad, trying to lie, and I don’t want to make you sad, not now. That’s the crux of it, really.”

She smiled weakly and fingered a strand of hair back from his eyes, and he turned his face into her hand to kiss her palm. She stroked his cheek, “why do you still sound like you’re saying goodbye? And like I’m about to hate you enormously?”

He put his hand over hers and kissed her wrist, gripping her and closing his eyes tightly, placing two more firm kisses along the soft underside of her forearm. He pulled at her gently, inviting her into his lap. She resisted, studying him.

His brow furrowed thoughtfully, “because I am, and I wouldn’t blame you if you did. But not...not because I want you to give up. I want you. I want to fight for you, because you’re right, wanting this feels like wanting everything in life to go with it. But Hermione...I also want you to dream beyond me. Whatever we are, it is fragile. It’s just a mad hope, a taste, a dream. And dreams die, Hermione. All the time. Even the enormously plausible ones, and all the work put into them. They fail, they burn out, they leave you and they don’t explain, they don’t apologize. If this ends someplace beyond our control, I don’t want to leave you without an apology. I don’t want to presume too much, but I would hate to have joined you at the beginning of wanting to live and then dropped you right back into...” he glanced ruefully around himself and shrugged, “If you don’t believe I’m something evil, at least recognize that I am fragile and unlikely, and that I can’t want to be something so wretched and disappointing as well.”

She accepted defeat and let him pull her into his lap. She curled against him warmly, cradling his jaw
in her palms like a bowl that she lifted to her mouth to drink. Trembling on the edge of falling into
the illusion, catching only lightly at the threads of sense, she asked “How long,” murmuring against
his cheek, “how long do we...how long do I get this for?”

“Only a little while. I...I am for you. Just raw materials, though, just a...a love letter,” he glanced
away, hurrying on, “If we take too long, it would begin to drain you. And you should know, I won’t
play the fainting damsel. If you don’t come and save me soon, I’ll get bored and rescue myself.”

She grinned and kissed him. He sank, for a moment, into the spell of it, and resurfaced only with
great reluctance.

“When all’s been said and done you should probably...the more you want to come back here the
tighter you should put the cork in and throw it into the lake because, well, I think I would drown
myself in you given the situation in reverse. It’s what I did with...well...what I did to Lily. But you’re
stronger than me, so I trust you with this, I trust you to want me and still want to live more. Can you
agree to that?”

She closed her eyes, determined to answer him honestly. She remembered her fears of a Pensieve of
Erised powered by one’s own most beautiful thoughts and desperate needs. They were haring too
close to it. But it was also his maybe-goodbye and his pledge to strive for more, and she tried to
imagine coming back to it knowing he were gone, whether she could still take it in the spirit it was
given. She nodded, “I understand.”

He stroked her neck, “Do you want to...”

She nodded, “But, tell me, if we both get out of this alive, he and I, and I return this memory to him,
will he see this? Feel it?”

The messenger nodded, “Like a cascading legillimensia, if he accepts it.”

“And is there any chance of it being intercepted, seen by anyone else?”

He shook his head, “This space only exists for you and him. With a lot of effort someone might
break it apart, but it wouldn’t open to them as a coherent whole. It’s hidden. It...I won’t speak to
anyone else.”

Hermione nodded, “Get up, then. I need you naked.”
This chapter contains relatively brief mature sexual content at the beginning. The information it contains is mostly thematic, and the sex is described more generally. If you wish to skip it, scroll down to the triple line break marked with a "....."
They simply stayed like that until

.....

Ginny gripped her gently and pulled her from the pool.

"Sorry, love," she crooned, clasping Hermione’s back to her chest as she regained her balance, retrieving the brightly glowing memory from the tepid water, “but dinner’s come and gone, and you’re starting to look pale.”

Hermione nodded numbly, her stomach and back screaming from neglect, her brain so full, so far from her body, it threatened to overbalance her. She nestled into Ginny’s embrace, her body weak with a hunger for touch that had only deepened as her mind had feasted.

“Harry?”

Ginny shook her head, “He had to go. Had to work on some leads at the office and go home to make sure the pets haven’t started a gambling ring or anything.”

Hermione leaned back and stared up into her best friend’s eyes, “Stay?”

She smiled warmly and nodded, “I made you a plate. I’ve been making notes on everything I remember from the vision you’ve been...ah...footnoting?”

Hermione grinned dopily, “Nothing we can’t handle, right?”

Ginny hugged her gently, “Right. Come on.”

Hermione ravened her dinner while Ginny shuffled papers back and forth, scowling and poking at them with a quill as if they’d misbehaved. As Hermione sopped up the last of her stew and loaded it into her mouth, Ginny passed her two large sheets of parchment.

“So I feel like knowing what people might think he is will help us figure out who took him, and knowing what he actually is might help us save him.”

Hermione looked over Ginny’s notes, prodding at them with her own quill as she thought of details, “Voldemort didn’t really know what he was getting.”

Ginny nodded, “It was his downfall with Snape, always. Not that that really fills in any blanks for us, but it’s comforting to know that the cause of evil is just as clueless as we are, going in.”

Hermione sighed, “There’s so much to figure out. Where did they hide the other paintings? Who were they of? Have they all been found by this collector? What happens if they’re used? What happens if Severus is used? I mean, Voldemort killed him personally, and Voldemort and his snake are both long dead.”

Ginny pulled out another sheaf of parchment, “I’ve been working on that too. He said they were having to stop at seven because the mirror broke. Snape is one. Of the people visible in the vision, I think we can rule out Pettigrew. Voldemort already had a leash on him. Bellatrix basically gloated that she was, so that’s two. He talked about followers to whom he had granted latitude, so probably the Carrows, three and four. His most loyal, so probably Dolohov, five. Not Draco or Rowle or
Rookwood. Maybe Lucius is six, since he felt moved to protest Draco’s eagerness and not his own. Seven…”

Hermione swallowed hard, “Fenrir. Fenrir Greyback is seven. And I think whoever’s collecting has figured out how to wake him up,” she reiterated to Ginny her visit to Severus’ cell and the monster that had awoken just before she left.

“Fenrir was never officially a death eater.”

“True, but Voldemort trusted him with a lot of responsibilities, and perhaps for a project that was mostly secret from the rank-and-file it seemed like an acceptable gesture.”

“Or he wanted to try the process of scatter-gunning half a person’s soul out of their body and into a canvas on someone hardly and expendable first, and just happened to succeed.”

Hermione nodded, “Probably that.”

“So why split them up? Why hide them?”

Hermione frowned, “I’ve been thinking about that sort of thing since I found Severus here. Since it seems like they’re mostly potential agents of revenge for disloyalty, or punishment for enemies, I suspect Voldemort would want to hide the portraits anyplace he thought his followers might try to hide from him if they ran, or where their killers might try to hide from them. Maybe someplace with a gallery, where they wouldn’t stand out, was preferable. Or maybe they need a gallery to operate. Strongholds like Hogwarts and Malfoy Manor. If the Carrows turned on him, for example, he’d already set them up fairly nicely to hide out in Hogwarts where he would have trouble reaching them, and where he might have trouble sending an avenging spirit. So I expect he might have needed the Carrows’ and Severus’ portraits to be secreted within the walls of Hogwarts to be effective insurance.”

“And Bellatrix and Lucius probably at Malfoy Manor, where they’d be more likely to hide or fortify. Or where the Order might commit a raid and take over.”

Hermione nodded, “And Fenrir and Dolohov probably in the ministry. It was quite the little nest for them for a while. Whoever has Severus also has Fenrir, so they probably have Dolohov. There were four other cells when I visited Severus’ prison. So perhaps they got Lucius and Bellatrix as well, or Amycus and Alecto. Or they have them all and just not all in the same place. Come to think of it, that might be another reason to split them up. When I talked to Severus, his dark mark was paining him, being close to the others. Having them all together like that might have been what made Fenrir wake up. That might be all that it takes. Maybe Voldemort didn’t want them conspiring among themselves, since he was making them as double-edged insurance.”

Ginny sighed, “So unless this is a big conspiracy, or the very long game of a very lucky evil fleamarket hunter...both of which Harry’s going to look into...we’re looking for someone who could access Hogwarts, Malfoy Manor, and probably the Ministry, either directly or through other resources.”

“And would want to...would know to look, and where. A death eater?”

Ginny shook her head, “There just aren’t any. Harry and I checked. I mean, there’s Draco, but he doesn’t have access to Hogwarts or the Ministry.”

“He’s got friends. He’s got his son here at school.”
Ginny grimaced, laughing incredulously, “Yeah but...Scorpius? I just don’t see it. Or Draco for that matter. I’ve gotten to know him a little since Alby got sorted into slytherin. He so different than he was, I can’t really imagine him willingly having anything to do with death eater business ever again. But maybe I can check in with him. He might care, have some ideas. It sounded like he might have been told about the paintings.”

“New cult? New aspiring Voldemort?”

“Not impossible, but it would be weird. How would they have found out?”

Hermione sighed, “Well, what about from the other side? Someone who hated Voldemort and wants to expunge traces of his work.”

“Auror vigilantism. Also not impossible, but weird. Also begs the question of how they would have found out.”

Hermione grimaced, “Same way I did. Maybe they found a more talkative painting while arresting death eaters. Wanted to talk to an artist the same way I immediately did.”

Ginny sighed, “Possible. But you said none of the other ones were awake. At least at first.”

Hermione nodded, “unless the awake one was somewhere else. I only saw five of the seven. I really don’t know much about how galleries work, and I didn’t see any books on it in the library.”

“Are you sure?”

Hermione gave Ginny a rather arch look, “Are you serious?”

Ginny snorted, “Ok ok, fine, fecking Library-head. So what else?”

She sighed, “Well, broadly...ugh, I don’t know. You’re the journalist married to a detective.”

“Well, what about some non-symbolic motive. What if someone knows what the paintings are and wants to use them for what they might know, or even what they were designed for?”

“You mean...revenge?”

“Against the people that took Voldemort down, yeah. Maybe if we narrow down who the paintings might be aiming for, we can find out if they have any living enemies. Not death eaters, per se, there aren’t any left. But maybe someone like Creevy who’s bitter about the war, doesn’t feel justice was done.”

Hermione sighed, “Or maybe someone just happened to find a really odd object and got suckered into a plot to hurt people. Oh Ginny, love, I’m sorry I...I was talking about me, about my doubts from before. That was insensitive.”

Ginny worked at uncrumpling her face, and waved Hermione away while Hermione petted her anyway, “No, come on, you’re completely right, I didn’t mean to get all...yeah it’s possible. They certainly might be using someone to get the gang back together. We don’t really know what they’re capable of. It’s a good point, and a valid one. It’s possible one of the paintings is masterminding this.”

“I’m an ass.”

“Well sure but,” Ginny shrugged cartoonishly into her ears, smiling, “No, I’m fine. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it doesn’t bother me. I just...” she sighed, “I never beat them, you know?”
Hermione cocked her head to the side, shaking it gently, “I...don’t really. I mean I know I wasn’t here but you and Neville ran the resistance brilliantly while the rest of us were on the run, and after the war ended.”

Ginny nodded, “After the war ended I never talked about it because it seems so stupid and petty, but it still bugs me. When Voldemort possessed me through that diary, it was Harry that saved me. When Bellatrix was dueling you and me and Luna in the great hall...we were probably going to die, and my mum swooped in and saved us. And now maybe Bellatrix or something like the horcruxes might be back and might be threatening you and the school and all our kids and...it’s gnawing at the back of my mind that...we won, but I never beat any of them. Maybe that’s selfish and crazy but...”

Hermione grimaced, the old scars on her forearm suddenly itching, “No, I hear you. I understand, believe me,” she glanced at the clock to try and avoid thinking about just how much she sympathized, “When is Harry coming back?”

“Dinner tomorrow. Said he had to put in an appearance and see if Creevy’s kicking up any trouble, try to get a better read on how much time we have. In the meantime, I think it would make sense if the most unstoppably brilliant witch of our generation would try to buckle down and decode that ritual while I, the valiant and intrepid journalist, work on strategies and interviews. If we want to know who each painting might be a weapon against, we’ll either need to dive into some tedious histories about the battle of Hogwarts or start grilling people that might remember who killed who specifically. Because I’ll admit, I was there and don’t remember much. Except for mum taking out Bellatrix.”

Hermione shook her head in longstanding disbelief, “That was the day I knew I would never be as badass as Molly.”

Ginny laughed, “You are in some very badass company on that front. But yeah I guess it means there’s a demented doodle of LeStrange out there with a mad-on for mum,” she shivered, retasking her attention, “I know Ron never stopped talking about defeating Fenrir, and Lucius Malfoy just slunk away and served his time and died peacefully in bed but...yeah it’s going to take me some digging to recall what became of Dolohov or the Carrows.”

Hermione’s face brightened, “Actually, if you think you can wait until morning, I might have a much easier interview for you right here. What else do we need?”

Ginny blinked, “Well, I was thinking, tactically and information-wise, the texentes might be our best tool for tracking down people that only exist in a sort of...reality-compromised state. From what you’ve said I don’t think Happy has really tried to steer the thing, just to set it and let it run, and I don’t know if Hogwart can really communicate the complexity of what we need to know to not completely screw it up with just nods and gestures.”

“So what are you thinking?”

“Well, looking at it, and everything that seems like a control or a gauge is covered in astrological symbols and really precise dimensional ruling. So we should hit the library for anything on the convergence of astrology and arithmancy to see if we can figure out a way to control it.”

Hermione barked a laugh that dissolved into a distinctively punchy giggling fit, “Believe it or not...I think I have someone for that, too.”

Ginny stared with mock peevishness, “And I thought you’d have a hard time making new friends.”

She held up her hands defensively, “I’m as shocked as you are. Anything else?”
Ginny sighed, “We could really use someone with an artificer’s knowledge of paintings and galleries. Got one of those?”

Hermione’s perk slumped and she echoed Ginny’s sigh, “Yeah, but she’s missing. Maybe Luna knows somebody. Wandmakers are artificers too.”

“That seems like plenty to start on, in the morning,” she looked doubtful.

Hermione nodded, “Harry’s certain to find a lead. Something will turn up. There might still be a ransom demand or something.”

Ginny sighed, “Oh, Merlin, that would be so great. I mean...not...not that a hostage situation would be great just...more straightforward...you know what I mean.”

“That you’re a terrible person?”

Ginny shrugged and nodded, “And I’m knackered.”

“Yeah, I’m with you on that. Come on.”

There was a moment of uncertainty, but only a moment, when Ginny followed her to bed, yawning. But if anything had changed it was that Ginny didn’t immediately presume to snuggle in with her after Hermione tucked herself in. She lay down on the other side on top of the quilts, giving Hermione’s hand a reassuring squeeze when she offered it. Hermione pulled her close, reaching to pull a quilt up over her like a burrito, linking them together in a planar figure eight. It was warm and secure and very, very confusing. The painful burn of human touch had begun to resolve to a sort of ache that mingled aversion with craving. She wanted desperately to touch Ginny, but still feared being touched. She wanted so much to explain a lot of things she wanted that she didn't understand herself.

Much occurred to each of them to try to say, or ask, or explain, but sleep, in the presence of such quiet comfort after such a long and uncertain journey apart, found expression first.
Hermione dreamed of flying in a serene and widening loop, glorying in the sensation of unstoppable speed. Ginny sat at the center of her arc, as reassuringly weighty as the silver sphere of the dream weaving device. Hermione knew that however far or fast she flew, she would always return to the center, because she would never stop and it would never move and therefore...therefore...she must always return. A thrumming across her skin sang awareness of a far-off storm like a whisper of static in her thoughts, some kind of odd rip-tide between the place she was and wherever Severus was being kept, plucking at the fragile threads between them and swirling her sense of direction into a jittery compounded spiral. The sky went black and the still air picked up a sweet stink of not-quite petrol. The vaporous blobs of imaginary color from the underland morphed into view when she tried to see across the darkness. The pungent smell of rubbing alcohol and lightning seemed to insinuate into her mind through her nostrils, siphoning snatches of verse and prose from her mind that echoed as they evaporated through her ears.

*One for death*
*Two for birth*
*Three for sorrow*
*Four for mirth...*

She went wider, seeking Severus, seeking the other crow, the other rook, the opposite square, her sleeping king, her twin in grief, two for joy. One for sorrow, two for joy. That was how the poem went. That was the answer she wanted. But she couldn’t hear it. The roaring hush was too loud. She cried out “two for joy!” and the darkness echoed back *two for birth*. The sound of it prickled in her feathers, her own voice inverted and rambling back to her like grit in the wind,

*One for the memory*
*Two for the show*
*Two for his rebirth*
*One for your crow*

*One for half*
*And two for whole*
*Haploid diploid*
*Splintered soul*

*One the teacher*
*Half the hero*
*One and one half*
*Makes up zero*

*Black the void*
*And white the sun*
*Black and white bird*
*Makes up one*

*Two the birth*
*And one the womb*
*Downward, outward*
*Tower, tomb*

*Numbers matter*
She called for him loudly. As the echo came back to her she began to realize that her feathers were not trembling with fear. She suddenly felt the all-encompassing tumult of a massive sweeping wind for the first time like a fish feeling water, suddenly remembered that the maelstrom was doing the flying and had been the whole time, that she was just a witch in a cyclone that ripped circles in the air, outward and outward spiralling. Ginny was a mote in its eye holding a bleeding book she had carried for too long. Despite its crushing indifference, it felt like a punishment, retaliation from an inanimate world for daring the search. Defiant, she yelled for him again, the wind stretching and twisting her words back in an echo that circled her like a gnat.

The dream ended abruptly with the sound of a knock on the door.

Groggily, Hermione flopped over in the sheets and writhed torpidly free from the tangling dream and Ginny’s slumbering embrace. Ginny whimpered a little, perhaps still stuck in a similar dream, but sighed and rolled over into peaceful snoring when Hermione stroked her hair.

Shrugging on her robe, she answered the door. It was Happy, looking upset.

“Happy, good morning.”

“Good morning Hermione Granger. Professor McGonagall has requested you for breakfast in her office.”

She felt a chill in her stomach at being summoned to the headmaster’s office in such grim terms, but she nodded, “Yes, right now? Yes, I’ll be right along. Will you wait for me?”

Happy nodded, “As you like.”

“Please come in, I’ll just get dressed.”

Happy shook her head, “I will wait out here.”

Hermione did her best to hurry and still achieve an acceptable appearance.

Happy was silent as they walked.

“Happy, what is it?”

The elf sighed, “I told Min...Professor McGonagall of what I have been doing. I thought it best to come from me. I may have been wrong.”

Hermione nodded, “Did you tell her anything else?”

“I told her that the people who took Enith might have wanted the texentes. I told her of headmaster Hogwarts. I did not tell her about your painting. He isn’t mine to tell.”

Hermione sighed, “Thank you, Happy. Are you worried?”
She shook her broad head, “Not exactly. Worry comes with lack of certainty, and I know her too well.”

“Happy did you...did you tell her because you thought I was going to? Because I wouldn’t have. I know it’s probably wrong, but of the two wrong choices it’s what I had decided on. I should have said so.”

Happy did not seem especially comforted, “Thank you. I told her because she ought to know, and it seemed like only a matter of time. There’s been a feathered grim following me since you got here, promising sorrow, so I thought I should head it off. Mungojerry.”

The Gryphon that guarded the stairs leapt aside and they went up.

The tension she had expected within the office was multiplied a few times over by Nikita and Beasley being there as well, sitting in two chairs with one between them, glancing back at her from the desk like concerned parents at a conference. Nick looked prim and tense, Beasley seemed affronted and ashamed. Minerva was not amused.

“Professor, come sit.”

Happy sat down on the uncomfortable black chair in the corner.

Hermione did her best to sit amiably, and everyone began fixing their coffee from a service on the desk.

“So I realize, Professor Granger, that you’ve had your quarters upended due to the machinations of the school’s chief porter. I hope—”

Hermione shook her head adamantly, “Minerva, it’s fine. Nothing was permanently damaged and I completely—”

McGonagall glared at her, “You may think so, but I find the damage to be significant. The integrity of the school has been compromised, and an important member of the wizarding community is missing in connection.”

Beasley nodded, “Not to mention the collective confusion and mayhem it’s caused over time.”

Nick added, “Or could cause, left to run. The possibilities are terrifying.”

Beasley looked away, pretending to cough into her hand. Hermione regarded McGonagall, “So we’re really talking about the texentes, then. Not the upending of my quarters.”

McGonagall shrugged, bristling, “I do beg your pardon. You protested that you aren’t concerned about that.”

“You protested that you are.”

“Well it’s certainly brought larger issues to light. Happy has said she believed the man was there to take the texentes. That’s a concern. Someone willing to do such wanton damage, who can apparently get in and out of the school at their whim, mightn’t they go farther the next time? It was only luck that no one else ran afoul of him this time.”

Hermione cleared her throat, arranging her face carefully, “I see. Have you had any thoughts about how to proceed?”
“I mean to let the authorities handle the investigation. And when the device winds down this Friday, I mean to donate it to the department of mysteries.”

Hermione shook her head, turning to Nick briefly, “But it’s a significant piece of Hogwarts history. Don’t you think it would be better to study it here? I’d be happy to change to different quarters so we might-”

“We are not a research university, Professor Granger. We are a boarding school. We are entrusted with the children of the wizarding community. The device’s effects are simply too far-reaching and, dare I say, insidious. It could fundamentally alter the protections guarding this institution, its functioning likely ripples in unforeseeable and uncontrollable directions, and has already been show to make us a target.”

“We can look into that. Surely the founders accounted for its effects. Surely anything that’s lax can be improved upon.”

Minerva’s jaw tightened, “Surely you just heard me say that we are not a research facility. We’re enormously short-handed this year as it is. You’re aware that this is precisely what the department of mysteries is for.”

“The department of mysteries is for things that are too complicated and dangerous to be-”

“Precisely,” McGonagall cut her off with the finality of a guillotine, taking a crisp bite from a slice of unbuttered toast.

Hermione heard that there were some elements of sense in what McGonagall was saying, recognized that three days prior she might have taken up the same side of the argument, to be sensible, fair, prudent in the face of potentially radical change. But there was a dire need for change that wasn’t even being allowed for. The work of Happy’s life, and to a lesser extent her own, was at stake. She was the only one in the conversation on Happy’s side or thinking of her at all, and if that didn’t change she was going to lose everything. She kept calm, feeling cornered, “Why isn’t Neville here, if we’re talking about the future of the school? Or Poppy Pomfrey if we’re talking about the safety of the students?”

McGonagall stiffened, “We don’t do things by committee here, Professor Granger. My first responsibility is to the students and staff of Hogwarts.”

“Not all of the staff,” Happy’s voice cut bitterly from the corner.

McGonagall ignored her, “So I will be needing you to change quarters by Friday, if at all possible, so that the ministry team can begin studying how to transport the device this weekend.”

Hermione cleared her throat, “It hasn’t harmed anyone. Inconvenienced, embarrassed maybe, fine, but you can’t compare that to what Happy is trying to do.”

McGonagall’s face went very calm and she folded her hands around her coffee cup, speaking slowly, “I have taken Happy’s intentions into account, in that I am not asking for her resignation, and I think that you are in no position to judge the caliber of what others have suffered.”

Hermione blinked, affronted, “Do you hear yourself? How can you sit there and say that while Happy is sitting right-”

“Happy knows exactly what I’m talking about.”
Hermione glanced at Happy, who was studying her large, paddle-like hands quietly.

“Well, you’ll have to forgive me, but I don’t, so I can’t help but be unmoved by it given the enormity of what’s at stake. I don’t suppose you, any of you, would care to elaborate?”

“Hermione…” Beasley said in a smaller voice than seemed possible from the tall woman’s frame, as if she hoped only Hermione would hear her, “I really thought I was going crazy. I don’t think I can stay here if…if that machine stays. I mean, I laugh now about being ‘Batty Bolger’ but…it’s really rattled me. I’m in an eccentric line of work as it is.”

Hermione’s expression softened, though the frantic urge to shake some perspective into Professor Bolger plucked at her gut, “I hear you, I do. And it does matter to me that you’re afraid, but if you would just come take a look at it, it’s a miraculous device, Beasley. I was planning to find you today and have you come look at it. I felt crazy, too…I had some dreams that…well…but now I understand. And now that you do too I’m sure if you just-”

Nikita shook his head, standing to reach for a muffin and towering over her, “It’s deceptive, corrosive to certainty and perception and discernment, to so many of the most basic tenets of what we do here.”

Hermione turned at him, rising, her expression neutral as she envisioned punching his perfect teeth down his throat, “It’s the foundation of the basic tenets of what we do here. Our founding headmaster specifically wanted-”

For the first time Nikita’s gentility slipped and became overbearing, wagging the muffin at her pedagogically, “Actually, as I understand it, an image of our founding former headmaster, blurry and mute, directed a house-elf to discover something that she then chose to-”

Minerva, Hermione, and Beasley all gaped at him a moment before Happy’s high, raspy voice belted, “The WORD. For what I AM. Is ‘ELF’!” she was standing ramrod straight on the seat of her chair, shaking with rage, “I am not a thing of this house or any house! I am a free Elf! And you may be too short-lived and short-sighted to recognize the larger harm you are ignoring, but you WILL mind your words when you speak of me in my own HOME you mudblood ba-” Happy clapped her hands over her mouth, glancing from Nikita to Hermione to Minerva, her enormous eyes full of shock. Without another word she disapparated with a loud crack.

Minerva’s steely ire, along with everyone else’s, was shaken, and she looked from one to the other of the three muggle-born professors in front of her, “I…” she cleared her throat, “I apologize for that. There was no call for…for that sort of language.”

Nikita shook his head, drifting back down into his seat like a bright red autumn leaf, “I misspoke. I slipped. She did too, that’s all. It’s all a bit fraught, I suppose. Difficult to change. She, she certainly has my…I mean I owe her an apology.”

Hermione tried to soften diplomatically as she sat, but her gut was churning with coffee and words. She spoke softly and clearly, “I don’t blame Happy. The elves didn’t make that word up, wizards did. And wizards found elves and made them into…well, that other term that they…that we made up for slaves. And you’re right that it is difficult to change. That’s kind of Happy’s point, I think, resorting to something as grand as she has. I don’t know what it is that you think she did to you, to any of you, but we’re sitting here, four professors of Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry, a place of world-renowned influence and power, a castle which is a work of elf labor from its literal foundation, and three of us are muggle-born, and none of us are elves. So I’d say that what we’ve been through in the name of what Happy is trying to achieve, indeed anything we might go through in the long fight ahead to address the damage human wizards have done, is less than nothing.
compared to the thousand years this school owes her kind, not to mention the several lifetimes we owe her personally,” she looked pointedly at Nikita, “at least she had the good grace to be ashamed of what she’d said without needing to be clubbed over the head about it,” every dramatic impulse in Hermione’s body was prodding her to scream, to stand, to pace, to leave and slam the door, but she sat and sipped her coffee, deciding that it was up to the others to react first.

It was Beasley that got up and left, followed shortly by Nikita, calling her name plaintively.

Minerva smacked her lips with dry indifference, “They were in the same year. They were not friends, to put it lightly,” she let that hang in the air, gauging the temperature of Hermione’s mood.

Hermione regarded Minerva coolly over her cup, trying not to wince as she imagined Beasley seeing Hermione sitting with Nikita at lunch, possibly assuming they were laughing at how she hadn’t known who Severus Snape was. And then finding out that her Neville was actually...

“Am I meant to feel like I am in big trouble with you, Professor Granger?” Minerva’s eyebrows were resting unraised, like guns in holsters.

Hermione shook her head, “No, Headmaster. I think we both already know that you’re not making the kind of choice that you’ll be forgiven for. You knew that before I got here. Your reasons for this absurd haste aren’t sufficient or else you wouldn’t need to bully me.”

Minerva’s face was as placid as the black lake, “I would appreciate it if you had your things packed by Friday, Professor Granger. You’ll have free choice of your next residence, of course, which I leave entirely up to you.”

Hermione felt her throat tighten. She’d never gotten the hang of being reprimanded by superiors, especially those she typically so respected. She tried to keep her voice brutally even, flicking a significant glance at the wall of portraits, “What a shame that we can’t possibly know what Dumbledore might advise.”

Minerva's eyes narrowed, and for the first time that morning Hermione felt her words had really been understood, “That will be all, Professor Granger. Good morning.”
Ginny had left a note, *Gone to Breakfast*.

Hermione didn’t so much teach her morning classes as state that she hoped they’d done their homework, direct them to the instructions on the board, and plunge unrepentantly into her books on magical theory and her diagrams of the soul-sieving ritual, all the while feeling like the whole weight of the castle above her was pressing down through her shoulders, pressing her brain into study. Time was not on her side, and stood with the majority. McGonagall had basically told her to toe the line or resign, and might have sacked her on the spot if they weren’t already so short-handed. Her search would lose a lot of ground in two days when the texentes stopped running...and would only continue at all if Officer Creevey didn’t come crashing down on her in a snippy, righteous avalanche first.

Part of her was screaming that she ought to explain to Minerva about Severus, about the potential threat. Even though it meant talking about horcruxes against Dumbledore’s wishes and might only worsen Happy's standing...Minerva was the headmaster. She had a right and a need to know. Even Happy had seen that, despite having an even greater reason to stay silent. But she had so much else she had to do, and so little time to do it, and had been asked to pack her rooms as well. She resolved to keep her mind on-task and to talk to Minerva just as soon as she ran into her, quietly hoping it wouldn’t be before they’d both had some time to calm down.

By lunchtime, Ginny hadn’t come back. Hermione sat at her classroom desk and said, very quietly, “Happy?”

There was a loud crack and the elderly elf stood gazing at the floor in front of her.

“I’m sorry to summon you. I just can’t stand the idea of walking about the halls right now. Are you alright?”

Happy nodded, “It is no bother, Hermione Granger. I’m fine. I would like to ap-”

Hermione waved both hands, bitterly exhausted with the etiquette of offense, “Don’t apologize. Four wizards were sitting around debating your right to lift your children out of the hole our kind put them in, over coffee and toast of all things, against whether it happened to romantically embarrass some hidebound academics a little,” she snorted derisively “Faust-forefend that Hogwarts might countenance a little mayhem in the course of opposing obvious evil,” she shook her head briskly, “It was the muddiest-blood moment of my muggle-born life, Happy. I’m glad you said what you did.”

Happy smiled, but drooped, “I am not. Minnie is overreacting, but, woman to woman, she has some right to be angry with me.”

“Angry, fine. She can be angry. I’ll let her shout at me until she's purple and not say a word to contradict her. But to punish the side effects of your endeavor by destroying the whole thing is beyond myopic it’s...it’s....well frankly it’s beneath her is what it is.”

Happy put up her hands, interrupting without disagreeing, her tones maternal, “If I had told her, even a year ago, she would have understood. I did not trust her until after something terrible had already happened, and I think that hurts her. This, in her last year. And Sir Nicholas...”

“You don’t owe anyone -”

“I know, Hermione Granger. I know. But Minnie is very special to me, for a human. I have raised many, and I have seldom seen one who was so brave, even when she thought no one was looking. I
have always had the greatest hope of the future in her, and cannot help grieving the loss of her trust and affection. I do wish she were strong enough to understand that I am already carrying too much to fight her fears and her pride and make her understand, not without even more effort from her, but I also wish that I were strong enough for both. I simply am not. I can not make her understand what is at stake, and that makes me unhappy,” she shrugged helplessly.

Hermione nodded, “Maybe I can.”

Happy sniffled, oddly dismissive, continuing her impromptu confession, “When Sir Nicholas began courting her, she confided in me, she trusted me to tell her if it seemed mad. I didn’t lie, I said it didn’t, that I don’t see anything wrong with it. I still don’t. I should have told her then, but the risk...so many of my own children to think of besides her, all just as good, all just as deserving of everything she has had all her life. I think she is sincere in feeling the same way for her own charges. Certainly she is hurt and humiliated and betrayed, but she has endured far worse without a tear. It is the innocents in our care that will always make us dig in our heels, I think.”

"But honestly, Happy, I know you look at her and see another innocent but...the woman I know, she should be on your side in this. I know she can be proud, but this...I don't understand it. Is there something I'm not seeing? Is the texentes actually dangerous in some way she sees and we don't?"

Happy shook her head, "I swear on my name, I have watched its effects carefully, and before I began I asked Hogwart if it were dangerous, and I asked Dumbledore for his opinion as well. Hogwart emphatically denied it. Dumbledore was a bit more...elliptical, but ultimately he assured me that what I meant to do was right."

"What did Dumbledore say?"

"He said not to blame the raindrops on the lake for the kraken's moods."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, "I think I take his meaning but that doesn't exactly sound not-dangerous."

"Which is what I said. I think his painting was doing the best it could, given that the headmaster never knew of the device in his lifetime. It made me more wary of consequences, but the texentes puts out very little influence of its own. It is not like a great storm making tidal waves. It is much more...the boiling of water putting steam into the air. It can do much to change the atmosphere, but there is no danger of drowning. I've...spied on those students that seemed vulnerable to its effects, and they have had difficulty, but no danger. Many have been challenged, but all for the better." 

Hermione believed her but was caught up in thoughts of her recent dreams involving water and monsters, of the memories that made her wish not to think of them, and could not think of any way to respond. It wasn't the whole ocean that drowned a person, after all, just as much as fills their lungs...and hers had begun to feel tight. She tried reflexively to struggle her way out, incidentally calling up the image of Dennis Creevey coming to the sorting ceremony as a child, soaking wet and beaming in the great hall, telling anyone who would listen (mostly his brother) how he'd tipped into the lake and been rescued by the kraken...

Happy peered at her clouded face with concern and amended, "This school teaches magic to children. I know Minerva has wished to soften some of the more...capricious tests that earlier generations were content to leave lying about, and I have agreed with her in every action, but this is no whomping willow."

"Yes, but...understand I'm not arguing with you, I believe you and I mostly agree that the risk seems small, like it couldn't have had anything to do with Enith's disappearance or the man that destroyed
my rooms, but if I'm going to convince Minerva I need to feel certain I understand. I'm...really not convincing if I'm not convinced and I can't...see what you see. As elves and goblin-kin you and Hogwart have a different magic than Minerva or I, so I need you to explain like I'm a child, and I'll try to un-condescend it for Minerva when I talk to her."

Happy shook her head vigorously, "It is not a different magic. You believe in different rules, you need the mythical thread in a wand or the ink in a quill or some other model of your soul in your body to bridge the gap between your magic and the magic of the world, but it is the same magic. There is no good metaphor, it is itself nonsense and the defiance of rules and measures, but roughly, the texentes puts motion into the fabric of it around you to make it easier for you to feel it. It makes your imagination potent by reminding you it is there, though it defies imagining."

Hermione had been so annoyed by the first premise that she hadn't heard much that followed it, "We don't 'believe' rules. We discover them through study and follow them for tangible results. That's why they're rules."

Happy shrugged, "Until they aren't."

Befuddlement felt dangerous, "Does the texentes break down the rules of magic?"

"No not at all," Happy paused thoughtfully, "It cannot even bend them. It only strengthens them. It does not work beyond them."

"But could it be used for evil? Does the winder decide what it will make people imagine?"

"That is an odd thought. No," she pondered struggling for words, "The rain does not decide which flowers to let grow."

"So how do you know it will make people believe that elves should have equal rights?"

"Because it is true. It is woven into the music of the pantheon of stone. Any thought allowed to move will move to this truth. It is the stagnance only that permits the lie."

"Are you sure, or do you just hope so?"

"I feel it pulling in my great ears and knobby joints, the same way you feel gravity. It can be resisted, but not forever."

"So it pulls downwards?"

Happy grimaced, "No...down is just whichever way you fall. Truth pulls us...out."

Hermione smirked, "Bang, like a candle?"

Happy's face brightened, "Just so! So you will speak to Minerva?"

Hermione sighed, "I'll try. At worst, it's her last year. Maybe Neville will be more open-minded. Maybe if I can find Severus he can help devise some wards that will make people feel safer. Or maybe Beasley can. Maybe I-"

Happy scowled, her politic patience exhausted, "I do not like maybe. I understand where your heart is, but I think you understand mine as well, and they are far apart on 'maybe'."

Hermione nodded. She didn’t understand, but it seemed important that she get there. What was it like to live a hundred years? Two hundred, making a life from the dominion of others? People who were
not uniformly unkind, but who all, at best, blithely perpetuated a fundamental and contemptible misery with their dominion? What was it like to bring children into such a world? To watch your children bring children into such a world? What was it like to live a life of nuance regardless, to let yourself care about the human children that would grow up to be your owners? What kind of heart would it take to honor their worth just as doggedly as they raised one another to ignore yours? How hard would such a heart finally break?

She set her jaw, “I’ll talk to her. I’d underestimated the situation before. I won’t make that mistake again. But Happy...whether or not I manage to reach her, I want you to pick ten students for me. I have room in both of my first-year sections for a few more. You’ve already been made to wait too long. I’ll teach them now. I don’t think I can get them enrolled yet, officially, but let’s start. This afternoon. Send me four, last period before dinner. It will be my Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. As houses go they’re usually less tetchy about conservation of caste than Slytherins or...well, Gryffindors honestly. It’s almost all theory and technique, they won’t need wands and there are supplies to lend. I can add another section just for elves at night, if you want. But send them. We’ll start. You’re right. No more waiting. No more promises. No more maybe. If your dreams are considered too dangerous, we’ve no choice but to make a go with reality.”

Happy gave Hermione a shrewd, almost angry look, but nodded and held out a hand that Hermione met in the middle, her raspy voice grim, “It is a risk, Hermione Granger, more for my children than for you. You know this.”

Hermione nodded, “I know. I’ll do everything I can to avoid their being hurt or shamed. The students and faculty haven’t seen half the fearsome creature I’m capable of bringing to bear if they don’t mind their manners.”

Happy’s lower lip trembled in its frown, then she whooped a laugh that caught her by surprise, radiating enthusiasm, “Then we will try. And the feathered grim can eat my ass.”

Hermione laughed with her, eventually gathering her breath, “I...I had wanted to ask what that means,” Happy looked stunned, her mouth flapping closed a few times before Hermione added, “The um, the ‘feathered grim’ part not the...I know what the other thing means. Vaguely.”

Happy snorted a relieved giggle and shook her head, punchy, holding it with both hands as if to straighten its seat on her neck, “Oh dear, Hermione Granger. You nearly stopped my heart. The feathered grim, yes. It portends sorrow. There’s been one following me around. Just incidentally, mind you, an old superstition, one of the oldest divinations. A carrion bird of warning. Sort of thing one never notices if they aren’t already afraid of disaster in the first place.”

“Sorry, I skipped divination. So a crow you mean? Like the counting rhyme? 'One for sorrow' and all that?”

Happy nodded, “Yes, but only in the portraits. And it might have been a raven. I doubt they count in any case. Many many animals in the Hogwarts gallery like to wander.”

Something plucked at Hermione’s gut, “There has been a crow, though. I’ve been seeing it too, around but...” she couldn’t remember if there had been moments that hadn’t been dreams.

Happy shook her head, “Prophesy of such kind is only what we notice: You come here, you decide to live in the dungeon, I become afraid you will discover my secret, so I begin to notice a crow. I must decide whether to take a risk to make an influential ally, and I have noticed a crow, so I judge my need to be more pressing than perhaps it truly was in that moment. My scheme goes wrong and I have noticed a crow, so I spill my secret to Minerva before she learns of it. Such fates are our own doing, but hard to overcome even knowing this.”
“But I’ve been noticing them, dreaming about them. I think I was dreaming that I was one, sort of, when you knocked this morning. And Severus’ patronus was a crow, before he fell in love with Lily...” it had sounded more meaningful in her head.

Happy shrugged and nodded, “I am not surprised. There are many superstitions about the sort of birds that claim the dead. That they can navigate through the veil of death, find lost souls, pluck at the threads of life, that seeing one alone means it is on a mission to find someone, flying straight as a needle on lives that are about to be pulled between worlds. This is why those with flying patronuses are often seers, diviners, and legilimens; piercers of boundaries and thieves of thought and vision. But these are not laws, and many animals besides are thought to be psychopomps. Dogs, horses, owls, deer. It’s only what you notice.”

Hermione’s brain ached and felt fuzzy, all fading coffee, hard study, and no food, “Yes, I know. Still. There’s something I’m not seeing...”

Happy patted her hand, “You should go have some lunch.”

Hermione sighed, “I was going to eat leftover pasties. I don’t want to see anyone. Come through, have some with me.”

Happy shook her head, “Minerva has forbidden me to go into your rooms, or I will lose my job. I’m not to instruct anyone else in winding it, either.”

“She can still do that? I thought-”

“Not all the laws on elves were created by wizards. Some are part of our nature, some are part of our own cherished codes of hospitality and bonds of ancestry. Hogwarts is my home, but it is still Minerva’s house. I would not disobey her direct orders and feel comfortable staying here. And I need to stay.”

Hermione sighed, “Then just wait a moment and I’ll bring some out.”

Happy shook her head, “You should go to lunch. Do not hide.”

Hermione felt just a little nauseous at the thought, “But I’ve got so much to do, I’d really rather-”

Happy fixed her in a stare, “If you are going to protect my children, you need to start right now showing what a proud and fearsome creature you can be. If you teach a class tonight, by morning at least one parent will have sent a letter demanding an explanation. Start now. Don’t hide here. I will see what I can do to help you in kind.”

Hermione groaned, “I hate that you’re right. But thank you for coming to talk to me.”

The elf nodded, “I am at your service, Hermione Granger, as I think you are at mine. You know what they say of those whose patronuses swim.”

Hermione blinked, “I actually don’t.”

Happy tilted her head to the side, “Well...no matter,” and vanished with a pop.

Hermione stretched her aching back, wondering whether the obligation she had taken up would be repaid in a way that would make up for the precious time she was losing, realizing with a sinking bemusement that, per her own vehement protestations, Happy didn’t owe her anything and never would. She groaned, hoping to be strong enough to hold up her end regardless. She went through and washed her face, vaguely gratified that her reflection didn’t look nearly as old as she felt. She
murmured “Be the proud beast,” and the incantation for eye liner.
I've spent too much time trying to bang this chapter into what I mean it to be and it's still not there, and it's really too long and doesn't move the plot at all but it's Tuesday so...onward!

She took the long way around, giving herself a fair shot at running into Minerva, even stopping by the base of her office stairs and lingering a few tense moments under the stone gryphon’s piercing gaze before moving on.

The great hall was so lively it seemed packed, although it was still only three-quarters full. The only open chair at the staff table, she noted with relief, was on the end next to Hagrid. It was easier to be bold with a friendly face. On his far side was Beasley, who hardly noticed her due to a rapt engagement at her far side with Ginny. But Ginny noticed. She gave Hermione a quick smile and nod over Beasley’s shoulder. It was clearly meant to be reassuring but otherwise cryptic.

“Allo ‘Ermione! Hard teh believe it’s only Wednesday yet. First week of the term is always the longest. Jes a constant learning curve!” he laughed, coughed, and cleared his throat.

“Are you alright Hagrid?”

“Oh, me? Fine, fine. Got my NEWT section next, though. Only twelve students this year, so the headmaster let me mush em all into one section. Yeh should come down, mebbe, if yeh’ve got time. Should be fun.”

Hermione shook her head, “I’ve got second and third years, and then first years plus some...new students. But we’re still on for tea tomorrow, yeah? I’d like to talk to you about adding some new students to your classes.”

Hagrid looked at her oddly, “Ehm, yeah yeah, tomorrow’s still good. Only I was thinking you might come down tonight. It would be great to see you, with Ginny visitin’ too. Just the best thing, really.”

Hermione smiled fondly at him, “I do so want to, Hagrid, only I’m just a bit overwhelmed. Doing my best not to show it. Glad it’s working.”

He chuckled, “Yer hair looks nice. We could be twins! Hah!” he ruffled his own unruly halo, “‘course I’m more of an ‘edgehog and yer more like a...hmm...” Hermione knew the look: he trying hard to think of something both passably accurate and unimpeachably flattering.

“I was sort of going for a mane. I’ll settle for madwoman, though.”

He nodded encouragingly, ”The eyes are just right," then after distracted pause, "Fer a lion, I mean.”

She smiled bemusedly and ate a little cheese as he tied a small sandwich and a piece of fruit up in a handkerchief, “You putting Grawp on a diet, then?”

“Hmm what? Perish the thought! ’Fact he’s taking the NEWT students skrewt-hunting. Should be plenty of meat fer him for the rest of the week.”
Hermione swallowed hard, “He eats blast-ended skrewts?”

Hagrid looked appalled, “What? No! Whyever would he do that? They’re hunting bloat-­pheasants and giant toads out on the marsh, with skrewts.”

Hermione’s mouth hung open as she tried to picture it and succeeded more than was probably healthy.

Hagrid waggled his eyebrows with delight and pointed at her with a thick finger as he packed the small lunch into his pocket, “Ah, see? I knew yeh’d want to come have a look.”

She shook her head, words gone, as he stood up and he patted her heartily on the shoulder, “Yeh just come down tomorrow if yeh can’t get away a second sooner, alrigh’? Sooner the better,” he patted her one more time heavily, “sooner the better, alrigh’?” there was something odd in his voice that made her mind turn, but she had to adjust for the open gulf between herself and Beasley across his empty chair.

“Yes, Hagrid, alright.”

He lumbered off as Ginny caught her eye, jerking her head slightly to beckon her over. Happy’s directive trumped her reluctance. She set her face like a feline queen and shifted one seat closer to Ginny and Beasley.

“Hey, Professor Granger,” Ginny chirped in the jaunty interview tone that jollied athletes into expressing themselves, “I was just having a word with Beasley here, I was wondering if we might let her have the look at the transcendentawozzit.”

Beasley glanced at Hermione and gulped visibly, but gave a guarded, earnest smile.

“If that’s alright with Beasley it’s alright with me. I’d love for her to, honestly.”

Beasley nodded with the irrelevant shrewdness of the vulnerable optimist, resigned to hope despite being unable to tell if she was being put-on, “It’s my free-period. I’d need it to grade assignments but Ginny’s been helping with that all morning.”

Hermione nodded, adoring the animate glow in Ginny’s cheeks. It had been a long time since she’d watched her work people, and it was always mystifying, “Ginny’s pretty wonderful.”

Beasley tittered, “How is it still only Wednesday? It feels like years since the trip on the Galleon.”


Ginny piped up, “So you eat something and then we’ll meet you down there?”

Hermione nodded, but Beasley balked, “Actually, I’ll meet the two of you. I need some tools and books and things from upstairs and, ah, well I’ll see you in just a bit.”

Ginny moved a seat closer once Beasley had gone. Hermione shook her head while she chewed, “How did you manage that? She was terrified of the thing this morning.”

Ginny shrugged, smug as a cat, “She’s a lot like you.”

Hermione squinted at her, “Is unpacking that little comparison likely to do anything good for our friendship?”
Ginny crinkled her nose and shook her head.

“Might as well have it anyway. You’re dying to tell me.”

“Ha! It’s not as serious as all that just- oh, excellent!”

Nikita brushed by behind Hermione and held out a parchment to Ginny, who smiled warmly at him. He bent down by her ear and all Hermione could catch were the words “...tell her...” and his hopeful look. Ginny nodded at him wisely, looking exactly like her mother as she patted him on the shoulder. Hermione’s look of disbelief as he left set her laughing again, “What? You said there was a Hogwarts historian and an astrological arithmancer that we ought to talk to, process of elimination wasn’t all that hard. You’re short-staffed and I’m a journalist.”

Hermione could have kissed her, “You’re not, you’re a sports writer.”

“Meanie. I’m also writing a novel, and doing time in the investigative pool. I figure if Harry ever gets bored with bureaucracy we can wear masks and fight crime together.”

Hermione shook her head, affecting her insufferable-know-it-all caricature “I know you hate trying to plan for retirement, but...Ginny...”

Ginny rested her chin on her laced fingers, “Yesss?”

Hermione squinted in scathing pity, “A novel ?”

Ginny laughed so hard she almost fell out of her chair, and Hermione glanced over at the Gryffindor table to catch James and Rose trying to hide their faces while Hugo and Lily looked up eagerly to see what was so funny.

Ginny wiped her eyes, “It’s your fault. I missed you, so I read that Jane Austen thing you gave me two birthdays ago. Come on, grab something so we can head back, time’s short.”

“You liked it?”

“What?”

“The Jane Austen.”

“Bleeding bludgers, no. The writing is good but...all the manners and pining and nearly dying from being caught in the stupid rain. It’s alright for muggles I suppose, but I’m glad I’m not...” she grinned as Hermione reflexively soured, “...foolish enough to think of muggle culture as a static monolith. Anyway, no, I hated it, but it gave me a good idea.”

“How so?”

Ginny grinned, “Well, it’s like that Sense and Sensibility bosh, except it’s you and me. And also we’re pirates.”

Hermione laughed, defeated, “I love you.”

“Of course you do. You need someone like me. Just like Beasley does.”

Hermione stood up, choosing an apple and another sandwich loftily, “Oh so we’re going to unpack that after all, then?”

Ginny shrugged, “All I mean is, people like you and her and Harry need people like me and Ron and
Neville and Mum and...well Nikita I expect...and vice versa. You’re so intensely yourself, so go go go, that after awhile you’re desperate to know which way is up, and we tend to know.”

“Interesting philosophy, but I don’t follow. Sounds like nonsense,” adding under her breath, “I should know.”

Ginny followed her out the side staff door, matching her pace and trotting down the narrow stairs beside her, “I suppose I’m just finding a hundred new words for ‘opposites attract’. Or maybe ‘opposition isn’t repulsion’.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, “Except when it is. Look at Nikita and Beasley.”

Ginny grinned, “They’re exactly the couple I was thinking of. He’s utterly mad for her.”

She ignored that, “And don’t discount similarities. I mean, you and me and Harry and Ron, we’re four Gryffindors and we all married each other. Aside from the odd life-upending cataclysm it seems to have worked out just fine.”

It was Ginny’s turn to roll her eyes, “You really have no idea how many people were betting you and Ron wouldn’t make it a whole year. Anyway I don’t mean opposite people or opposite values I just mean...no matter how similar two people are to bring them together, being together highlights how you’re different. It’s the parts that are opposite that tell you if you work, that tell you whether their push and your pull can turn the same wheel...whether the sum of your difference puts you face to face or back to back. Part of being in love is that sense of something different from yourself that you still recognize.”

“This is not sounding any less like nonsense the more you talk.”

Ginny grinned, “Well exactly. And Harry would agree with you, and that’s why you’re both helplessly in love with me and only devoutly fond of each other. You’re too similar. Mutually inert.”

Hermione laughed, “So you’re saying the two kinds of people in the world are you and the people madly in love with you.”

Ginny laughed heartily, her tongue sticking out just a bit, “Not what I was getting at but now that you mention it,” she was bluff as ever, but blushing.

They reached the bottom of the steps. In the dim and numbing stone passage the contrast of Ginny’s steady radiant warmth shone like a beacon, kindling a similar smiling warmth in Hermione’s cheeks and fingertips. With a kind of deja vu she was aware of staring at Ginny’s lips in the cramped hall, and the sensitivity of her own, until forming words felt awkward, “Ginny...you’re not…” she felt the lioness, or perhaps the madwoman inside her goading her courage, courage, courage, “...you’re actually not wrong… about how I feel for you, but the texentes is still running...and I’m still not really myself and there’s so little time, so...it’s just a bad time to talk about it or to...decide anything. About that.”

Ginny balked, “No, I know. You said so yesterday. I get it. I’m not really all myself yet either...I mean, none of us is really ok right now. I just cope a little differently than you and Harry. But I’m not...I mean…” she seemed uncharacteristically flustered, “I mean...yes. Don’t worry. No one’s deciding anything. Least of all me. There’s really nothing to decide on my end.”

“Oh,” Hermione felt her cheeks blaze in the dark, “Good to know.”

Ginny took her hand as they walked and nudged shoulders companionably. Hermione felt a simmering weight in her stomach that wasn't relief. Ginny wasn’t deciding anything, just as Harry...
had said. Nothing to figure out, like Harry’s kiss, warm and damp in a porridge-y kind of way, awakening nothing. Inert. That was all that Ginny meant. And it was good. She knew she should decide that it was good. Neither of them needed confusion. It probably only hurt because good things hurt lately.

Ginny gave Hermione’s hand an honest squeeze and slid away as they went through the dungeon door, leaving a cold shadow and a striking emptiness on her skin. It didn't mean anything, just the world moving on. But letting go of Ginny felt like letting the world end with a whimper, and set her heart beating like a startled bird's wing. She caught at Ginny's hand, knowing it was the wrong thing to do, and pressed her against the door until it closed behind them, running her hands down her arms and lacing their fingers, feeling like she was falling to earth, burning up in the air, begging Ginny wordlessly to catch her.

Ginny’s breath caught, and she put her arms around Hermione’s waist without releasing her hands, pulling the gap between them closed and kissing her solidly. Ginny’s larger than life act made the intimate delicacy of her jaw and lips feel like another secret in the thousand-thousand they shared. A bolt of blistering joy and longing sizzled down her ravenous and tantalized center like a hot poker and exploded the icy terror in her belly into a suffocating steam. There was no question in the space where their mouths touched and opened. Doubts collapsed under the heat and gravity. For the first time since leaving home her mind scrambled to keep up with her body, yanking unheeded reigns, censuring the waking world when it had so eagerly run ahead in her dreams. She hungered, she wanted, and she wanted to want. She wanted so definitively to kiss Ginny, to spark off of her like steel on stone, to take her to bed, sober and sane and certain, to go...

*Home.*

Fear snapped the fragile thread of her certainty with a clarion ping, dissolving it like a fantasy. She felt dark tentacles twining from her gut and around her fingers under Ginny’s gentle grip, the clarifying heat of her solid presence transmuted to acidic burning.

As her giant brain began to founder, Ginny turned her lips away first and twisted them in an anxious laugh.

Hermione stopped, releasing her hands, her face clouding, “I’m sorry, I don’t know what I’m...” her stomach began to charlie horse and the ducts by her eyes tingled with foreboding. She laughed nervously, “This is going to annoy the husband.”

Ginny nodded, her expression distant, her tone close but gentle, “It’s ok. I mean, Harry just wants us not to be fighting.”

Hermione looked away, mostly joking, totally lost, “I meant Ron.”

Ginny gave a sad little sigh, tightening her arms as Hermione sagged against her, “Ah, well. Probably. Still, if he wants an opinion so bad he can not-die next time.”

Half-laughing, anxious but unable to explain as the pain worsened, Hermione placed both palms against the door and pushing gently, “I also don’t want Beasley to get down here and think we’ve lured her into some kind of lesbian sex-dungeon.”

Ginny grinned like cracked ice, letting Hermione go and pressing her away, “True. Don’t want to shock Beasley.” her jaunty tone faltered like it had lost a wheel, and she shook her head, “Even I can take a hint like a big girl, eventually,” she blanched, “Sorry...sorry about...that was an asshole thing to say. I didn’t mean that. I know you don’t want to talk about it right now.”
Hermione backed to the nearest desk, feeling guilty and doing her best not to stagger as her head spun, trying to show that she could cope, “But here we are. So...”

“Shit,” Ginny scrubbed a hand across her scalp hard enough to hurt herself, “shit, Hermione I’m sorry. I suppose I’m not as steady as I pretend.”

Hermione sighed, “Stop acting like you’re the only one who’s being an ass. I know, ok? We were this close to everything being ok again and then...” she huffed decisively, “We might as well have it out. Just do it. Don’t make me beg to be told off.”

Ginny bobbed her head, her shag of red hair wagging like a curtain shut too quickly, “You always think I’m about to tell you off.”

“Stop it. Could we really talk, please?”

Ginny took a stiff breath, “I swear it’s not a problem.”

Hermione gestured at the closed door, “Even if stuff like this keeps happening? It’s not ok that I...I keep throwing chaos at you and just expecting...I don’t even know what. I just keep...yanking at you and Harry and anyone that comes within reach,” her heart felt like it was beating sideways, battering itself bloody to get to the woman she loved through an unyielding wall made of the same force that drove it.

Ginny sighed, “Yeah, and that would be ok except I keep...” she shook her head, “I’m hurting, and I’m confused, but you know it’s not you. Stuff hurts right now, and we’re just different about it. Things go wrong, and I’m like my mum: bring everyone together, hunker down, put food in people, bind us to the earth; re-affirm bonds. That’s what I do when I’m hurting...” she shrugged apologetically, “...and sometimes I do it blindly. You’re not the only one throwing chaos. You’re my friend and you’re hurting and I should be able to handle that without...I shouldn’t be flirting with you. You’ve said in a hundred ways that you need your space. That’s not hard to understand. That’s been you since we were kids. When things go wrong, you’re off to the library, you’re off to get a look at the basilisk, you’re off screaming a challenge in unspeakable names and carrying everything you need in your legendary beaded handbag, drawing the monsters away from home base before anyone else even knows what’s what. That’s you, that’s Harry, that’s my dad. You don’t want to be held when you’re afraid, you want to be channeled, you need to move. And, yeah sometimes you do it blindly, and I will never really get that as a reaction, and it will always scare me when you run, more than a little, but...I know that not being willing to let you would be the same as not loving you. It’s not like you’re always wrong.”

Hermione did her best to breathe evenly, let Ginny talk without demanding anything of what she had to say. She knew she could stop the explanation just by saying how much it hurt, get her to say whatever she wanted to hear, and it felt like a danger, “So what’s going on with us?”

Ginny smirked, “I’m being a needy arsehole and you’re being a shitty liar.”

“Oh come on,” Hermione urged her closer with a little tug at her waist and a sly grin, “That’s nothing new,” and Ginny tilted her head over onto her shoulder where it always fit with a solitary resigned chuckle, “let’s just have it. You’re right, things just suck right now. But I’m not mad, not at
you.”

“I am. I don’t want you to try and respond to me just to keep the peace. I know my ego’s pretty big but it can survive. You’ll always just be looking for excuses to get away from me, and that’s mental.”

“What excuses? Ginny I don’t understand what you’re-”

Ginny grimaced, “Beasley, just now. You kissed me, because I guess you thought I need that, because you’re trying to salvage us by any means necessary, and then...you vanished again. I felt you vanish right out from under your own skin. You act like you need an excuse to stop, as if just not wanting to wasn’t reason enough. This space between us...I want to kill it, too, but sex won’t...I mean...You’re trying to want me because you love me and that’s, you know, that’s so you, and I get it, but you shouldn’t. It’ll be ok. I love you too, and that’s all I really want. It doesn’t have to become sexual just because it suddenly can,” she smiled, “That’s one of the great parts about not being teenagers anymore, we get to know better.”

Hermione exhaled, “Oh.”

Ginny nodded, enthusiastically fatalistic, “Yeah. And it’s fine, it’s nothing wrong with you that you’re straight,” she grinned, nudging into Hermione’s shoulder a little, “More and more people are coming to accept that heterosexuals are just born that way.”

Hermione laughed, but it felt like a kick in the gut, “Ginny, you’ve got it wrong.”

Ginny’s smile held, but her voice quavered in disorganized retreat, “Don’t do that. I know we’re all a mess but I’m in an ok place about it. Don’t make me dig any harder at rejection. I didn’t take the hint before, and things got weird. And maybe I’m a little jealous, too, of how much your... how much your dreams are doing for you that I can’t...but I swear it won’t matter in a year. I want you to be happy.”

Hermione’s heart began ricocheting around like a frantic moth in a jar, “But I do love you. I mean...my physical...I have desire for...It’s just that when you said there was nothing...”

Courage,

“It scares me, yes but like you say I want to fly into it and dare it to do its worst. Wanting this...that’s not the difference between you and me, and it certainly isn’t the difference between you and him. What happened just now is that...you said...you said there was nothing to figure out and I panicked because I thought you meant...I thought you meant it the way Harry means it, that there’s nothing to figure out because there’s nothing...here. That it would never happen again. And I shouldn’t have panicked about that, especially if it were true, I shouldn’t grab at you like that. That’s why I vanish...”

Ginny said nothing but Hermione heard her swallow hard. She soldiered on, the words a vinegary welter in her throat, “I’m more than hurting, Djinn. I’m broken. I’m a muggle motor that’s lost so many pieces it doesn’t matter that it’s hooked up to a live battery. My waking life is this...abstracted pantomime. It doesn’t matter what I want on the inside...or how much. I long for you but I hate being touched most of the time and I don’t know why. You love me back and that hurts and I’m scared it's going to go away.”
Ginny spoke carefully, “I don’t mind going slow…”

Hermione felt her throat tighten, “But there’s no easing into it carefully because...because you’re already my whole heart, you’re everything that hurts too much to touch...and worse is the fear that...” she shook her head once, “I have no sense of anything, like everything’s too close to see and too far to touch at the same time. If my feelings for you did bother Harry I wouldn’t be able to tell and that’s terrifying. If I ruined...if I came between...if I...killed your...” her eyes started streaming in earnest, her stomach jerking with suppressed sobs.

Ginny shushed her, curling an arm up over her head and holding it against her own, crooning, “Oh there. Oh there, love. Easy now. No guessing, I promise. I wouldn’t do that. Harry wouldn’t do that. I see you. I see you. Nothing changes that. You’re not whole right now, but you’re not ruined, you’re just missing, you’re not gone,” Hermione turned and clung to her, sobbing, and Ginny gathered against her, humming small repetitive noises in her throat, two or three declining notes at a time, murmuring the odd word that was more musical than meaningful, “Oh there, now. Oh there.”

When Hermione finally calmed, Ginny’s tone remained rhythmic, “When I say there’s nothing to figure out, I mean there’s nothing for me to figure out. I’m not waiting for you to hurry up and be alright. I don’t need to guess to know how I’m supposed to feel. I’m not deciding whether I want you. I know what I want. And I know that you don’t know, not really, and that’s ok. I’m here for all of it. You can take your time.”

Hermione scoffed, “It doesn’t feel like there’s time. It feels like life just blows our hearts to smoking craters at utterly random intervals, like every day is apocalypse roulette.”

Ginny petted her gently, “It does eventually stop feeling like everything is actively trying to fall apart on you. At least in my experience. The new normal becomes normal. Your new and old lives finally connect into a coherent story, and the thing that blew your world apart becomes...something that was always there, even when you didn’t know. It’s not a mistake or a punishment. It was always just a part of the love.”

Hermione nodded, “I keep forgetting you’ve done this before. I’m still getting there.”

Ginny stroked her damp cheek and kissed it chastely, “And I’ll be here when you get back.”

“It really is like being far away, on a different plane of reality. Right now I’m...” she sighed, “I’m so strange to myself. I mean, this is ok, but a lot of the time...I can’t think straight, I hate being touched, I can’t slow down, I really feel like I’m losing my mind sometimes, when I’m awake. All these crazy dreams are the sanest I’ve felt in months, the most like myself. When I’m awake I... I miss people and want to connect but the moment I do I just want to recoil and scream and run. Do you know what that’s like?”

Ginny shrugged, “Not for you. But sit with it. What is it you feel that hurts when people touch you?”

“Well...the first thing is overwhelmed. My brain works so much slower than I’m used to, I feel like everything happens around me too fast and I can’t possibly protect myself.”

“Protect yourself from what?”

Hermione squinted at her, “That’s your interview voice. Is this off the record?”

Ginny grimaced at her, disbelieving, “Emphatically. And that’s your evasion voice. Come on. Be serious.”

Hermione looked down, “I don’t want you to know any of this. I don’t want you down here in this
mess. That’s part of what I’m protecting myself from. I wanted to get it all figured out before I saw you again.”

Ginny persisted, “What mess?”

Hermione stared forward, describing enormity with outstretched hands, “This feeling...this hyper-awareness of chaos. It’s like I’m...I’m standing on this long bridge and I can see forever in both directions...like my head’s been split in half and my eyes are goggling off on opposite sides...I can see where I’ve been, blissfully ignorant, blithely in love like I want to be again, and at the same time I can see ahead, where all the endings are, eventually, and all the pain, and I can’t separate them in my view. I can’t detach loving from knowing that it’s all going to end, and how much that’s going to hurt. And underneath the bridge is just this bottomless...horrible...crater. Full of monsters and freezing water. And with my blown-open face I’m more like them than I am like myself. And I can’t go forward or back so I’m afraid I’m just going to sink.”

Ginny nodded, “I’ve been someplace like that. I get it. But let me ask, if you looked into the future and saw that it weren’t ever going to end, would that feel any better?”

It was such a weird question that it took a moment to get her head around, “I don’t know. Right now I’m standing still and it’s the same as drowning, down below where beginnings and endings can’t get to me and it...no it doesn’t feel any better..”

Ginny sighed and gazed philosophically at the ceiling, “It takes time. I mean...it really takes time. Steals it, eats it. But...you’re going to wake up one morning and life will be made of moments again. That wall-eyed blown-open feeling of seeing everything but yourself will resolve and your eyes will be back on the front of your head again. You’ll get your depth perception back, and be able to feel the distance between the mosaic joys of the present and the comparatively brief and straightforward pains of the future. The difference between now and then will uncollapse, and you’ll be back in your life again, safe in your own body. The past and future will be in love with each other again...delightfully distinct and undeniably connected, complimentary, separate, face-to-face, and better for it. And that’s just what making a life out of time is. We go on learning, and things go on being possible. We live and we die. But in between we also love, and hurt, and heal.”

Hermione sighed again, “You’re right,” she waited a beat for dramatic effect, “It is demented that you’re my conscience.” She shook her head, “I know I need you. But I really don’t want you down here with me.”

“I know, you said. Fortunately it’s not up to you.”

Hermione grinned, “No. I’m glad you’re here, there’s work to do and people to save and no one I’d rather have with me on that. Fuck my bloated and broken pride if it comes to that choice. I just mean,” she thumped herself in the gut with a closed hand, hanging her head, “In this blasted crater. Where I can’t offer you anything. I hate that you’re going to see me like this, because I love how you look at me when I’m...when you think I’m strong. That look in your eyes sometimes is the only memory I have of the person you think I am. And if you’re down here you’re not...I want you far away to be my beacon home, not down here poking my guts and realizing…” she cleared her throat, “realizing I’m just not…”

Ginny shook her head adamantly, “You are. You’ve always been this Hermione, who can be strong and who can be scared. This has always been you, forwards and backwards, and I’m here for it. There’s nothing you have to be but you. And home...it will never be the same but...we can move on, I hope. I mean, I’m not really there myself yet. I still haven’t really let go of the way things can’t be anymore. I’m really a crap sort of beacon,” she sniffled a little, “But I’ll get there. Everything else we can figure out.”
Hermione sighed, “Hypothetically, once we finally get to that point, what do you want?”

“I want you. And Harry and me. For us to be a family again. And anything else that makes that work. But that’s not an agenda, I promise. I’m just...stating my biases.”

“Such a journalist. I’m all agenda.”

“I know. Such a politician.”

She snerked, dabbing her nose, “Technically I’m a teacher. I’m just terrible at it,” she looked at her feet on the dark stones, shaking her head, “I’m trying so hard to get back to you, Djinn. I need you to see that.”

Ginny nodded, “I know. I’m trying really hard to be something worth coming back to.”

Hermione gripped Ginny by the forearms and straightened up a bit, searching her eyes, “It’s...it’s going to feel like I’m running away from you, but I’m not. You won’t see it because I’m starting from too far away but I’m heading back to you. And him, too, Severus, but not away from you, not instead of you. I found him first because he was closer to where I got dropped, the first beacon on my way back, and it’s...it’s an intense place, an intense feeling, but it’s not ‘more than’. I’m not trying to hurt you or make you jealous...even when I do....” she sighed, resisting the urge to look away from Ginny’s eyes and reaction, “What I most want is to find my way home and to bring him with me. Home to you. But home...home still scares me right now. Home hurts...home is what I’m hiding from. I feel like bringing him along is...it’s more than just a quest, but it’s not more than getting home. Does that make sense?”

Ginny nodded, her own eyes damp, “I’m glad you’re such a shitty liar.”

Hermione gulped a flustered sob, “I’m not lying!”

Ginny folded her into a hug, “I know you’re not. If you had any talent for lying at all I wouldn’t be able to believe you because you’re just too ridiculous sometimes.”

Hermione laughed, bopping Ginny awkwardly on the shoulders with her hug-pinned arms, “Needy asshole.”

“You love me.”

“I do. And I promise, no more chaos. I won’t keep ambushing you and then vanishing.”

Ginny smiled and planted a kiss in her hair, “Take your time. I swear, it still exists out here in the real world. You’ll know where to find me.”

“Always. It’s how I’ll know I’m home.”
If you enjoy expositional dialogue, boy you are gonna love this chapter. Next week there will be things that actually occur in real time...for as much as that concept applies... :) 

Hermione sighed and sat back, smearing indifferently at her eyes with the inside of her voluminous sleeve. She still felt tired, and there was still a gulf between them, but the air had cleared significantly over the chasm, and they were no longer trying to navigate the edge blindly. Their old patterns of camaraderie slid into place, displacing the dealt-with, “Should we actually be worried about Beasley yet?”

Ginny grimaced and pulled out a handkerchief, stuffing it into Hermione’s hand, “Give her another minute. I think Nick was going to try to catch up with her. He’s determined to woo her now that he realizes she’s his...you. I think she’s warming to him, but slowly. I told him to give her some room but,” she shrugged, “he is young and smart, and clueless as a bag of rocks.”

Hermione sneered into the handkerchief, “What’s on the paper he gave you?”

“I gave him a list of death eaters, and asked for a brief explanation of how they died or were defeated.”

“Great! Let me see it. What did you trade him? Time’s so tight with the staff shortage I was figuring I’d have to offer to alphabetize his personal library or something.”

“As it were,” Ginny intoned quietly, digging the paper from her pocket.

Hermione winced-laughed, “You need to stop, he’s so young, that’s disgusting.”

Ginny scoffed, “You arithmancers. You’re so obsessive about age. He’s turning twenty-seven next month, that’s more than half-plus-seven for you.”

“Ugh, barely. And I’m not his Beasley anymore, you just said.”

“He’s still your biggest fan.”

“As if that’s saying much,” she plucked the paper and scanned it, “Seriously, what did you give him?”

“I promised him an interview for his book, and some introductions.”

She glanced up at that, “The one about me?”

Ginny rolled her eyes in mock-derision, “Could anything be said to exist that isn’t about you?”

“You’re selling me out.”

“I know.”
“And you sound jealous.”

“I don’t disagree.”

The list was brief and neat.

- **Carrow, Alecto**: disarmed by Luna Lovegood, imprisoned by Minerva McGonagall, died in Azkaban 2002, fell while stunned by guard, Edwina Wexel, during escape attempt, final cause complications from concussion.
- **Carrow, Amycus**: disarmed by Harry Potter, imprisoned by Minerva McGonagall, died in Azkaban 2007, suicide, final cause asphyxiation.
- **Dolohov, Antonin**: Killed by Fillius Flitwick, Battle of Hogwarts 1998, final cause internal bleeding, organ laceration, Incussus (impact) charm.
- **Greyback, Fenrir**: Killed by Ronald Weasley and Neville Longbottom, Battle of Hogwarts 1998, final cause blood-loss from multiple wounds.
- **LeStrange, Bellatrix**: Killed by Molly Weasley, Battle of Hogwarts, 1998, final cause Dormus (sleep) curse direct to heart, cardiac arrest.
- **Malfoy, Lucius**: Defected during Battle of Hogwarts, surrendered to ministry authorities after. Taken into custody by Abelard Bock. Served five years in Azkaban. Died 2017, St. Mungo’s hospital, final cause complications from heart attack, heart failure, pneumonia.
- **Snape, Severus**: Killed by Voldemort’s serpent Nagini at Voldemort’s orders, 1998, final cause blood loss due to multiple severe lacerations, exacerbated by anticoagulant in snake venom.

A chill plucked at her stomach to see Severus listed as dead. The memory of him on the ground, broken, leaking sacrificial blood and memorial tears... She shook it off, letting her stupid brain assure her of how alive he’d been beside her mere hours before. She stood up and started pacing.

Ginny sighed, “Do you think this is the information we need? Based on the ritual?”

“It’s a decent bet. If each wizard were holding their wand in their portrait, and a wand knows who defeats or disarms its master, that would be a powerful guide for directing vengeance. It’s still a bit of a reach but it would stand to reason if...except...” she worried thoughtfully at the tip of her thumb with her teeth.

Ginny grimaced, “I don’t think Greyback even carried a wand most of the time. He vastly prefered to maul people, and his werewolf form didn’t really lend itself to sleeves and pockets. He’d be a wild card. But then the paintings could be artifices in their own right even if their method of painting was a bit more...” she trailed off, substituting a facial writhe for adjectives that didn’t exist.

Ginny pressed experimentally past delicacy, “Silk-screened?”

Hermione winced, “You’re a terrible person. But yes...and portrait-Severus, he never had one until I gave him mine. He definitely would have drawn it on me more than once if he’d had one.”

Ginny clutched an imaginary necklace of pearls and fanned herself, “Do tell.”

Hermione turned pointedly, still pacing, offhandedly remarking, “Terrible. Person.”

“You’re the one blushing. So...all the rest of his clothing and physical detail and whatnot, all that
translated, but not his wand.”

Hermione nodded, “I...I mean I assume so. I never saw pre-portrait Sev...” she trailed off, realizing where she was going and feeling Ginny’s suppressed grin radiating at her from the desk.

Ginny paused before speaking, “That’s on you. I don’t think I’m a terrible person.”

“Yet, rest assured...” Hermione studied the list, meandering off into her own thoughts as her pacing wound down. Maybe they wouldn’t need the wands to know where to direct their vengeance. If the paintings were artifices they might have their own ineffable ways of knowing who wronged their subject. It would make good design sense; Voldemort wouldn’t want vengeance paintings that would change sides on him the way a wand would. Still, even if that were the case, where did the wands go? If he was confident that they were his thralls, why disarm them? Or maybe wands just don’t translate for some reason related to...

“Did you ever want to?”

“What?”

“To see him. Pre-portrait.” Ginny sounded serious in a way that was unnerving after her banter.

Hermione rolled her eyes, trying to ignore the change, “You mean when we were literally children and he was an abusive inscrutable bastard?”

Something riddled around behind Ginny’s eyes, “No, I mean when we were passionate young women of the resistance and he was a dark, brooding, conflicted uber-nerd playing by his own rules. You never thought about whether the two of you would work?”

“I was sort of busy just then, and hopelessly in love with Ron. And he was twenty years older. I wouldn’t have been half-his-age-plus-seven until we were, what, thirty-three and fifty-two?”

“Hah, you thought about it. You can’t have done that in your head just now.”

She sniffed, “Can too. I’m an arithmancer and a genius.”

“...and a bit of a prude...”

Hermione pointedly ignored that, “Anyway, you were here when he was presiding over the Carrow reign of torture like an indifferent vulture. However did you resist him?”

Ginny sighed, “You’re missing my point.”

Hermione was losing the struggle to keep exasperation out of her voice, “Which is?”

Ginny nodded, “Ok. What’s different now? Is it just that we’re older? That you’re caught up in age to him?”

It was a fair question, “I...I honestly don’t know. I’m less judgemental than I was.”

“Plainly.”

Hermione pushed on, “I’ve got more of a perspective, his choices don’t seem so alien. And he...well...he offered. That never seemed like a thing that would ever happen before it did. He never seemed to want anything from anyone except to be left alone. It would have been...impolite to want him. I don’t tend to dwell on things I can’t have.”
“Except for Ron, of course. Back then I mean,” Ginny smiled fondly.

“Yeah,” Hermione nodded, blushing again.

“But before he...offered...you picked his quarters for yourself. And you kept the painting.”

“I didn’t know he was a person then,” she huffed, defensive, "As soon as I did I offered him his liberty.”

Ginny was better at staving off exasperation when she wanted to, but not perfectly, “But before that, he was still important to you. Without being a person, or a prospect, more than the coincidence of your job, even if you didn’t realize it, he meant something to you. Or am I wrong?”

“Not romantically. Or, well, I guess I should say not intimately, not sexually. Not falling-in-love romantically, but in a certain poetical sense, yes, his memory meant something to me. Mystery, estrangement from the known. Memories from the war. And sort of a work-around for thinking about the problems in my life without having to actually think about my life, if that makes any sense.”

“But even then, wanting part of him for yourself, you still didn’t fantasize about him until he sort-of started it?”

Hermione sighed, “I fantasized about...about talking to him. Being encouraged by him. Like he would know how to, sort of, bind me up on my broken side. Like maybe I could have done the same for him if I had known.”

Ginny deadpanned, “Hot.”

Hermione grimaced, “Look, don’t make fun of me. I’ve never really been prone to...maybe I’m too literal for sexual fantasies. I’m just not fanciful. I study, I plan. I don’t know how to pick people apart like that and...use them. People are complicated. Sex is complicated. So no, a dead man who’d openly despised me and would still be hopelessly in love with a dead woman if he’d lived never seemed like a real hot prospect.”

“So what was it?”

“What was what?”

“The need for him you felt that brought you here. I don’t even mean literally, I mean...what you were saying earlier about where your heart is. That ‘here’. In the vast dark, why is he where you got dropped? What makes him your beacon?”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, “I’ve...thought about him a lot. Over the years. How different our lives would be now if not for him. And how unlikely...for him to have done it.”

“Unlikely?”

“Well, yes. I mean, he genuinely despised all of us. Master spy or not, it never seemed like an act. Certainly everything was, in some degree, but his obeisances to the dark lord were cold, guarded, unemotional. You saw. He didn’t fawn or profess love or other emotions for effect. He wasn’t spontaneously expressive. If the way he hated us when we were children was an act, it certainly showed considerable range. He hated us with a passion,” she lingered over that thought uncertainly, trying to resolve it with the man she had only recently met, “Maybe he was angry about other things and only took it out on us but...that’s really not how he does anything. His single-mindedness and self-control were astonishing,” she indulged a small smile, “still are.”
“I don’t get what you’re driving at.”

Hermione leaned her elbows on the desk, “From the time he got to Hogwarts as a child, there was no human joy in his life. None. His best memory is of working by himself, down here, over his potions. In the time we knew him, his indifferent solitude had been exchanged for active daily reminders of his worst days and the ever-growing promise of intense suffering. And he had no love for us, at all, and yet...and yet he lived every day for us. For seven years. Despite all his worst nightmares coming true one at a time, beyond all conceivable sense and inclination…”

“The man who lived.”

She nodded, “And all for a dead woman, apparently. When I came back here I think...part of me wanted to understand...how he did it. Because even with all the love I have in my life it’s...it hasn’t always been easy.”

Ginny smiled, “I can’t imagine what it’s like.”

Hermione gave a non-committal head-wobble, “I’ve told you, I don’t need you to.”

“I mean for him. Not the one that died, this one, your one. What it’s like to live the life he did, and then to be thrown into a box and wake up after what I can only imagine was a much-needed twenty-year nap to find...it’s all over. The danger’s long gone. He can live in peace in his dungeon, sharing it with a foxy brain-box who adores and admires him in this very complicated night-time-telly sort of way…”

Hermione shook her head over a blush, “Who then manages to lose that for him after barely forty-eight hours.”

“But putting aside the weirdness and the self-recriminations for now...what’s really different for him now? For either of you? I know you’re not a snot-nosed kid anymore, granted, but...he never reached for anyone. Yet even before he knew the world had changed, that it was safe to feel differently, he reached for you. Why?”

“Well...I don’t know. I suppose I’m afraid to question it, honestly. He mentioned dreaming, being disoriented...of it seeming like I was just suddenly there, a strange offering. But I guess with the way you put it, that would have made it even less likely for him to feel differently…”

“What if it’s because he’s like you?”

Hermione regarded her piercingly. Ginny had certainly gotten good at the probing journalistic interview, and it was beginning to outmatch her own political dexterity. She felt an unfair annoyance and she bit down on it, trusting that Ginny’s intentions were good “Look, I know I’m self-centered, but you can’t bait every hook with cryptically comparing me to people and expect me to always bite. Just say what you mean.”

Ginny sighed, “I don’t know if you’ll believe me if I do. I’m hoping you’ll lead.”

“Hope again, seeker.”

“Ok ok well...things out here, you know they’re different from how you describe things in there with him. In there, you feel safe and brave and clear. You do things you wouldn’t be able to stand in the flesh right now, because even good stuff hurts for reasons you can’t control. That’s what fantasizing feels like, by the way: even the dangerous ones are safe, even the ones about having your power taken away come from a place of total editorial control. But what if we get him out here and you can’t be together because...”
“Because we’re both broken?” she hadn’t meant to sound combative, but it seemed to take a measure of courage and confrontation for Ginny to return her gaze and nod.

“Or for lack of physical chemistry. It’s just that the part of him you describe meeting, he sounds so different from the man we knew.”

“Well yeah, what little we knew.”

“The man who wore three layers and a hundred buttons every day. Whose hair always looked like he didn’t wash enough. Who was defensive and closed-off and vicious in ways that...well I won’t suppose anything too specific but he seemed to take an almost necessary comfort in repelling people. I think whatever broke him left the same kind of scars you’re carrying, the kind that make touch hurt. I think he didn’t like to be touched. I think he didn’t like to be naked. And I know he seems alright with it in dreams, but then so do you.”

Hermione nodded, not really wanting to listen, “It...hasn’t been as cavalier as all that. He is touchy about a lot of things. But I think he’s getting better. I think I’m getting better.”

Ginny nodded emphatically, “You are. And I’m rooting for you, Hermes. Both of you. So hard. But I worry about whether you’ll be ok if we pull this off and the two of you, in bodies, in the real world, just don’t...work. I’m honestly worried about you losing this thing that’s helping you so much, and it’s possible you could lose it by saving him as much as by letting him go.”

Hermione swallowed, “I know you know I’m not doing this just because I want... Gods and goblins how many times am I going to have to explain this? Even if he doesn’t want me, or even if it turns out that I can’t want more than a fantasy, I still want to find him, to get him whatever it is he does want. I owe him that. And I think even that will help me. Do you understand?”

Ginny nodded emphatically, “I do. Believe me, I get that. I know exactly what that feels like. That’s exactly why I’m being such an asshole about trying to understand what you really want.”

Hermione smiled fondly, sadly “Anyway, yeah, I have thought about that...we even talked about it, some...that maybe he’ll find, once all this excitement has died down, he just wants this part of him to go join the rest of him on the off-chance of seeing Lily,” she shrugged again, her voice tightening, “and I’ll try to...to figure out how to do it. Once it really is a choice and not just him trying to be noble, I mean. And all that’s ‘if’ we bring him back. A big ‘if’. If it’s a matter of bringing him back from the dead, I doubt we can manage it. Some part of him definitely died that day in the shrieking shack, and back from the dead doesn’t happen, not in any way you’d ever want. It’s taken some time, and a lot of...really dark notions over the last year...but I accept that.”

Ginny flinched sympathetically, “Sorry, love.”

Hermione shrugged, “It’s not your fault. I’m feeling a little dramatic I suppose. I barely understand how any of this is meant to work. Nonsense and abstraction is usually Ron’s department,” she shook her head, “It’s bothering me that I couldn’t find him last night, in my dreams, and he didn’t come find me, but there could be any number of reasons for that.”

Ginny looked down and cleared her throat.

“Djinn, what is it?”

“I think I did. Last night.”

“Did what?”
“Find him. Talk to him.”

“What?”

Ginny’s face went pale as sea foam, “I dreamed…”

Hermione gaped, “Were you holding a book? In a hurricane?”

Ginny looked at her, eyes round, and nodded.

“I saw you. What did he…how did he...”

She took a deep breath, “I had the diary, in my lap. Like the nightmares I sometimes have, but it wasn’t the same. I felt protected, grounded, and it wasn’t ordering me to do things, there weren’t even written words, I was just making a police sketch of the missing painting, the way you described it, in profile, hair hanging…then I noticed I was sketching with my wand, and then with just my fingers, I felt like I had…talons on my fingertips. Phoenix claws. And I wasn’t actually drawing I was scratching paper away to reveal the ink underneath. When I could really recognize him I started to hear whispers. His lips moved but he didn’t look at me. I do think he said my name, but it was mostly just a jumble of different phrases, far too fast. One was definitely ‘please help her’, something about harming him, and an admonishment to look for him…but that wasn’t the way he said it but it felt like what he meant…begging to be looked for, like ‘look and then see’…I also heard, not in his voice but in my own head…not controlling, just insistent, telling me to ‘draw him’…but I knew it didn’t mean the sketch it meant…like drawing blood. I was trying to hear him and the wind was loud. I could hear him telling me to look, alternating with that voice in my mind, ‘draw him’ and I was trying but I pressed too hard and I tore the paper with my claws because I had forgotten that they could destroy a horcrux, and the ink welled out and then everything kind of fell apart in the wind. I meant to say something but you weren’t there when I woke up and it’s been such a day since…”

Hermione was nodding slowly, “No it’s great. You’ve done great Djinn. You said he didn’t look at you, but he called you by name? Did he call you ‘Ginny’?”

“Yes I think so. It sounded strange to me, because I don’t think he ever called me that in his life. Even when he was hauling Neville and I into detention for leading the resistance, it was always ‘Miss Weasley,’” she shook her head, “He always knew how to make it sound like it rhymed with pond scum.”

“Could it have been ‘Minnie’?”

Ginny squinted, “Maybe. What would that mean?”

Hermione sighed, “I haven’t the faintest idea. He said it once before in kind of a post-traumatic fugue state. It’s also…” she sighed, “it’s a secret but it’s also Minerva’s childhood nickname. Which also would make no sense.”

“Are you going to ask her about it?”

She shrugged, “Just as soon as I get the chance. I’ll try to slip it in between exhorting her on racial justice and getting myself sacked.”

“Well she’s not angry with me yet. If I see her I’ll try to work some of the weasley charm.”

“Ugh, ok, but go gently. She’s going to hate that I told you.”

“It is kind of adorable. So…it’s ok that I…dreamed about your lover?”
Hermione gave it a moment’s honest thought, and the thought glowed, “Yes. Emphatically yes.”

Ginny reached out and petted Hermione fondly on the shoulder, “So how does it feel? Your...desires about him? You did say you wanted us to check you. Because horcruxes.”

Hermione sighed, “I said that, didn’t I. Well, I don’t feel crazy, or compelled, at least not about him. When I’m awake I just feel...hopelessly entangled. Like things can’t be right until I make things right for him. It’s nothing like the feeling from any of Voldemort’s horcruxes.”

Ginny nodded sober agreement.

There was something of a ka-whumph against the outside of the classroom door, and Ginny and Hermione exchanged a look before answering it.
With apologies to Kurt Vonnegut Jr., J.K. Rowling, and you, the heroically dogged reader. I blame Beasley.

Ginny pulled open the door to find Beasley and Nikita piling through it half-backwards, Beasley with her arms full of books, Nick with his arms full of Beasley. Beasley managed to pivot and catch herself on the desk beside Hermione by planting her books on the tabletop and hanging on for dear life. Nick lost his grip early and caught himself against the open door.

Ginny smiled broadly, giving Hermione a significant look, “Nick, Beasley, you got here at the same time. How good. Come on through. Hermione, why don’t you show Beasley to the Transcendentawozzit and I’ll introduce Nick to Hogwart.

“Oh, actually,” Nick ran a hand through his hair, “only I’ve got to go prepare, got another section. I was only just...helping to...um. After dinner, perhaps?”

Ginny nodded. Beasley’s didn’t say anything, her mouth drawn in an exasperated line. She didn’t look at him as he pulled the door closed. When it was latched firmly she rolled her eyes, “He’s not helping.”

Ginny shrugged, “Alright, well, here, let me have a few of those,” she picked up half of Beasley’s books, “You’ll likely want to leave these on the dining table, gets a little windy in the room with the dream machine. Hermione you get set up for your students and keep plugging away at that ritual. I’ll get Beasley set, and then when it’s time for her to go I’m going to pop home and check on the dogs. If you’re willing to keep the floo open for us I’ll come back with Harry for dinner. So, Beasley tell me all about—” the conversation broke off cleanly when the door closed on it.

Hermione sighed and waved her wand at the board, her lesson for the afternoon laying itself out like a summoned feast. With ten minutes to dig into her ritual notes, she melded into the task. She was just about to take a moment to look up and see how much time she had when there was a strange thudding pop and the pressure in the room changed. It was as if someone had cast a muffliato charm ten times more powerful than anything she’d ever felt.

The magic window was still bright with early afternoon sunlight, but there was someone standing in front of it, looking around herself amazed. She was a slightly older woman, tall and broad-shouldered, with wire-rimmed glasses, watery blue eyes, and strikingly thick eyebrows. The thing that stuck in Hermione’s mind as peculiar, somehow, was not that this woman had suddenly appeared in her classroom, or that she was wearing a pullover and jeans instead of any sort of school attire in the middle of the day, but that a woman her age was barefooted on the cold floor.

They stared at each other a moment, each unsure whether the other was actually looking at them or if they were caught in some sort of voyeuristic pensieve. It was Hermione that finally spoke, ever the bravest in any room.

“Hello, who are you?”
Oh...um...I...

“Am I dreaming this?”

No, not exactly. I suppose you could say that I am. Only you’re not supposed to be able to see me. I think Beasley must be getting creative with that machine back there.

“I see...or rather, I don’t...at all. Who are you, why are you here, and why am I not supposed to be able to see you?”

I gritted my teeth, I...I don’t think you’ll like the answer.

She squinted her lion-painted eyes at me, “If you’ve been observing me you’ll know I’ve had it just about up to here with vague and evasive answers.”

I nodded, You’re right, sorry. Only I’m not supposed to be here. It’s terribly self-indulgent, I don’t expect anyone will tolerate it. I’m not nearly the writer Vonnegut is, and to be honest I wasn’t planning this.

Her mind whirled and something hard and cold clicked into place, “Vonnegut. Breakfast of Champions. You’re...like that. You’re a writer. You’re not just watching you’re...you’re writing all this. Did you...am I...”

No no no not nearly to the degree you’re thinking of. You’re not mine, you’re much much better than that. You’re someone else’s entirely. You, Harry, Voldemort, your world and your war, that was all someone else. She’s wonderful, just brilliant, you’d love her madly. You’re famous in my world, far more than I’ll ever be. I’ve just...been making you up a bit of an adventure is all.

She really didn’t look amused, “For how long?”

Only since Friday. Well, that and the...the situation. I realized with dread that I couldn’t keep her from knowing what that meant, it was too unfair.

“Ron, you mean. You killed Ron.”

I’m far more accustomed to being a coward than she is, so I just said sort of.

Her eyes brimmed and she hated me, “You sort of killed my Ron. Rose and Hugo’s’ father. What’s wrong with you?”

I don’t really have a defense. Not a good-enough one. There isn’t one.

“Then I’ll settle for an explanation.”

Right. Well. I didn’t do it lightly. I didn’t really mean to do it at all. He died because people die and it doesn’t make any sense, and I needed to write about that, but there’s never anything to say unless you’re in it and even then...show don’t tell, you know? And I’m just yet-another middle-aged widow and you’re Hermione Granger. Where I come from, a whole generation of little kids who loved to read learned to believe in themselves by believing in you. No one would ever assume that you struggle with grief out of weakness or self-indulgence. You’re smarter than me and braver and when I think about what you would do in my place it makes living without him, living at all, easier. And it’s monstrous to put you through all this, I know. I thought I was just doing something cathartic for myself that would be less tedious than an endless elliptical essay about nothingness, but every thought you’ve had about how wrong it is to treat Severus as a plaything are things that I’ve
thought, about all of you.

“So this is, what, a belated request for my consent?”

If that’s what you want it to be. I’m not exactly sure why I’m here right now. This story keeps surprising me. And it’s about to get a lot worse, honestly. Or...weirder, now that the texentes is being adjusted. Has it been terrible?

She glared at me with an incredulity I completely deserved, “The part where Ron died? Yes. The part where I’ve been an absolute failure as a parent? Yes. The part where I’m stumbling through the world in a distressing and badly-framed cattle-chute of coincidences and shitty devices? Yes. It’s been fucking terrible. Quite on purpose, I imagine.”

Well...not the shitty devices part. I would do better by you on that count if I could. And I do mean to do better by you on the rest of it.

“So this is going to end up a happy story then?”

Only if you want it to be. If you want there to be a way I’ll make sure that there is one.

“What in the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I mean there are limitations on me. I didn’t invent you, or your world, or death, or grief for that matter. I sometimes get you wrong but I don’t control what you say, I only watch you and write it down as near as I can manage. Sometimes things go wrong or drag on pointlessly so I back up the story and try something else because the things you do and say in response show me it’s not your story, that I’m seeing what I want to see and forcing things I want to believe. And I’m lazy and inconsistent and wordy and easily discouraged and I lack voice and I use the same two bland sentence structures over and over. The story you’re in has only pushed past two hundred pages because it feels like you’re doing most of the work. I watch you. I offer you things. The things that don’t suit you I change. I don’t feel like I have the right to change you to suit them. I’ve been trying to make it quick, hence everything happening all since Friday. And you’ll be done by this Friday, I promise. I don’t want to keep you.

“Do I get to make demands?”

Yes, I think so. Like I say, in the world of stories you outrank me by a fair bit.

“Nobody else dies.”

I bit my lip, One person is going to die. Possibly two. Three at the absolute outside.

“What if I give you an order?”

I swallowed hard, considering, I’d do my best to make sure you end up happy.

Her eyes shone with a fearsome and desperate wrath, “I don’t want to be happy, I want the people I love not to die anymore.”

Believe me, I understand that. But you can’t control everyone else’s choices any more than I can control yours. You wouldn’t be happy in a world with people less-real than you. Things go along, and death...it just shows up, and it’s not fair and it doesn’t make sense and we apparently just have to settle for “maybe” and “oh well” and go on. The person that made you, she made death as indelible a truth in your world as it is in hers and mine, and it matters. It’s why life matters, as far as I can tell. For an awful lot of people it’s what makes you and Harry matter to them. Because down
here in grief, the very worst places we ever go, there are stories about people who are brave and who grieve and who love and who go on living, or don’t. Because when there’s no one in your life who lives on the same side of the chasm of widowhood with you, there’s sometimes a character there; a fellow widow, a fellow orphan, a fellow freak, someone trying to carry an affliction or an addiction, someone in love who isn’t loved back, someone growing older, someone finding out they’re sick, someone you can sit beside in that worst moment who is there with you, in the showing rather than the telling, the knowing rather than the guessing, who you can walk with like a friend...it matters.

Her expression evened out and I almost felt bad for talking her down. I almost wanted her to hit me. But her mind was working on the problem, taking up her strength, “Like Kilgore Trout is with me right now. You made sure he was in my book collection so I’d understand this now.”

“I swear on my life I did not know this was going to happen when you picked that book. At the time, you were talking to a person who you thought was also someone else’s creation, who you wanted to connect with anyway. It seemed to me like what you would pick. And you and he both seem like people who would enjoy Vonnegut, to me. And I guess I wanted you, and him, to know how much I believe in you, in your natures, in your unwavering bands of light, about how you matter. And I maybe wanted to recommend a better book than this one to anyone reading this one. I didn’t feel you fighting me when I put that in there. Themes are tricky, but this part is happening because of that, not the other way around.

“You swear?”

Lying to you would completely defeat the purpose. But I don’t know how long we have before Beasley changes the setting and I have to give up this peculiarly self-indulgent narrative device. Ask for something else.

“You don’t get to hurt my children.”

I swear it. No more than I already have, anyway.

“Or any of the children here. Leave them out of it, whatever you’re doing. Maybe a little excitement if you have to, but no danger, no harm.”

I promise, happily. The whole upshot of the story is kind of adult, anyway, and a little bit of an inversion of the way Harry’s stories are written with students running about everywhere getting tortured half to death and their teachers as these peripheral figures. Keeping the kids out of this one is part of the point, I promise. But understand, not hurting the children means that you have to live; no matter what happens, you just have to live with it. If you decide to die, the way that would hurt them would be part of the story. And, honestly, I don’t always get to choose. I don’t one-hundred percent get to decide how bad it gets, but I’ll go back as many times as it takes to make it something you can live with. I’m pretty bland about violence and risk so...anyway yeah, no hurting kids. No problem.

“Alright. Fair enough. The elves, too. Things get better for them by the end of this. A lot better. Promise me that.”

I promise. I more-than-promise. I dream of it.

“And Ginny and Harry. No matter what happens with me, they’re fine, and they still love each other, and I don’t make their lives fall apart because of some idiot notion about how only two people can ever truly love each other at any given time or...or...anything like that.”
I promise.

“How many wishes do I get?”

Not sure. As many as you ask for that I’m able to do, I guess. Until I pop out of existence again. This chapter’s already about five pages, though, so I wouldn’t bet more than three more.

“Five pages? What are you describing my rippling thews every time I talk or something?” she asked, her bosom heaving or something.

I try to keep it tasteful, but I guess I’m just kind of a word-hose. This is cathartic for me, remember?

“Ok ok. Alright. Um...whatever the end is, he gets a choice. I don’t want a weird resurrected mannequin of Ron or a two-dimensional dream-Severus with no free will and no purpose beyond my happy ending...as it were. I want anyone in my life when the smoke clears to have their free will intact, not compromised or cobbled together or trapped by me or you or any of our stupid devices. None of that ‘he was just a part of me all along’ bullshit.”

Got it. I might get a little annoyingly allegorical, but, yeah. I’m intimately familiar how unbearably trite “they live on in you” feels in the face of grief. I can’t force him to stay, but I won’t force you to take it serenely either.

Her ferocity faltered, “But if he is going to choose to die, I want a chance to see him off. To say goodbye. A real one. And a real choice, too. Not more of his noble pathos self-sacrifice bollocks.”

It’ll hurt you.

“Oh, I know. I consent, ok? The pain is part of the love, right? I want to know what he chooses more than I want him to choose me.”

Ok.

She looked down, “Do you know what he’s going to choose?”

Honestly I don’t. He’s an odd duck. Part of the reason I don’t know what you or he are going to choose is because I need to find out. Because I lost my Dave, like your Ron, like his Lily, and I’ve been drowning since. I need to find out what people smarter and braver than me would choose, and how and why, and I have to find it honestly, because nothing makes sense without him. He was always my muse, he could always move me to write, and I feel like I’ve lost that too. No great loss to the world, certainly, but I miss it, so it matters. He was always so alight inside with fantasies, so unashamed. We could always finish each other’s dreams. It hurts that that went away when he did. There’s a lot of love-letter to him in here. I wanted a lot of it to happen in dreams just in case that makes it easier for him to see, easier for him to help me finish, wherever he is. I get through the day on an awful lot of nonsense. Speaking of that, I have a gift for you.

Muggle that I am, I couldn’t resist the chance to “accio” the vial of memories, even though I’d kind of lost track of where it was, and I might have had to make it travel through a couple doors somehow. I put in my finger, and pulled out the love letter that she had made for him, the tiny soft-lit world of the two of them making love in a chair. I detached it gently from the rest, and rolled it into a ball, putting it into her locket for safekeeping, like a fairy godmother offering a secret weapon, the stage crew putting the gun on the mantelpiece, a lazy device unworthy of what it really means to me or her but, oh well. It’s what happened.

You’ll have a chance to get that to him. He does love you. He feels bound to you the same way you
“I really didn’t want you to say that. It’s not fair.”

“I know, but I’m dying for you to know it. So is he. Honestly, you’re both so stubborn about it, and it’s so obvious.”

“You know that neither of us can know how we feel yet. It’s only been a couple days.”

“Dreams and stories are different. Things go fast. They can be impossibly clear. A frog can love a maiden, a witch can save a prince. And in fantasies even moreso.”

“Do you think of this as a fantasy?”

“Only the parts clearly labeled as such. I’m not looking to starve to death on illusory banquets. I have to go soon, make a wish.”

“Is there an afterlife?”

“I can’t tell you that. I honestly don’t know.”

“Well then make something up. You owe me for this nonsense.”

“I can tell you that there are other stories in my head for Ron. And he’s smugly loving how much you miss him right now.”

She grinned and laughed at that, despite the unreality of the notion. It feels good to make her laugh, it’s my favorite part. I wanted to give her a hug but it seemed inappropriate. Unprofessional.

She sighed, not wanting to ask what she wanted to ask, “So...he still enjoys things? He’s still alive?”

“I shuffle my bare feet on the cold floor a little, I don’t know about this world, but in my world he’s Ron Weasley the same way you’re Hermione Granger. He’s...always. Not that that helps when you miss him, I know.”

She nodded, “I suppose this is the part where I should be grateful that I’m part of something bigger and better than everyday life.”

“No. No, there’s nothing better than everyday life. Its why we’re always trying so hard to get back there, why stories end when we finally do. There’s really no describing it. Everyday life, everyday death. No place like home.”

We were quiet for an uncomfortable moment. She wanted, desperately, to ask me if I could bring Ron back, to pretend for just a moment that she hadn’t already accepted that back-from-the-dead doesn’t happen. She whirled through a hundred ways to ask, and none of them seemed like anything that could overcome the constraints of her world, or mine, bitterly familiar with the inadequacy of magic. I can’t tell a story where death isn’t death. At least not this one.

I cleared my throat, Ok, One more, then I have to go, for your own good. It’s three in the morning where I am. Stuff starts to get a little ridiculous if I go on too long.

She grimaced, "You don’t say.”

Don’t be mean. You’re not mean. That’s me leaking through. See? Tired.
“Alright. Ok, I want my back to stop hurting all the time. And I don’t want to remember this conversation. I’ll just second-guess what I ought to have asked for forever.”

Granted. Make good choices. I’ll be watching.

And I vanished in an apologetic and narratively irresponsible puff of difference.
The hardest part in potion-making, for elves, is the stipulation that everything be done by hand. Hermione was overjoyed to see that Wooly was one of the four that Happy sent her for her last section of the day, along with a young porter named Holp and two members of the cleaning staff, both named Bizzy. From carrying objects to cutting up herbs, Wooly in particular was constantly and compulsively summoning and levitating and magically manipulating his tools. The third time she corrected him he had tears of frustration in his eyes. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff each lost twenty house points that day because human students kept asking Holp to fetch them things from the shelves instead of doing it themselves. Hermione was sure that the first instance was a mistake of habit, but after that it was something of a joke. The last incident landed a young Dabulus Flitwick in detention. That was finally enough to keep everyone’s work in their own hands.

Dinnertime came and there was no Harry or Ginny, only an owl with a clipping from the *Daily Prophet* and a note in Ginny’s hasty, precise hand: “Having dinner with Draco, lots to tell, still no leads on where but a very probable who. Take a look. I can’t believe I missed it. Hogwarts safe for tonight, I expect. I’ve sent Luna an owl. Get some sleep, compare notes in the morning. -T.P.”

Hermione smiled, realizing that the signature probably stood for “Terrible Person.” She smoothed out the small clipping from the previous day’s edition. It was a slender column, probably from one of the back pages, and she read it aloud to herself to combat the imposing silence of her quarters.

“Malicious Vandalism at St. Mungo’s”

“Officials have confirmed that a break-in at St. Mungo’s hospital late Monday night was confined to the medical research wing, and that all magical damages not related to the breaking and entering were to a single artifact previously used for spell recovery research. Specialists are assessing whether the LeStrange wand can be restored to a usable condition, but declined to comment. Authorities are not commenting on possible suspects or motives for the damage at this time, though auror involvement in the investigation has been confirmed.”

There was a small picture of a petite white-haired woman holding a black walnut wand that had been snapped in half, the end dangling by its dragon heartstring core. Luna Lovegood looked back and forth from the sorry wand to the photographer, smiling in her perpetually cryptic, bemused way.

Bellatrix LeStrange’s wand had been destroyed. Hermione looked closer at the picture, trying to discern whether the research room had been tossed in a manner resembling her own, but the picture was too small and tight upon its subject. The article had only mentioned “magical damage”. Wizarding folk didn’t tend to give too much thought to the other kind, given how easy it was to mend.

The scars on her forearm radiated a phantom itch. She felt sure this news was a sign that whoever was perpetrating all this misery had a plan and was acting fast, while she and Harry and Ginny were losing ground they didn’t even know they needed. The silence felt oppressive so she crunched the
paper in her fist to mar it, shaking her head. She would talk to Ginny and Luna and hopefully Harry in the morning and tear into the ritual and figure out...everything. Until then...

She thought about going dinner but her appetite politely declined to attend.

She thought about starting to re-pack her half-unpacked room, but the space felt too empty as it was, and the grating silence honed her priorities to a point. She had to find him. She couldn’t just wait around. Time was bleeding away at the edges. She read Beasley’s notes in a blazing skim and went to her room, ducking behind the tapestries to ponder the blue-white cyclone of the dream weaver.

Beasley’s tinkering was evident. The juddering in its arcs and rounds had smoothed. Its motions, though still utterly mad and too intricate to follow, were reeling more than flailing. The wind and light, too, moved more smoothly, as if their cogs had been oiled.

The purr of gears and the flow of pendulums and spirals was diverting and hypnotic. As her eyes relaxed she could see patterns more clearly, could see filament-threads gleaming in the air. She motioned to try to stir these filaments, noticing fine ribbons of silken light trailing from the tips of her own fingers. They vanished when her hand tensed, but flowed into the air again when she resolved to let them, resolved to reach. Gliding together they sang and sighed, higher than hearing, in tones like stroked glass. They weren’t threads spinning, exactly. More like...ripples expanding...waves catching threads of sunlight at their crests...round and round and outward and outward....

A dizziness began, but also a balance, a centrality. The keening threads resonated in the silver sphere’s latticed texture and suddenly she could hear, shivering through her where her skin met the air, a song, gliding and weaving with complex disharmonies that compounded into sweetness and diverged into silence.

She felt the sounds move through her until they were originating from her, and her sense of place shifted as she realized that the texentes was not a machine but a model, a tuning fork for the music of the spheres, a kinetic model to study the motion of...what? Dreams? That seemed wrong. Dreams were the product, the fabric. What trailed around her was the raw silk, the damp flax, the unspun golden straw of...what? Self? Life? Story? There was no nearer word, and they all began blending into the same sort of meaning anyway. She was filled with a foolhardy, confident immediacy, like the first time he had touched her, wordless and patient, and she trusted it with a serene sort of madness.

The sound of the waltzing hooks swarmed around her, seeming not to echo off the wall behind her but to exist behind her instead, the wall replaced, the echo and the origin indistinguishable, herself at the center.

It occurred to her idly, with a sort of hookah logic, that a circle was not a circle but two arcs pressed end to end, a sphere was not a sphere but two basins pressed mouth to mouth, pensieves reflecting a hermetic infinity in one another like mirrors, surrounded by a tangle of infinite orbiting vectors that might describe a girdle binding them or a seam defining them...and no difference. Any thread was every thread. Everything was one thing, and she could go anywhere she belonged. It was only ever the difference of a step. Her heart yearned after the thought.

She let out a reckless thread, pressing it into the wind, needing motion. It caught and pulled and for a moment it hurt, a sharp sting up her arm and across her back like a kite-string burning against fingers that could not stop it from running. She let it run. It drew out far and she became afraid of being unraveled, but something in her chest untangled to give it more lead and then held firm, and the thread described an orbit, gleaming. She traced a fingertip along its length. It was smooth, steely almost, not flossy like memory. Spun force, it sang of the possible, resonated with the actual, homed
to her desire.

*Find him* she intoned, somewhere beneath her ribs, and the thread blurred as if plucked, sounding. She let out another thread, another expanding ripple, felt the air tremble it like a whisker, outward across time. She heard a whisper and turned, spindling in her strands, but the sound vanished as soon as she looked. She let out another thread, and another, more, her mind sliding further into harmony with nonsense, recognizing the gyring curve of the thread as mirroring, somehow, the direct north of history and change, modeling that one needed to move in circles and spirals to follow what we mistake for linear time and causality. She let out another thread, each twisting strand spinning the pulley-point of a friction drill as it ran, nursing an ember in her chest. *Find him.* Another whisper, another turn, curving threads spindling tighter, wrapping her into a cocoon, lifting her off the ground that seemed strange for existing.

He was close. The threads vibrated more finely than the tiny hairs of her ear’s inner spiral. She could hear him on her skin. He was so close, tortured, crying out in pain, crying out for help. He was just beyond the spiraling weave. She had no purchase with which to propel herself, but there was only either stillness or motion. She chose to move. Queen’s rook to queen’s rook seven for a secret never to be told.

She slid through a cloudlike curtain, like shedding a skin, and fell to the stone floor. It was dark. The texentes was silent and still. She felt a momentary dread that she had slept through all of Thursday into Friday evening and it had wound down, but that fear passed quickly with the certainty of dreams: Of course the texentes wasn’t running in her dream, she thought; she was dreaming because it was running in her mind.

Even as the mechanical thrumming faded from the air around her, she could still feel him on her skin like a migratory urge, and her heart leapt. He was just beyond the two tapestries. He was in her bedroom. She slipped through as quietly as she could to surprise him, needing to squeeze against the tapestry of Hogwart to get around the iron headboard.

Everything was different than she had left it.

A low bookshelf by the armoire, a travel bag of clothes resting atop it and rifled, a box of books on the floor and no books on the shelves. The writing desk from the main room was in the corner of the bedroom instead, open and piled with a stack of fresh journals and uncut quills. There were no enchanted sconces, and the only light in the room came from a single candle-stand by the desk. The iron bed was against the tapestry, but her quilts were gone, and instead there was a single pillow about the size of a bag of sugar, a dense canvas mattress, and two thin blankets that didn’t look like they provided much protection from the cold.

Sitting on the far edge at the head of the bed, his back to the room, was Severus. He was wearing a dingy grey nightshirt so thin she could see the knobby bones of his back as he hunched, bracing himself up with stiff arms. She moved silently another few steps along the length of the bed until she could see the edge of his face.

He looked knifelike, drawn with youth and clenched muscle, his cheeks hollowed, his tightly shut eyes rimmed with red and grey. A scraggle of dark beard seemed incongruous on his pale razor profile.

He was heartbreakingly young, she thought. Younger than Nikita, probably.

How old had he and Harry’s parents been when Voldemort had killed the latter and doomed the former? Twenty? Twenty-one? It had never sunk in for her just how young they’d all been. As young as Fred.
He was there, she knew suddenly, preparing for his first week of teaching, just as she had been when he’d come to her. The youngest potions master in the school’s history. One day soon would be September first, ten months since the hallows-eve murder of Harry’s parents.

And he looked like he was ready to die of grief.

Hermione felt simultaneously ancient and foolish. What could she say to a man half her age who was grieving a love he would carry, like a holy wound, until he was destined to die for it? What comfort, what warning could he possibly hear from a comfortable widow with beautiful children and two loving families? What could she possibly be entitled to say? Her droll and detached mind wondered quietly if this was how Dumbledore had felt all the time, curating his damaged charges. It had felt so right to come to him when she’d felt him crying, but now that she realized just where she’d come it felt impossibly wrong, invasive, cruel, to damn him with faint comfort and awkward company.

But as her confidence faded, she also lost her sense of how to leave.

Taking the kind of deep breath she reserved for trying to start a conversation with her daughter, she lowered herself gently onto the corner of the bed opposite his. The frame creaked and he turned, shocked. His eyes fixed on her and his shallow breathing caught, his taut and tortured expression sagging with awe. Trancelike, he half-crawled, half-collapsed across the bed, staring, reaching out when the length of his body had brought him within hope of touching her face.

“Lily…” the weight of his voice seemed impossible from his gangling birdlike frame.

She sighed, feeling she’d already begun wrong, *No. If I look like Lily it’s because that’s who you want to see. I’m sorry.*

His hope-parched face fell flat on the covers, like a castaway reaching the edge of a mirage, too exhausted to bear up under perplexity. His comment was flat, detached, “That’s cruel.”

She bobbed a weary nod, *I agree.*

He seemed to consider that and step around it, “Who...what are you?”

She brought her feet up onto the bed, turning towards him, *Who I am is a friend that heard you crying. What I am is...a bit complicated.*

“Oh?” his voice managed an annoyance his face could not, while his body stayed slack, “Try me. I’m really quite brilliant.”

She felt her lips pursing as his had...or would...when encountered with a similar line from her, *Well, to put it simply, you’re dreaming.*

He coughed a small bitter laugh, “Oh yes, I see, desperately complicated.”

She put a hand on his hair, stroking it from his face. He flinched and whimpered, the authentic sense of touch taking him by surprise, but he did nothing to resist her. A potions-master should understand how complicated dreams can be. *I’m here because your grief called me.*

He shivered but seemed to relax as she petted him, his earnestness opening to her a fraction, “You’re here to help me die?”

She gave his hair a gentle squeeze, a stab of exasperation at his childish bathos blocked by a pang of compassion for his childlike sincerity, *No. You’ve got too much work to do. People you’ve hurt that you now have to help.*
He put his hand on her hand, then slid the other underneath it, grasping her prayerfully against the side of his head as tears began leaking from his eye and pooling in the divot in the side of his nose, “To punish me, then,” it wasn’t really a question.

She considered him, feeling her intuition and honesty expanding familiarly as their dreams fitted together through voluntary touch. He was terribly unwell. The whole room seemed to ache like a broken rib, *Only if you wish it.*

He shivered again, his knees and chin each sliding halfway to his chest, losing his grip on her as he closed on himself. He nodded.

She continued to stroke his hair gently, *First, tell me your crime.*

He flinched at that, turning his face further to the surface of the bed. He opened his mouth, but all that came out was an abortive, shuddering sigh.

*Severus,* she intoned firmly, moving closer to him so she could stroke his back while resting her other hand on his hair as she always did for Rose when stress and perfectionism plunged her into a numb panic, *I can’t meaningfully punish you if you can’t express why you deserve it. Neither can you, for that matter.*

A sob escaped him and, in its wake, “I...I killed her.”

*Sternly,* Voldemort killed her.

He gritted his teeth, “You sound like Dumbledore.”

She sighed, *I expect I do. Your crime?*

“I betrayed her.”

*Wor-* she caught herself, unsure whether she had a right to change his memory, change history, *Warmer,* but no. *One of James’ friends betrayed them both. Otherwise she’d have been safe. By any reasonable measure you caught your mistake in time and did the right thing.*

“Mistake,” he snapped back at her, his voice grating as he pressed himself up onto his hip and refused to look at her as he spoke, “You don’t know a thrice-damned thing. Every step of it up to that point was barren, icy malice with her in mind. I spied and tortured and killed for the dark lord. I endured and excelled in every sick game Bellatrix...” he broke off, trembling, “I never meant for her to die but I meant...in my worst moments I meant to force her...to compel her to apologize to me...destroy her world until she could choose me or nothing,” his voice got louder even as it seemed bent on strangling him, like a lawyer who had been forming his case against himself for months and found it expedient to wear the noose to closing arguments, “I told the dark lord of the prophecy unawares, but I did it to hurt her world all the same.”

*But once you realized, you were ready to give up everything to make it right.*

He snorted, snarling, “Not everything. Not even then. As I sought to save her, I entertained sick fantasies of basking in her gratitude, forgiving her. I wanted her husband dead at her feet and I got my wish. I wanted her to beg, and she did, I know. I wanted to make her look at me and now I feel her eyes on me everywhere, and I see what I am in them and...and I’m...” he retched unproductively and lay still.

She shifted, finding his profile again, clarifying but not challenging his self recriminations *And you don’t see that knowledge as sufficient punishment. Or living with it in the service of others as*
sufficient atonement.

He shook his head, turning his sunken face and glaring at her, “I’m dying of it, and it’s nothing to what I deserve. Nothing. You know it, I can see it in your eyes.”

She sighed, reaching to stroke his hair again, surprised that he did nothing to avoid her though his expression remained fierce, Lily’s eyes. You can’t see mine unless you want to, and you don’t want to because you would see something different there. You need to learn that about dreams, professor. They don’t go out of their way to lie to you, but they only show you what you’re willing to know. It’s difficult, and harder for the clever. So I’ll just tell you what I see. At your most sadistic, you wanted her to live, hopelessly bound to you, her freely-chosen life destroyed. Your present punishment seems perfectly apt. I think you need to bear it.

His bottom lip trembled and he tried to brace it by glaring and snarling at her, but he was powerless, wrung-out by suicidal asceticism, and he collapsed again, his face in her lap, sobbing, “Please, please, let me die. Or torture me until I go mad. Or tell me where I can find the dark lord so he can send me to her, so I can beg...”

She shook her head, You really should stop making wishes to Death, at least. They’ve served you poorly so far. And Voldemort’s dead for now, so you’ll just have to wait. Do your best by Lily’s memory and you can expect he’ll get around to you.

He sat up abruptly, studying her face, perhaps having heard the peculiar irony in her weary voice. He spoke in a fervent hush, “Dementors, then. If you are a friendly thing of dreams and hope, call to your nightmare cousins of despair,” he knocked at his bony chest vaguely, madly earnest, “let them kiss my gangrenous soul,” he was gaunt and wan and blotchy from crying, pitiful in his desperate humor, but still she saw a flicker of the man she knew, his intensity and reflexive poetry, and for a moment she was disoriented by his uncanny beauty as he leaned into her, “I’m accustomed to joyless idiocy now. Those without feelings or memories are the most fortunate. To think that with just a kiss it could all go away...”

Like a slow disaster, his lips collided with hers, his weight pitching into her, and though she tried to press him back she only managed to control their fall. He twined with her and squeezed, pulling provocatively at her mouth with larger and larger motions of his jaw, as if he might unhinge it and try to consume her whole.

She levered an elbow free and cuffed him awkwardly across the face with the heel of her hand, unavoidably striking herself across the nose as well. He rolled off her further than she could have truly propelled him and resumed his prone sprawl, half-laughing, raggedly manic.

Hermione prodded her tender nose gently, No, Severus. No more nonsense. I care for you more than you know, but you’re far too young for me, and too far out of your right mind. And anyway if you want me to pull out your memories that way, it would take about seventeen doses of dream-brewed veritaserum and more time and patience than I’ve got right now.

He looked up, and the way he gazed at her made her wonder if she’d just caused a paradox, but at least she’d managed to engage an academic interest capable of distracting him, “Dream brewed...”

She nodded, Delicate process, highly corruptible. But for retrieving difficult memories it can be gentle and...and pleasant, she thought of his skillful lips when he had been her lover, wondered how he had gotten there from this flailing, slurping boy, and realized she was staring at him again.

He was staring at her as well, “What are you?”
She shifted uncomfortably, *I’m just a dream, Severus. And you’re very ill. I think you’re going a bit mad, honestly. You can’t handle this alone. You called for help because you know you need help.*

He got up on his knees, extending tentative fingers towards her face, “But you’re real also. You’re not a dream, we’re dreaming but you’re not a dream. You’re no invention of mine.”

She couldn’t stifle a slightly desperate manic laugh of her own, *I might be an astral fluke. Are you...ahem...are you accusing me of projecting?*

He squinted at her, ignoring her words and fingering her hairline cautiously, “What are you? How old are you? Why can’t I see the real you?”

She endured his prodding, *In reverse order, you don’t want to, too old for you, and I’m a witch who knows a little of what it’s like to be where you are.*

He squinted harder, leaning in again, peering, “How? How do you know?”

She grimaced, *This isn’t about me.*

“It is. If you’re here because you know how I feel then by definition it is.”

She had to give him credit for cleverness, even though it was powerfully annoying, *I saw you and Lily together once. On the train. I know a little bit about the person she was. I think she loved you very much.*

He winced and bowed away, grinding the heel of each hand against an eyebrow, “Don’t say things like that.”

She reached out to take his hands, catching him as best she could as he reeled and fell into her lap again, wishing for all the world that she could heal him with a kind word and a warm hug, knowing better, *I know that it’s easier to lose the ones that we love than it is to lose the ones that love us. I know that hollow place that forms when dreams die. I know what it’s like when well-meaning people tell you to talk about it but the lack of words for what you’ve lost only makes it worse.*

While she spoke, he trembled but said nothing, his self-control apparently holding the line even at the very last.

*Tell me what you want, Severus.*

His voice was thick, but he seemed to be growing calmer in spite of himself, “Tell me who you are, first. You’re no dream of mine, why should I trust you?”

She considered quietly for a long time, stroking his hair and letting him become quiet, *I’ll make a deal with you. I will tell you, but you must let me take your memory of the information away with me when I go. I don’t think I’m supposed to be here, and it would be bad of me to leave too much of myself behind.*

He nodded with suicidal indifference, turning onto his back, wiping at crisscrossing tear tracks and gazing up at her, eager for distraction, “Yes, alright.”

*I’m someone whose life you will save. Some years from now, you come to me in a moment, much like this one, when I am as good as dead, and you...you save me.*

He sighed almost drowsily, diversion washing over him like a bedtime story, “Doesn’t sound much
like me.”

She smiled in spite of herself, *It is. You’re still a prickly insufferable know-it-all, but you save people. And I…* she felt the inertial honesty of dreamscape get out ahead of her, ...*I fall in love with you. Long before I even know it myself.*

He shook his head, glumly indifferent, “I’m sorry for that. I can never love you back, you have to know that.”

She felt that familiar ripple of something that ought to offend her pride, to seem deliberately hurtful, but he was just speaking with intimate candor, and they understood one another, *Because your heart is too broken, you mean.*

His lips quivered, and he nodded almost shyly, “I am broken. Burnt away. A crater. Part of the great apocalypse, heart and Lily and he-who-must-not-be-named and all in a stroke,” he glanced away from her, ”the property is going for a song, to anyone willing to condemn it. Gut it. Salt the earth. What is your name?”

Her common sense cringed, *I shouldn’t tell you that. We don’t...well, I just shouldn’t tell you.*

His tone got snappish again, “Take it when you go, take everything I don’t care, just give me something to think about until you do. You don’t know what a relief it is to feel anything that isn’t this festering pit inside me.”

Her heart panged in sympathy for a feeling she knew all too well thanks to him, *Herm... har.... Harmony. Call me Harmony.*

He put a hand up to her face in a gently conversant way, “Harmony.”

*Yes.*

He shook his head, “I still only see Lily.”

She gave his hair a gentle tug, *That’s alright. You’re grieving, you want what you want. It’s not unusual that you see her everywhere, and find everything else lacking.*

He closed his eyes, his fingers wandering across her temple, “Your hair, though. It’s different from hers.”

*Yes.*

He flinched oddly, “I can feel that. Hers was very fine, like mine. Yours is thick.”

*Yes.*

He grimaced, “I don’t like it.”

Hermione shrugged; that one had been meant to hurt her, but it missed by miles, *Your rudeness is rallying. That’s the spirit.*

He turned over and knelt up again, leaning in to study her face intently, seeming annoyed by her indifference, “But I could change it if I wanted to, change you,” there was something jeering and Malfoy-like lurking under his voice, that strategic and reflexive use of cruelty to unseat kindness.

*You can change what you perceive here. It’s your dream.*
“I could. I could hold you down,” he sounded more pained than menacing, though he was clearly trying for menacing.

_Could you? You’ve made yourself very weak. But then, it is a dream. You only have to think of it, want it._ She couldn’t get a handle on what he was driving at by trying to upset her.

“Don’t think I haven’t.”

He gave her a smouldering glare that triggered recognition. He was actually trying to be seductive. She wasn’t entirely sure she hadn’t been flirting back, in his estimation. She leaned closer to him, taking his hand gently, modeling fearlessness, patience, _But I get a choice. You could do those things, see and feel them happen, but I wouldn’t come along with you. You’d be doing them to yourself. Just more vicious power fantasies, and waking up alone._

He swallowed, stroking her hand with his thumb pensively, his voice still full of bravado but his touch conveying some discovery of shame “I’ve had women, you know. Several. Women who like power, who _like_ vicious fantasies. Before the dark lord died I could…”

She shrugged, _He won’t stay dead. You could undoubtedly go back to that when he returns, hiding from yourself inside other people’s willing bodies. Before then, even. There are plenty of women willing to pretend they are unwilling for the fun or the freedom or the pleasure of it, and there’s not a thing wrong with that. But that isn’t now, and it’s not what I’m here for._

He turned her hands over idly, inspecting, “No, you’re here to save me so that I’ll save you. Very noble.”

_I’m not noble. I’m just here. And I’m better than nothing or you’d probably be working a lot harder to offend me._

He slid his fingers around her wrist, tightening, then he took her other wrist in kind, “You sound like you want me to offend.”

She couldn’t really help that his grip excited her on a mechanical level, that her decision to humor him wasn’t made entirely of clinical curiosity and her confidence in her own safety. Young and sloppy and broken as he was, he still smelled like himself, and it got to her. She couldn’t help being alert to his body, and noted that her sense of purpose, indistinct to begin with, was coming under assault by her longing. She had to redirect him, get them both back on track. He wasn’t well. She was’t thinking straight. She looked in his eyes and felt a flash of insight, _I think you want me to be as frightened of you as you are. But I’m not sure it’s even physically possible._

That seemed to prick him, pride and all, a hopeful sign that he still had some pride to appeal to. He snarled and turned her and pushed her down on her back with her head by the footboard. She let herself be steered, let him lead in the gravitational tango whose brutality was entirely for show, though he clearly couldn’t tell that she could tell. Was this what everyone else felt like whenever she tried to lie?

He straddled her ribs, pressing her hands down into the hard mattress just above her head. By accident, her fingers grazed the iron scrollwork of the bed’s frame, and she felt a hard pop in the air, like a muffliato charm dispersing.

A raw chill passed over her even as his weight became warmer, more solid. His palms against hers crackled with immediacy as her knuckles suddenly ached against the stiff mattress. Her indomitable security sizzled away like a water droplet in a hot skillet.
The iron that defined the borders of their bed had lysed her dream-space, her nonsense-fluent mind informed her, and they suddenly shared a single dream. The demonstration that portrait-Severus had given her, of one hand holding down another, pressed upon her thoughts.

She was still wearing her thick robe, her clothes, her underthings, while the young man above her seemed ghostly in his shroud-like shirt and wasted frame, but suddenly she felt naked.
He felt it too, the awkward flood of information skin to skin, flames of awareness licking up his forearms to his shoulders, reading his pulse, his poisons, the thinness of his blood. He flinched, his eyes darting in reflexive search for the missing boundaries as his hands twitched, as if trying to hold onto something too hot, “Stop that, stop it!” he closed his eyes, finely occluding her as he’d done to reality itself the first time he’d held her down. The edges of the room swam until her sense of touch retreated to the surface of her skin.

He released her hands and straddled her abdomen on his knees, “What are you? What are you trying to do?”

She let her hands lie passively, feeling like a criminal under arrest, “Severus I know that you’re-”

He gripped the collar of his nightshirt and rent it open down to the base of his ribs, seizing her wrists again and crushing her hands to his heart, at once wrathful and pleading, “You think that you know, but you don’t. If you love me then kill me, torture me and kill me, then you’ll know what it’s like to do what I’ve done.”

Her face starting to leak and she cursed it, tired and frustrated and on the wrong track. The sudden clarity only made everything far too raw, sensations flooding in and pushing tears out. He was so clever, intuitive, present, and putting it all towards refusing what little she had to give him and demanding the impossible instead, at once yanking at her touch and refusing her nearness. What was she doing with a man who ordered her to kill him every other time they met, who could so selectively see and hear only what he wanted, who wanted her to treat him in a way she found dangerous and unjust?

She tried to pull her hands away from his shackling grip but didn’t want to drag him down atop her, “Severus…” she felt old and foolish, on the edge of pleading, admitting defeat.

Over his shoulder, Hogwart waved at her. He put one hand over his heart, and with the other traced a word she’d been staring at all afternoon as she’d worked on the problem of Voldemort’s canvas prisons, “Worros”...sorrow, in a mirror. Her mind sparked as, dreamlike, the exact plan he meant to convey opened to her, and she winced because it was all irredeemable nonsense, a fever-dream of desperate and obsessive study. But if he wouldn’t let her in or himself out...maybe she did need to make his own heart speak to him.

Her reason rebelled at this interloper. The human heart, it insisted, was a muscular organ that pumped blood. Only the mind had thoughts and feelings, even if there was a part of the mind that thought of itself as the heart. She couldn’t just reach, literally, into his chest like a snooping surgeon and make it give up its secrets. “Reaching into” or “pulling from” someplace other than the mind with legilimency was utter bunk, flimsy metaphor...but then so was fairytale nonsense like the dispelling properties of iron. Dreams didn’t follow waking laws, even magical ones. But even if she could do it,
legilimetic manipulation was a crude, dark art. And he was a wounded child.

But he’d put her hands on his heart, and the sensory impressions of his pain were physical so...maybe she could go ahead and...pretend? Treat his body as a model, like the texentes, for what needed to happen in his mind? If it worked at all, it would be because he had brought her, however unwittingly, into his dream, and asked her, explicitly, to kill what she’d found there. According to all her heightened senses, her fingertips really were mere inches from his madness.

It still seemed wrong.

She thought of George. He’d very nearly lost his mind when he’d lost his twin, and he’d had his family, his shop, and nothing like the well of regrets Severus had to torment him. What did Severus have to save him from himself if she stolidly remained an observer, didn’t try to intervene? His friends were all in Azkaban after the dark lord’s death. The dear, brilliant, tragically preoccupied Dumbledore had just begun a long game and didn’t trust him to teach defense against the dark arts. Could she assume he would be alright simply because, in the world she knew, he had been, sort of, without her intervention?

Then she remembered, their dream, on the bathroom floor, when she’d pressed her hand to his heart and he’d lost his sense of where he was...recognized something...become afraid...but also demanding...that she was going to hurt him. It hurts me...Harm...Minnie...

*Harmony.*

*Oh bollocks...*

She was no observer. For better or worse, she’d invaded his story, backwards and forwards. To avoid acting would still be to act. She looked up into his angry, anguished eyes and felt...recognition...that what was between them had to be faced together.

Pressing his chest affirmingly, she took a deep breath and commanded him, “Hold the bar.”

He squinted at her, but she said it again, more quietly, and he obeyed, leaning over her to grip the rail above her head, bracing himself with his arms as he squeezed her slightly with his knees. His eyes winced shut, the diffuse pain in the air contracted in on him and cringed down atop her, as if the invisible weight of the castle above them had settled across his shoulders. Gooseflesh prickled up his arms, his occlumency collapsing and leaving his senses porus to her own again, his dream stripped of pretense.

Her thumb throbbed sharply against his skin and he winced, but she held steady. She hoped the iron would keep him from reflexively controlling the dream, violently occluding her away, collapsing the room, or striking out at her with some nightmarish afflictive legilimency of his own. It had probably also burnt away his ability to make her look like Lily, and she felt foolishly self conscious.

“Keep your eyes closed.”

He nodded.

With a deft touch like multi-sensory sonar, she mapped his “heart”. “Gangrenous” was accurate. What ought to have been seething and singing with the grief that ran all through him was snarled, stagnant, and silent, his incisive mind and indomitable will having abandoned it to rot. Banished it, bound and buried it for forbidden knowledge like some kind of mythological transgressor. She could feel its dying substance drizzling poison into his thoughts that his mind could not recognize, twisting them towards madness despite his strength and discipline. She knew that feeling, and loathed it as an
enemy.

She prodded the ulcerated figurative mass, and he sucked a sharp breath in real pain. He did not let go of the rail, residual wrath melting into resignation and...relief. He believed she was going to kill him. She wasn’t entirely sure that she wasn’t, one way or another. His wound required a scourging more intense and precise than she could sanely trust herself to do, even with his dubious consent. His heart needed to be drained of poison, and the damage transformed into a language his mind would hear to break the cyclical banishment of whatever he was refusing to know. The pain of that alone...

worros.

She slid one hand, tenderly, apologetically, to his cheek, hoping to steady him, her fingertips just resting on his ear. He winced, still disoriented by the razor-sharp realism and the lineless muted boundaries of her touch, but turned towards her hand, his lips resting where her palm became her wrist. She wished...but refused to wish, drop-kicking herself forward to the next step. She murmured the ritual words she and Ginny had noted down from the memory, worros tse taerg, terger tse taerg, esromer tse taerg, erutrot tse taerg and as she spoke them a frosty white mist rose like smoke from her mouth, pooling flat in the air between them in a gauzy disk the size of a hand-mirror.

Worros otre irra bonsier eht… the disk seemed to crystalize into a fine screen, ready to transmute any energy that passed from her lips into the form that would most efficiently resonate with his inescapable regret and imprisoned remorse. All she needed was the compatible fuel, the right ammunition. Fortunately, he was well-primed to torture himself, he just needed someone to hold up the mirror, steady the scalpel, and resuscitate the words.

She almost refused to begin, her own loneliness begging mercy for his, but she couldn't look at his face and think that he was well, or would be. He was being eaten alive by something he refused to define, let alone defy. Time wouldn't heal that. It would just twist and knot tighter, boorishly eating up his substance like a cancer: untouchable, safely growing fat and matted behind his impeccable defenses.

In no other time or place would she have the ability or right to do what she was about to attempt.

Her fingers tensed against his skin as she gave another gentle push and gentle pull, plucking gingerly at one of the putrid, clotted threads cradling his heart, hoping something might work loose gently, but nothing moved. She tried to insinuate her senses more deeply, but her fingertips began to sting and her awareness began to go numb, her thumb throbbing again, the pain of it homing to him like a falcon’s claws.

She took a deep breath. Alright then. Not gentle.

“Severus,” she said, hearing her voice change through the filter, sounding lordly and stern and very much unlike herself, much more like him, “I’m going to hurt you now. Your heartstrings have become too tangled and I’m going to rip them apart. This is your last chance to tell me no,” it certainly wasn’t, but she wanted him to take her seriously.

She needn’t have worried. At the sound of her pronouncement, all the scant color of his face and chest drained away as if he’d become coated in a rime of frost. He nodded, and his voice didn’t quaver when he said softly, “Yes.”

“Pleas and screams will not be attended to. If you take your hands from the bar, if you do anything to stop me, we will be done. Do you understand?”

He nodded, and the word he spoke resounded in the space between them with a significance she
couldn’t fully follow, “Yes.”

Gently as Alexander conquering Phrygia, she stroked her fingers down his chest, raking talons through the rotted cordon around the crater of his heart, ripping strings apart like brittle sinew. Something sick and heavy burst, unleashing an invisible cascading burn of thick bloody bile that seemed to flow down the inside of her arm through the splinter-punched hole in her thumb. It pooled in her shoulder and chest, rising into her throat, scourging her throughout with his agony as he withered. He screamed, the young man who had learned to resist the cruciatus to a startling degree, as though she had ripped his chest open with her bare hands. If the poisons flooding down into her were any measure, it must have felt like she really had. Lack of sight likely made any distinction impossible, though his eyes and skin remained obediently closed.

She had meant to simply murmur out the poison as nonsense or counting or nursery rhymes, push it through the filter to find it’s own shape, but had not counted on the intense pain and the thick tarry weight of the stuff. Her sense of the spell insisted that she must speak steadily and clearly, with art and conviction, breathing the cadence of her voice into the words, while maintaining concentration on the filter. She needed something appropriate, weighty, that she could recite easily...and she had to choose quickly because the sick feeling in her chest was beginning to feel like drowning, and she wasn’t certain she could stave off panic for long. As his scream subsided to a long groan, a poem that she knew by heart volunteered itself. It was surely long enough, and grim enough to bear the weight of a young man’s love, self-loathing, and despair.

*Once upon a midnight dreary*

*While I pondered weak and weary*

*Over many a quaint and curious...*

Her voice echoed around the room as her words morphed into his self recrimination through the filter, “She loved you, Severus. Enormously. And might have grown to love you even more in a different life. You know it. You knew it. It was obvious to anyone that saw the two of you together. It’s why Petunia hated you. It’s why James hated you. It’s why she couldn’t forgive you when you’d broken her heart. It wasn’t safe for her. She loved you too much, and you gave it back in kind until suddenly you wouldn’t. You did that on purpose and pretended it was her fault.”

*...each separate dying ember*

*wrought its ghost upon the floor...*

Her breath ran out as she reached the dregs of her store of poison. She lifted her hand to his chest and raked down his tangled misery again, draining it to refill the quill of her tongue. His scream reverberated down the floodway between them, and her hand shook erratically. He throttled the bed as if to sunder it, but he kept his hands upon the iron bar and so she continued.

*Eagerly I sought the morrow*

*Vainly I had sought to borrow*

*From my books surcease of sorrow...*

“When you took that away, she ran. She was different from you that way. You knew it but you refused to remember it.”

*Nameless here forevermore...*

“You saw it. You’d knew her nature. You loved her for being the person who would do exactly what she did. When you are afraid you hunker down, button up, become fiercer and more adamant,
shelter in place, build up stores and bottle solutions, drive strangers away and cleave to what you
know. She ran towards what had frightened you, put herself between it and you, determined to
challenge it on its own terms.”

*So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating...*

“You twisted that into lies and spite on her part. The dream that possessed you from the first moment
you saw her didn’t die with her last year, it died a decade ago. You took up resenting her, pretending
she’d killed it, the way you’re torturing yourself now, pretending you killed her, because there’s
nothing left of her to hurt, and only yourself to blame.”

*... Darkness there and nothing more.*

He was shaking his head more and more vigorously, sighing words, sagging above her, his brains
foundering in the sudden burning tide, “You’re wrong, you don’t know, when did I break her heart?
What are you talking about? Who are you!”

She scored him deeper and he screamed, the hot fury racing into her chest and bearing a desperate,
exasperated hatred along with it.

“That day on the train, she chose you over Petunia, she stood up with you against James and Sirius,
she gave you her heart silently and, silently, you accepted it. You knew she was afraid, alone but for
you, struggling to be brave for you. And yet not three hours later, in front of the whole new
wonderful world you’d promised her over and over again for three years, you abandoned her.”

*But the fact is I was napping,
and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping,
tapping at my chamber door,*

His long cry twisted into words, “You’re wrong, she abandoned me. We’d promised, she lied, she
never loved me, you’re wrong you’re wrong oh god…” and he screamed as her merciless claws tore
him to his core again.

“E comes before S, Severus. Well before. How long did you watch between when Lily Evans was
sorted into Gryffindor and when it came to be your turn? That’s years for a mind like yours, maybe
not the most brilliant but the most acutely perceptive student of your year, easily, did you notice how
the hat let people choose? Did it notice, when it was deciding about you, your courage and your
steadfast love, or only your bitter spite? Your desire to punish and dominate as it bubbled up, hating
what she had done for you? Did it even sense enough love in you to bother to ask what you
wanted?”

*Back into the chamber turning
All my soul within me burning
Soon again I heard a tapping
Somewhat louder than before*

“She loved you enough to run into the lion’s den, to face down the boys that had frightened you, her
love, her twin, her dearest friend, and you spent the rest of your school career killing her for it. Did
you ever think that maybe the hat had no choice but to put her in Gryffindor because she was being
so brave?”

“Please, please stop, please…”
“Brave for you?”

“Please…”

“But you’ve always been brave, too, Severus. You could have been put in Gryffindor, easily. Was there ever a thought of standing by her, or was your only thought under that hat ‘not Gryffindor, not Gryffindor’?”

“I’m sorry…”

“Are you?”

*Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore”*

He threw his head back and bellowed the unearthly sound a deer makes when mortally wounded, and it echoed terribly down through the filter between them, long and longing, *Yes.*

The heat and dissonance that bled down her arm from his heart slowed, cooling, thinning, and quieting. She stroked him one more time, more palm than fingertip, and he seemed to feel far less pain. He was more exhausted and numbed than healed, but the tangles of his heart were no longer choking themselves. The decade-old abscess that had formed around the thorn of a convenient lie had been gouged open and drained, and now bled cleanly, the roaring sluice of fury done. A dark pool of it lingered in the crevices of her own chest; she could sense in it other and darker pains inside him, deeper but unhidden, the sins of a death eater; and there were acres of poetry left, but it seemed that what most needed doing in their moment had been done. And she was heartsick, having done it, her hair wet with her tears.

She took her hands off of him, letting the frosted filter sublimate into mist, reaching up to circle his wrists, murmuring “let go now,” and guiding him down as he collapsed onto his side, fresh tears flowing and his breathing labored.

“Are you alright?”

He shook his head, limply, and heaved a shuddering sigh, “She loved me. And I knew it. All along. I ruined it. I abandoned her. It was...it was easier to hate her...than to believe that she loved me and needed me to... to become... I wanted everything to be as I had set it out in my head, and when it wouldn’t obey me...when she wouldn’t obey me...” he snarled in disgust, wrapping his arms around himself.

She rested a hand tentatively on his, where it seemed to be trying to pull his ribs back together, wishing that she could remind him that children are allowed to make mistakes, certain it would not help, would sound only like her opinion. Better to stick to truth, “that space in your heart, the crater that won’t heal...the one that... you don’t want it healed, even if it could be…”

He sighed and nodded.

“The reason it doesn’t heal is that it’s not empty. That thing that feels like a blasted crater, that sorrow, it’s...it’s actually a pensieve, if you like. It’s a space that holds your memories. What hurts is that we don’t want them to be memories, we want them to be dreams. What hurts is that we reject them for that, we don’t like what accepting loss requires of us.”

“What it requires?”

“That we go on. That we change. That we stop shaping ourselves to the things we expected from the
dreams that can’t happen the way we expected them to anymore, thinking that will bring them back. That we live. That we go through life and experience new things that make those memories mean even more. That we dream beyond the dreams that die. We have to let them go, and trust them to stay with us, always, all the same.”

He lay still and said nothing, she did what she could to gather the covers around him, taking off her robe and laying it over him, laying down by him, searching for words.

“It’s not too late to be what she saw in you. Stop making wishes to death, start granting wishes for love.”

He shook his head, his voice flat, “Love does nothing. It obligates us to do the impossible but it doesn’t help. It doesn’t have any power. It doesn’t have a plan. I love her so fiercely, but I can’t get out of bed when I’m meant to. I can’t think. I can’t eat. I’m crowded, all the time, with desperate thoughts. Do you know what that’s like?”

Hermione sighed, “Not for you, not exactly. I’ve known a version of it, but tell me about yours.”

He shook his head, “It’s just...it’s too heavy. Everything I thought I could do, it wasn’t enough, and now it’s all just gone. What is love worth, what is magic worth, or cleverness, what am I, when I can’t...when it’s all…”

“Changing?”

“Doomed. Useless.”

“You think you want to live in a world where you can control everything but, trust me, you don’t. Living in the world with other people means accepting that things go wrong, that things change.”

“What the hell do I care about living in a world with other people.”

She reached out again and stroked his hair, feeling cruel for how he sighed when she did it, “Because you’re not cut out to be a monster, Severus. You were adopted by one, served one, lived as one, maybe even aspired to being one, but you aren’t one. And there’s a part of you that still belongs to someone else. With everything you did to core it out, kill it, it’s still strong enough to burn away the things that are truly hurting you, melt down what’s broken and change it into something new, if you can let it. You’re astonishingly strong, Severus, and so young. I know you feel old, but you’re so, so young. You’ve got time. You change. You change the world.”

He shook his head, “I don’t believe you. It hurts too much.”

“You should talk to Madame Pomfrey. You don’t have to suffer it without help.”

He heaved a shuddering sigh, “Do you think I’ll ever see her again?”

She petted him tenderly, wishing she were any kind of liar, in any kind of place that would allow it, “I...I think there are a lot of unusual things in the world, but I don’t allow myself the luxury of an opinion about anything beyond it.”

He didn’t say anything, and she continued awkwardly, “I mostly get by on ‘always’ and ‘maybe’.”

“Always?”

She nodded, “That place in your heart that’s hers, it will always be there. It will always hold her, and the person you are in her eyes. It’s safe to grow, to live, without fear that you’ll outgrow loving her.”
He made a sound through his nose that was hard to interpret, her connection to him muddled by their mutual pain, “and ‘maybe’?”

She sighed, “I...I take everything that makes me long for one more day with the one I’ve lost, all the things I wish I’d said, all the things I’d like to have done, or done differently, all the hopes that he’ll be waiting for me when I finally pass on and I...I just let them go, with a single string connecting them back to me, and that’s ‘maybe’. Maybe I’ll see him again, maybe I’ll get that chance. Because thinking I won’t overwhelms me, but thinking I will makes waiting unbearable. So I go along on ‘maybe’, and I leave it alone as best I can. It’s not comfortable, but it’s livable. I get more comfort from what I definitely know to be real, I get more comfort from ‘always’. Neither is perfect, everything is still awful, but it’s a way forward.”

He shivered and bent towards her fractionally. She put an arm around his shoulders, pressing his forehead to hers. She wrestled with whether or not to tell him that she learned the “always” part of it from him, decided against it. There were already too many things she ought to be taking away with her. He curled in on himself and wept.

Chapter End Notes

So...just in case I didn't flag it clearly enough, do not try any version of this "at home". Do not try to speak harsh truths to people in the throes of suicidal grief. Like any other cathartic controlling non-con fantasy, this interaction in no way mirrors acceptable or effective real world behaviors. I know all my AO3 peeps are brilliant and lovely and wise but just...I worry sometimes about the way these things are portrayed and I would hate to contribute to the messed-up ways people treat the depressed and grieving. <3
After a long cry and a long silence he sighed, his lean body slackening open against her as something inside him unclenched.

She smoothed his temple, “It’s time for me to go,” riffling his recent memory to find the parts of her that might best be taken away. It was surprisingly easy, like fanning a hand of cards, and she intuited that it was both the space they shared and the way his mind was opening after a long time constricted that made it so.

He winced, and she tried to go more gently. He looked more like himself then, his face seeming to mature with rest and stillness. She stifled a longing sigh. As if in response he stroked her wrist, raising a prickle of desire that threatened to muddle her efforts. He caught her hand and kissed it, “I don’t want to forget you yet.”

“We made a deal. I have to go.”

“I’m sorry I was rude earlier, but you divert me. It’s helping, please...” he kissed her fingertips.

“I have to go. I’m out of time.”

“You are. Completely. Time doesn’t mean anything here. Stay.”

She didn’t want to have to pull away, she wanted him to respect her enough to let her go, as she intended to respect him, but that was only her rational mind, and it occurred to her that he might suddenly be reading her desires only. “Severus, please don’t do that.”

He opened his black eyes on her and they shone with a longing that mirrored her own, “You said you’re in love with me.”

“I...said I fall in love with the man you become.”

“Am I...is he able to love you back?”

She sighed testily, pulling against his grip, trying to stuff her thoughts away where he couldn’t get at them or they at him, “I don’t know, I don’t think so, but I don’t really mind. I don’t need him to.”

He let her retract her arm but kept his grip, getting his knees under himself, drawing her up with him, “But he kisses you. You let him kiss you.”

“He...we do. He’s very gentle, respectful,” she turned her hand uneasily, rising to face him chest to chest, a breed of fear slithering through the aching swill around her lungs. Not of him, or even of her own feelings, more of the space between them, fearing to enter it.

“Harmony, let me kiss you, you want to be kissed. I can see it.”

She pulled more sharply, weary “Only because you’re still half unhinged with exhaustion and hunger.”

“And you long to feed me.”

She shook her head, “That’s really not my style. I’m not like Lily, I don’t coddle. You of all people...you’re still only seeing what you want to see.”
He scowled, shifting his weight, playing for time, “Maybe you found me because I’m the one you want, because you don’t want gentle and respectful, because you long to be loved with the same passion I long to show you.”

She tried to speak sternly but her voice quavered as he caught her other wrist and pulled her to him, “Severus, no.”

He kissed her, firmly, sending a bright thrill of despair down her spine, muddled with visceral memories he wasn’t entitled to. His touch was, as ever, conversant, and this was a threat and a plea pressed with fire, “You’re not her anymore,” he clasped her mouth again hungrily, then, “I can feel you now, smell you, I’ll recognize you. I’ll find you.”

She felt the strange burning ink in her chest stir, responding to his menace, filling her with a feeling of failure, a desire to give up, give in. Her lips moved against his for a moment before she turned her head, breaking away, “Severus, stop it. You know you can stop yourself. You can always stop yourself. Don’t make me stop you.”

“Prove it,” he released one wrist and slid an arm around her low back, lifting her against him slightly, tightly, “Prove to me that you will love me.” He was doing it again; that foolish, abusive posturing that was arousing to neither of them but was apparently the only sexual cue he had ever learned among the death eaters. She pitied him bitterly, and hated wanting him all the same. But just as he could hear her longing, she could hear his, and he didn’t truly want her. He was scrabbling at company, at feeling loved, and hadn’t lived long enough to know that sex would never ease that ache.

“I will, Severus. When the time comes, I will cross my worst nightmares to see you again.”

He scowled, swallowing, “You mean ‘maybe’.’”

She shook her head, “I mean yes, but not now. Now you’re being an utter shit and I have to go. But I found you because I was looking for him. You feel me wanting because wanting him brought me here,” he reached for her with his mouth again but she craned her neck away, panicked by her own unsettling desires more than his.

He kissed her neck with a more eloquent hunger than before, drawing more of her against him until the bristles of his scruffy beard tickled the soft skin behind her ear, “Say yes to me, right now. Lay down with me in promissory of your parsimonious love. Prove...” his words stumbled as his lips found her earlobe. The hand braced on the small of her back slid downwards only slightly, and her mind skipped ahead to the idea of his hand tight on her buttock, and she knew she was going to lose her moral center if she let it go any further.

“You want proof, here,” she clapped her free hand to his chest and let the squirming memories that yearned towards him come pouring out, slamming his still-raw heart with legillimetic impressions: a touch on her hand, excruciating pleasure, twining and kissing deeply for what seemed like days, taking memory into her mouth with exquisite slowness, kneeling at his feet, laughing about books and sex, screwing on the classroom desk. Falling to her knees on the stone and knowing he was missing, her still-raw world flying apart.

Severus made a sound from the bottom of his lungs like an ocean cave and collapsed backwards, pulling her after him until she caught herself with the railing. For a moment she was certain that she’d killed him. Then he blinked, struggling to sit up. She stomped down her impulse to apologize. He was being a cad, she’d just slapped him inventively...with a kind of magic considered so dark it was just above unforgivable. But there was no reason to think he’d have stopped otherwise, or that she could have contained the desires he was misinterpreting as permission.
He pulled the robe she’d lent him up around his narrow shoulders, genuinely astonished, all the poetic wheedling slapped out of him, “Harmony, I’m sorry. You’re right, you should go. We’re...too far out of time.”

She straightened the thick black fabric on him with maternal reflex, fastening a few buttons at his throat, “I forgive you, but you need to talk to Poppy Pomfrey. You need to eat something,” she tried to sound light, clinical, though her heart was pounding, “And you really ought to...whatever the death eaters taught you about sex, I mean really...playful is one thing but it’s not a contest or a...a conquest or a...”

He blushed deeply with a hint of a scowl, “A hunt.”

They stared mutely. The swill in her chest stirred with knowledge she did not want, things that had marked him. She tried not to show it, “We can talk about it another time perhaps.”

He closed a few buttons down his front, lying, “Perhaps.”

“I really do have to go. Promises to keep, nightmares to cross before I wake, that kind of thing.”

He nodded ascance, “You should take what’s yours.”

He leaned to her hand, letting her press gently into his mind, offering up her face, her name, any defining details that would make him doubt that she had just been some dream of Lily that had come to comfort him, leaving him unhealed but ineffably more able to avail himself of the scanty comforts of his new life. She’d just begun to spool the necessary details together when he put two fingers on her wrist, forestalling her.

His speech was groggy, his mind scrambled in too many places, “Let me...inside you.”

She gave an exasperated sigh and continued spooling.

“‘I don’t mean,” he snarled, outraged at incapacity, “to help you find me. Him. Later. Your now. After now. I could...we could...give you something.”

She pursed her lips, gently letting go of the threads of his mind and nibbling thoughtfully at the tip of her thumb, “That’s a good idea. I do have a...a sort of compass to him, but it has its flaws and I don’t know how long I can count on it. Do you think something else would work better?”

He shook his head, but only to try and get his thoughts straight, “It’s worth a try, anyway. When you’ve gone I’ll put a ward down so you don’t keep finding my dreams when I sleep in this bed and...want you.”

She blushed a little, “I do wish that it wouldn’t be ruinous to leave you something. The time ahead isn’t going to be easy on you and I do...that thought troubles me, for your sake. But it will be a long time before you recognize me. It will have to be.”

He waved a long hand loftily, “I’ll get on without you. I’ll think this was a dream of Lily, and that will suffice. If I’m honest I don’t care for your ‘maybe’, for some promise I can’t even...I’ll be happier thinking she’s promised to see me again, to love me...again. I doubt the feeling will be different, simply that I’m being pulled forward to something I should survive for. This strange yearning will be more bearable for thinking I know what it is.”

Hermione tried to get her head around that idea and simply couldn’t, “You’re ok with setting yourself up to...to be ignorant? You, of all people,” a montage of moments where his stoic zeal for knowledge had been his only redeeming quality spun through her mind, “I admit I...don’t understand
that.”

He looked down, “I expect you have more going for you than I do.”

She blushed and nodded, remembering Happy’s admonishment about why “maybe” would never be a comfort to those in desperate enough straits, admitting to herself that she’d spent most of a year preferring a dead ‘always’ to a living ‘maybe’. All the same, it made her feel strangely jealous, and she steered away from it, “So do you have thoughts on what to…”.

It was his turn to blush, and prettily despite being underfed and beaten to hell inside, “I...don’t actually. Do you?”

She sat, trying to think, her brains feeling like over-boiled beef. He lay back and laid an arm across his eyes. It was almost funny to her; a pair of potions professors, each considered to be somewhere in the top of their generation in terms of brilliance, both feeling so utterly and intimately ragged they couldn’t get their giant brains around inventing what they both knew should be a fairly simple energetic reagent exchange...and that for all their writhing towards mutual exhaustion nobody had even gotten laid.

She stared around the room, trying desperately to think of something, anything, that might serve. Whatever it was, she couldn’t carry it. Her body was far away, and the part of her that was with him was likely to go through some strange things before returning. Anything might happen to it as she tried to find her way. Anything of hers she left in him would all but defeat the purpose of trying to protect the future from her intrusion. And anything connecting them, before the proper time, might actually make it harder to find him in the correct time and place. Her eyes settled on the writing desk.

“Severus, I have an idea.”
She did end up kissing him. When caster and subject share a dream, the obliviation is simple, and both are willing, much can be done without veritaserum. After reaching in and half yanking out his heart, pulling a few strands from his mind was hardly an intuitive leap.

The last thing he asked her, after they'd prepared their clever stratagem but before she removed all other distinguishing traces of herself from his mind, was probably the sweetest.

"Harmony, you said that you understand how I feel. Am I why you do? Are you on the quest of Orpheus, that you pass me here at the gates of death? Do I...did he die on you?"

She smiled and shook her head, stroking the hair from his eyes, *not exactly*, "Not yet."

He nodded, "Good. Because I’ve given it quite a bit of research and...back from the dead really isn’t…"

She nodded kindly, "I know."

"And because I...I don’t want to cause any more pain."

She grimaced, thinking a decade into his future when he would be the surly exacting sadist that had symbolically flayed her alive on her first day of potions class, imprinting himself on her vulnerable psyche in a way that would linger always. But then, it seemed they’d come full-circle on that account. It was probably just lucky for him that it wasn’t Neville who’d been tasked with his expiation.

She’d kissed him, then, on the temple, washing herself out of his story, feeling barriers slide into the space between them as she began to pull herself out of his dream, leaving behind only their bound agreement that he must cast his wards and keep their secret safe. On her lips it tasted like iron and honeyed tea.

He stared at her blearily as his mind rearranged itself around the gaps, clasping her hand to his heart.

"Lily...it hurts."

She nodded, *I know. Bear it.*

He nodded, "Always,” and kissed her so gently, so sweetly, so much like himself, that she felt like a thief, a fraud.

She put her feet on the floor and backed away. He put up a hand, only half-remembering why, and began casting a protective circle that etched itself in runes of blue fire on the floor around the bed. From her ethereal vantage point, she could see it shimmer upwards like a column, and then it, and he, and the bed vanished from her awareness.
She sat down with her back against the wall, letting out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. She looked over at Hogwarts across the bedless room, and he shrugged sympathetically.

“I don’t suppose you know what I should do next.”

Headshake.

She studied her empty hands, “You’ve been around a long time.”

Nod.

She fiddled with her shirt button, wishing she hadn’t given away her robe, wondering if she’d done something to him by wrapping him inside it in his dream and leaving it behind, “Do you think things happen the way they’re supposed to?”

Thoughtful pause. Headshake.

She tapped the back of her head against the wall lightly, fancying she could hear an echo, “So I could have done something different, couldn’t I?”

Nod.

“So...why did you tell me to do what I did? Why not something...I don’t know...kinder? I feel like I just sentenced him to twenty years of picking on children and longing after someone who might not exist anymore. Not to mention all the students...”

Fingertips resting on breastbone. Headshake.

“Yes you did! I saw you, I was out of ideas and you signaled me with the word worr...but why would you know that word?”

Hands held out to sides, big shrug.

Hermione put her elbows on her knees and clutched her head, “I did that. That was me. I saw what I wanted to see, permission for the barbaric self-important idea I couldn’t think was mine. I did that. Merlin’s mystical migraines...”

Nod.

She sighed, “I want to hide down here forever. Things are getting too complicated and I’m just...I’m not up to it. Let the world spin forward without me. It has plenty to keep itself occupied. Harry’s smart. Ginny’s smart. Severus is smart...smart enough that I can’t imagine him still wanting to be with me once he knows how I...what I just did to him. It was all peculiar enough between a former student and teacher but this...”

Pantomime of turning a key at the corner of his mouth.

She grinned “Yes, I’m sure you’re very good at keeping secrets but I’m not. Even if the obliviation and the promises hold perfectly and he never remembers, Ron declared me ‘perversely ethical’ on more than one occasion. Obliviation isn’t always permanent either. It was fairly easy to reverse on my parents, after the war,” she frowned, “Crawling Crowley, Ginny’s right, I do tend to just up and vanish on people as a first line of defense.”

Nod. Poking self in chest.
“Yeah, I suppose you do know what that’s like,” she smirked, “what do you say, want to be roommates for a century or two?”

Skeptical eyebrow.

Petulance needled her, “Then what should I do? I don’t know how to leave. I kind of assumed I would just...snap back, but...nothing’s happening.”

Fingertip to temple. Poke poke.

“I am thinking. But I can’t wake up, I’m not asleep. At least I don’t think I am. I don’t know, it might be the same thing. But I feel stranded here. Like my ride left without me.”

Fingertips to lips, head tilted. Squint.

“I came here on my own, but the, the thing I conjured to bring me, it...I pushed myself through but once I was on the other side it didn’t exist anymore, like a one-sided door.”

Finger tip to temple. Poke poke!

“I can’t just conjure out of my head!”

Palms upward, held out. Nod nod!

“I...I can?”

Fingers splayed emphatically, nod.

“But the texentes isn’t...wait, yes it is. I remember now. That bullshit dream logic. It’s in my head.”

Arms crossed. Scowl.

“Oh calm down. I’m just no good at this. I find nonsense really unappealing. I hated Alice in Wonderland, even as a child, and now I’m neck-deep in finding out Lewis Carroll was apparently another Beedle the Bard.”

No motion.

“You want Ron. He loves this sort of thing.”

Continued sulking.

She took a calming breath, “I’m sorry I called it bullshit.”

Curt nod, fists on hips.

“I don’t even understand what this place is right now. I lost my dreamspace. Severus seems to have excluded me from his and yet…” she stared at Hogwart.

Grin.

“This is your space.”

Nod.

“You’ve got all sorts of options here. You could just occlude me and I’d probably go back relatively
close to where I belong.”

Shrug, nod.

“Well?”

Crossed arms.

“Oh come on, I said I was sorry. It’s not bullshit, alright? The dream nonsense logic isn’t bullshit. It’s...it’s fanciful. Ingenious. It’s one of the cornerstones of this school that you built that has lasted a thousand years. I stand in awe of it and am jealous because I’m terrible at it. Ok?”

Curt nod.

“So...I suppose this place works however you think it works so...please...how do I get out?”

Tapping sternum with one finger, fingertip to thumb tracing line out from chest.

“What, I don’t…” Hermione imitated him aimlessly, discoverling a thread around her heart that lead out into the air. The light tug panged sweetly, and she realized it was the one Ron had given her in the dark, his end of that fragile “maybe” she tried not to think about too often, and that if she followed it it would probably lead her back to her life, since that was her way to him, eventually. She followed it a few steps and realized it lead through the tapestry, but when she pushed him aside she found blank wall.

She let him fall back, scowling at him, “Really?”

Innocent shrug.

“There’s nothing I can give you this time. Severus took the pillows.”

Quizzical look.

“Oh, right, that hasn’t happened yet. In the future, you let my patronus through but not me, and wanted a bribe. Well, not my patronus exactly. Maybe not really a patronus. But it was a happy memory that took animal form so...yes, a patronus. I suppose it makes sense that the texentes would weave things up, given the slightest pretense. It might have become a real crow later, out in the dark. I don’t know, there have been crows around just everywhere. It’s been absolute murder.”

Eyeroll.

“Well, if you let me through I’ll stop bothering you. Otherwise what have I got to do with my time but try to annoy you with puns?”

Arms folded. A slight crackling in the air that told her he was not helpless.

“Oh ok, I was mostly kidding. Honestly I’d probably annoy myself to death before you broke a sweat. My poor tolerance for nonsense again.”

Arms unfolded, pitying look.

“What? That’s not a bad thing.”

Pinching robe at one shoulder, shake shake.

“I know I’m a witch. But magic isn’t nonsense, it’s real. There are rules that tie to constants in the
“real...but you’re a headmaster, for Laufey’s sake, why am I explaining this to you?”

Shrug.

“Well, feel free to jump in anytime. I mean, don’t you have to follow rules?”

Headwobble, nod.

“Is that why you won’t just let me through? Or can’t? Even in your own dreamspace?”

A look askance, nod.

“I don’t suppose you can just tell me the rules.”

Hands meandering in circles fingers extended, head tilted.

“I’ll take that as an ‘it’s complicated.’”

Emphatic nod.

“Then let’s work out what I know. You wave at me if I get something wrong. I saw you let a crow patronus through. Would that be by choice?”

Headshake.

“So...you had to do that. Or...will have to do that.”

Nod.

“But you’re the one that told me to let it out of the bottle. Did you...would you have to do that?”

Headshake.

“So you...you wanted to be compelled to show me the door, to get me on track.”

Headwobble, tapping ear with one finger, tapping chest.

“Sounds like you, huh?”

Smile, nod.

“And after I knew to ask, you could ask me for a bribe. Or...had to? Is that a goblin thing? Or a way-guardian thing?”

Nod, nod.

She looked around a little hopelessly, “But even if there were anything here you wanted, I wouldn’t know how to get it into my hands without my body. But, if I were...a patronus? You’d let me through for free?”

Biting lip. Headshake.

“No? But...a bird then? A crow?”

Finger tapping nose, nod nod.

“Wait is it…” she boggled, remembering what Happy had said, “is it that crows… symbolically…
are psychopomps? That they travel through the...fabric of reality?”

Shrug, nod.

“Seriously?”

Scowl, nod.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean that in a...it just seems like such a weak pun, you being a tapestry and all...but...anyway....”

Impatient huff.

“Ok, well that’s a dead end I suppose. I’m not an animagus, and even if I were one, otters aren’t exactly thought of as heralds of the underworld.”

Facepalm.

She scowled, “Do you think you could be even just a little patient? You’re not exactly holding up your end of the conversation.”

Reluctant nod.

“So clearly you think there’s some way to change myself into something else.”

Nod.

“Is it something I can do right now, or are we basing this assumption on the fact that there’s about forty years of time between now and where I belong?”

Palms down, hands bounced downwards twice.

“But you can’t tell me an incantation, and I’m not seeing any little bottles marked ‘drink me’.”

Sigh, headshake.

She racked her brain for what felt like forever trying to think of how to make herself into a prophesy bird. She got up and paced back and forth. She skimmed the book titles at the top of the box, and they were interesting but she couldn’t move them. She stared into the slowly flickering candle flame a while, and at the blank parchment on the desk. Finally she sat down on the floor again, facing Hogwarts, her back braced against the leg of the desk, “I’m sorry, I’ve got nothing.”

Deep sigh.

“Give me a hint?”

Thoughtful pause. Hand held like a grasping claw, pointed at open mouth. Long exhale, other hand tracing a path from stomach to chest to throat to claw.

“Dementors? A dementor’s kiss?”

Nod.

“What about it?”

One finger pointed at her, then two at his own eyes.
“No, I’ve never seen it done. We don’t do that to people anymore. I’ve heard them described. Harry told me...the little ball of light and the absolute sense of despair, sorrow.”

Palms forward, thumbs linked, fingers flapping.

“What does that have to do with psychopomps?”


“A patronus?”

Nod.

“Ok...so...” she fell to silently pondering again.

Something clicked mercifully into place “We aren’t typically tiny beads of light. Like with Severus just now, he was compacted by despair but when he was able to open up something inside him expanded. We’re great bands of light, usually.”

Nod.

“The despair the dementors press in on a person, that’s part of their feeding process. In preparation.”

Nod.

“Just like the texentes helps spool us out, or our best memories help us to erupt a manifestation of our confidence, or a wand works like a conduit, or a pensieve works like a...I don’t know, a...”

Amiable shrug.

She smiled, muttering mostly to herself, “I’ve been so many sizes since this morning, you see.”

Indecipherable squint.

She barreled on, “I’d expect an adaptive reason for us to be able to change size. For doors of different sizes. Otherwise wouldn’t we just, I don’t know, evolve so that things like the dementors couldn’t get at us? It’s a pretty serious disadvantage. But the primary process of our evolutionary ‘fit’ isn’t cruelty and domination, just the ability to adapt, as a group. To think beyond ourselves and the present moment.”

Headwobble of vague disinterested agreement

“It’s interesting, isn’t it? I mean, sentience, for the most part. Having an ability to plan and remember and invent. Over a hundred thousand years it’s made us tool- and magic-using species into the fangless and clawless lords of the earth.”

Yawn.

“Yes, sorry, wandering rather far afield. It was part of my campaign against isolationism, and in the cause of inter-sentient equality. Ron once said I ought to just make soap-box shoes and stop ever pretending to come down,” she touched her chest tenderly, feeling the thread again.

Smirk.

She smirked back, “Well it’s not like you’ve anyplace to be, is it?”
Airly looking into the distance.

“Ok, so, back to it. Souls can be shaped. But we can’t just reshape our patronuses at will. Some shapes are a part of us. We can’t change them without changing our fundamental nature, and that’s dangerous. First rule of magic and all.”

Hand palm down, waggled like a scales.

“That’s not a very healthy attitude to take towards the first law of magic. Is that another goblin notion they don’t teach here anymore? Rule mutability? Is that why goblin magics are so different from human magics?”

Detached incredulous look.

“Right, fine, you can’t exactly give me an abstract dissertation in mime.”

Relieved eye-roll.

“Ok, so. Patronuses are a projection of joy. Joy so intense that it changes us forever. I don’t think my whole soul could hold a feeling like that, and the ones it has been holding...I don’t want to risk being shaped by them any more than I already have been. How do we change, in a way that lets us change back?”

A glance behind her, at the books.

“Books. Ok, fair. Or...stories, right? Things we let ourselves believe, let ourselves become. Maybe not even a strong emotional association, just a connection of ideas, and a willingness to...suspend disbelief...” she grimaced, seeing the end of the line of reasoning, and reason itself, at last.

Wide grin.

“Oh Merlin.”

Wider grin.

“This is going to be really nonsense intensive, isn’t it?”

Enthusiastic nod.

She waited. And waited. “Well?”

Open-palmed gesture indicating the whole room.

“Well tell me what to do!”

Weary sigh, pinching bridge of nose.

“Ok, ok, so you can’t tell me how to do nonsense. Dumb question. I just have to...do the nonsense. Somehow,” she sighed heavily, muttering about wooly wizard...shenanigans.

She looked around, taking stock, trying to calm her analytical mind's insistence that there was no way out, trying to listen to her creative mind and trust that the weird little man in the tapestry knew what he was gesturing about. It had worked for Severus, she thought, and as she thought it the pained ink left over in her chest stirred hotly. She glanced at the writing desk and caught another
inspiration. She turned back to Hogwart.

“I’ll make a bet with you. I expect that taking bets is somewhere in your rules. Guardians of ways often do.”

Intrigued surprise. Nod.

“If I can do this in one try, I want the path you open for me to lead me back to Severus first, the one I’m actually looking for, not just back to my body. Can you do that?”

Nod.

“Do we have a bet?”

Hand open, palm up.

“If I lose...if you have to occlude me back to my body or I have to texentes up another one-way door or something...the first thing I’ll do is set you up any book you want to read. And a much better chair. A recliner.”

Puzzled look.

“It’s a muggle invention. You’ll love it.”

Fingers beckoning, demanding more.

“Well what more do you want?”

Pointing at her, hands opened like a book.

“I won’t have time to read to you. I’ve got barely enough as it is back there.”

Helpless shrug.

“Is that part of the rules, that the bet has to involve something I can’t afford to lose?”

Nod.

“Alright well...I can’t promise you my time. I’m not the one that suffers most if I run out of it. But in the time where I come from, there’s a threat to the texentes. People that want it removed from the school.”

Eyes widened in alarm.

"One of them...she’s my oldest friend and mentor. Opposing her openly would undoubtedly mean losing my job and her respect, permanently, but it would work. I could...I could keep her from interfering with it, do whatever it takes. Does that meet your criteria?”

Long, penetrating gaze. Hands folded solemnly, official nod.

“Ok, it’s a bet,” she took a deep breath and put her hand to her chest, feeling several pulls and not as much confidence as she would have liked, “What are the odds that this is going to be excruciatingly painful?”

Ambivalent headwobble.
Twinkle, twinkle, soldier, spy

Chapter Notes

With apologies to...pretty much everyone.

She went to the writing desk and sat down, white-knuckling the edge to keep her hands still. Maybe you couldn’t teach nonsense, but that didn’t mean there was nothing to learn about it from books.

Why is a raven like a writing desk?

Her logical mind pitched all the reasonable answers she’d hoarded as a child, resenting anything that claimed to be unsolvable. Because they produce a few dull notes. Because they often hide treasures. Because they’re occupied by puzzlers easily. Because Poe wrote extensively on both. Because neither inherently produces ‘ravin’ but literate folk often credit that misconception.

The murky ink that remained in her chest seemed to stir, preambling a boil. She held on to that feeling as tightly as the desk. There was a logic to it, but it made no sense. Not real, not even true, just connected by imaginary threads. It was ink, ink for a poem about a raven. That was true, she had felt it happen.

She let her logical mind wind down, run itself out of clever ideas, remind herself that the purpose of the riddle was to have no answer, and be maddening. But that meant it needed a mad answer.

I am a raven at a writing desk.

It had to be true. There was the desk. Therefore...therefore there had to be a raven. It was almost impossible to think of a writing desk without comparing it to a raven. She didn’t see any other raven, so as the only thing in the room she couldn’t see, she had to be the raven. She could feel it in her heart, after all, the poem about the raven, the ink-black incantation, from Poe’s inebriation and the darkness there behind the door.

The candle guttered, shadows jumping, like the ruffled wing beats thumping as her heart was pumping shadows to her wing-tips and across the floor, incantation, ink can taint one. She felt her small sharp nails on the polished wood. So close, so close. There was pain, but it was part of someone far away. She felt that sensation of singular centrality again, black threads instead of white, change inverted onto her person, moving through her instead of her moving through. She embraced it. Courage, courage, courage. Speak the Poe-em. Sing the Carroll. The words folded like origami, and her with them.

I am a raven at a writing desk.

Why is a raven at a writing desk?
Why does a raven like a writing desk?
Replies the raven at the writing desk:
To get to the other side!

That reminded her, suddenly, she had places to be. She was wasting time. She took off from the desk and circled the room, annoyed by the cramped confines and lack of motion in the air.
But there was the open door, the small man was holding it open, and down the long corridor she could hear wind rushing, so she followed it.

She came out in a place much brighter than the first time she’d gone through Hogwart’s passage. It made perfect sense to her nonsense-attuned mind: this time she was a bird, therefore he’d shown her the tunnel up rather than the tunnel in, like he’d done for the patronus-crow. She was high up, above a river in a great bright savannah, looking down at a herd of hippos.

A *bloat*, her rational mind put in, causing her some discomfort as she momentarily forgot how to use her tail to direct herself, *a herd of hippopotami is called a bloat*.

Her irritation with herself came out as a loud avian croak. She couldn’t possibly occlude the entirety of her rational rule-worshipping mind. She just had to do her best keeping her irrational mind active and hope she wasn’t really such an insufferable know-it-all that she’d crash herself over vocabulary and grammar. *Yes, but I’ve heard of hippos*.

She circled low, delighting in the bright sun and dry breeze, settling herself on the back of one of the hippos, just to enjoy being among them.

*Hippopot-amidst. Hippopot-amongst.* She cawed shamelessly, hoping she could send her rational mind into a quiet sulk with silly wordplay.

The savannah stretched away into the bright distance only in the direction she’d come from. Off to her right and left, about half a mile apart, the golden landscape dissolved into banks of bright yellow mist. On the fourth side was a grey, gauzy veil sort of hanging in the middle-distance. It stopped her heart for a moment, as the textured opacity of it reminded her of the great veil in the department of mysteries. But it wasn’t nearly so dark. It also seemed to hang without support or motion, about five feet off the ground, and was vaguely rectangular, about fifteen feet by twenty.

She flew towards it. The peculiar thing was that she could see savannah beyond it, but as she came closer it somehow became impossible to fly around the floating square. It didn’t exactly move or grow it simply dilated in her field of vision, as if the change were in the focus of her eyes. As she drew nearer she could hear voices on the other side. As she listened, the sound, and the haze, became clearer, and she knew she was looking out of the frame at a hallway in Hogwarts. She remembered it, it was on the second floor, right across from a statue of a rather diffident witch that she found herself staring directly at as students bustled past. Immediately she recalled the painting that hung across from that witch. She couldn’t tell the exact year, the school uniform hadn’t really changed in a very long time, but there were an awful lot of sideburns among the older boys. The grey gauze was edged with a thin dark rod that looked enough like iron that she thought she ought not to try to find purchase on it, and hovering was becoming a bore. Where to go?

She had as intuitive a sense of how to travel back to where she belonged as she had of how to fly, a gentle homing pull in her heart. Going forward in time was easy, obviously. She wouldn’t be able to find her way backward the same way, but that was always a given. No one ever did. But for heading forward, towards herself, there was a definite slipstream, a little hole in the air that she’d fallen through and which she expected would backfill itself as she amended her temporal position. The gentle pull lead off to her right, into the bright yellow mist.

She resolved to fly straight, though it took some effort, the view created by having eyes on the opposite sides of her head becoming a bit more jarring as she flew parallel to the canvas front of the painting. Dark stone to her left and bright sky to her right made her feel as if a storm were looming, and it was peculiar needing to cross her eyes to look ahead. The mist accepted her with a whispering sound like paper on paper. The light shifted drastically, and she was in a dim room where four dutch
merchants argued quietly over a map. Another sound like a turning page and she was in a bright flower garden by a charming cottage, and a young shepherd was leaning on the gate, gazing at a long blond braid down the back of a linen dress visible through the kitchen window. Another susurration and she was gliding along beside a flock of geese, her left eye all the while taking in glimpses of Hogwarts hallways.

The second time she passed the heard-of hippos, she recalled the tendency of these places to curve, but the gentle homing pull still came from directly ahead of her, and she resolved to trust it. On the fifth revolution, the bright and vivid images to her right became a sort of static backdrop, and those on the left, though duller and more poorly composed, became more intriguing. She flew faster, and the progressive images and the sound of paper made her feel as if she were watching a flip-book. What’s more, it helped to reassure her that she was in fact heading forward in time, because for some reason the sequential images she saw, frame by frame, tended to be of recognizably similar people in similar groups. For a few seeming moments, there were three ravenclaw girls walking along the same direction as she was going. In the first few frames they were clearly first years, in the next few they were older, then there were four, and then just two together looking old enough to be on their way to their NEWTs. She noted that the wall across from the painting of the cottage had a mirror, and a window was visible in that mirror, and she could see alternating sunshine, rain, snow, and starlight when she passed, through the painted flowers were perennial. The young swain at the gate never moved from his pining, though off to her left many young people aged, coming together and falling apart and disappearing from her view. A boy and girl went from being friends to more-than-friends to solitary figures in a few wingbeats. Two boys went from playful jostling to bitter fighting over a few brief pages, limbs lengthening and voices deepening as they learned how to shout and shove. The shepherd remained serene.

None of them ever seemed to notice her.

A trembling man in a great purple turban was stalked by a long, black shape.

She poured on speed, shaken from reverie. She had to find him.

Finally she saw an older woman, travel-weary and walking like she was part of a funeral procession, following a cheerful older elf she recognized who was gesturing to direct a tour. The elf glanced right at her and flinched, and then away again. Hermione slowed, looking at herself a few days younger and a thousand years more desolate.

She had to find him.

When the pull finally stopped drawing her forward she turned right at the hippos and flew for the horizon. After a few miles a small black line appeared where the sky met the land. Like a negative sunrise it slowly expanded, until it was an opening and the landscape merely a decorated door frame. She plunged through it into the featureless dark, wheeling over once and diving straight down.

She could hear echoing conversations and could see colorful distant openings in the darkness like mail-slots to paintings on other levels.

Something bright flew up past her to the right, and she rolled through the air instinctively. Another shot past on the left, sizzling and golden.

*Someone’s shooting at me from the ground, I must be near the ground. Those are revelio bolts,* her analytical mind chimed in, causing her to think of drawing her wand, causing her to think about having hands, causing her to wonder where her hands were to say nothing of her wand, causing flying to become so difficult that the third bolt caught her squarely in the breast, black feathers morphing into black robes. She flailed, getting off a lucky levitation charm before the *petrificus*
totalis caught her, inches from the ground. She managed to break it before the caster approached her, and leapt up, wand out, to duel.

“Oh Merlin’s beard,” Minerva muttered, putting her wand away, “what on earth are you doing down here, professor Granger?”

“Professor McGonagall?”

She nodded sourly, “Before you say it, I asked first.”

“I...um…” the backlog of necessary information was rather daunting.

“Would it help if I were more specific? All right then. When on earth did you become an animagus?”

“I didn’t. I’m not. That was just some nonsense magic. I’m surprised it held out as long as it did.”

Decades her irrational mind chimed in, proudly and unhelpfully.

“Are you the one that’s been posing as a crow in the gallery, then? Spying on everyone?”

“I was a raven. And no.”

Minerva squinted, opened her mouth, closed it, shrugged, apparently satisfied and too busy for a fight, “Ah. I beg your pardon. Difficult to tell in the dark.”

Hermione realized she still had her wand out and put it away, slowly, trying not to wonder why she had her robe back all of a sudden, “Clearly. So you’re down here looking for the crow?”

“Yes. You’ve seen it too?”

“I think so. Only incidentally. But Happy said one had been following her, and that wasn’t me, either. Except for the one time...”

“How many little flying jaunts into the gallery have you made in the last six days, Hermione?” she sounded more baffled than angry.

“Just the one, just now but...the texentes...I sort of fell backwards through time and am just getting back up to speed. I had to...” she sighed, “have you ever had to explain something so ridiculous that it hurt your brain just to hear yourself say it out loud.”

Minerva smirked, “Since becoming headmaster, literally every bloody day.”

Hermione barked a laugh and Minerva smiled.

“Minerva, listen, I wanted to say...”

Minerva shook her head, putting one finger over her lips and pointing upwards.

Muffliato!

Minerva nodded, “That should be all right. Go ahead.”

“Well, I understand why you want the texentes gone from Hogwarts but-”

McGonagall held up a hand, “Hold on, Ms. Granger. I need to explain. A good deal of that conversation was for the spy’s benefit.”
Hermione blinked and felt her cheeks color, “Ah.”

“I was fairly sure that whoever was trying to make mischief in my school was keeping an eye on me through the gallery, so I thought it prudent to let them think that their best chance to interfere with your quarters and find this device would be the weekend, hopefully keep the first week of term to one major disaster.”

“And you couldn’t have let me in on this plan because…”

Minerva looked a little startled by the question, “Well I needed them to believe it.”

Hermione grimaced, “Touche’. And Nikita and Beasley?”

She sighed, “They were upset. I thought letting them believe I was going to act boldly would help them calm down.”

“And Happy?”

She scowled, “I admit it didn’t take a great deal of playacting to express the anger you saw.”

“But-”

Minerva held up a hand, “I know your feelings on the matter, thank you very much.”

Hermione nodded once, conceding, “Do you have any idea who the crow belongs to?”

“That’s the odd thing, I don’t think it belongs to anyone. The thing that made me notice it was that I was certain it was the animagical form of my old friend, Kalliuda.”

“Kalliuda Krowse? Dorian and Anglen’s mother?”

Minerva nodded, “It’s hard to explain how we recognize each other, but it’s uncanny.”

“Do you think she’s...I don’t know, watching over her sons?”

“She would have told me. Something’s going on. But I haven’t been able to find her. If there are multiple back ways into the gallery that I don’t know about, this problem just got enormously harder.”

Hermione shook her head, “Mine was fairly....specific. How did you get in? Are you dreaming?”

She nodded, “My portrait is a door, but only for me.”

“Interesting.”

“Isn’t it? Now, I notice you never got around to answering my question. What on earth are you up to down here?”

Hermione sighed, “How long do you have?”
Situational Tragedy

Chapter Notes

Yay more long conversations about death! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Hermione had finished explaining; omitting the racy details and some of the more oblique, speculative, and nonsensical bits, but including the intricate ritual she had witnessed; Minerva simply stared.

She fidgeted like a pupil, “There...there was never a good time to tell you?”

The headmaster shook her head, “Six days.”

“Five and a half. A very full five and a half.”

Wearily, “I accept that you’re telling me at the first real opportunity, I’ve been preoccupied myself. I’m just thinking this must be some kind of a school-year record for discovery of a dire and mysterious threat to the school.”

Hermione smiled, mostly relieved, and shrugged, “I bet you thought it was always just Harry and Ron’s influence…”

Minerva’s tone was bone-dry but there was a tiny smile at the corner of her mouth, “How wrong I was. Clearly they were holding you back.”

“So...if the crow is your friend Kallida, how do we find her?”

Minerva sighed, “Well, as you were talking I was thinking. Whether or not it is Kallida, a crow has been spying on me, and on Happy presumably. You said you’d noticed it as well.”

Hermione nodded, “I remember seeing one in your office, then again when I was eating dinner, and then…” something clicked, “and then when I was down here the first time. It...it followed me and helped direct me, actually. I had assumed it was just a manifestation of the dream, everything was getting really allegorical and I guess I skipped wondering how...how the patronus I’d followed in had turned into a solid black bird but...but maybe it didn’t.”

Minerva’s mouth curled in bemusement, “Then if she’s so interested in spying on the two of us, all we really need to do is take a walk together and wait.”

Hermione blinked, “I suppose so. But I really do have to find Severus. I feel like he’s in danger.”

“No doubt he is. I was suggesting that I should come with you.”

“Oh. Well. I can hardly stop you. Do you suppose we should pretend to be fighting still?”

Minerva scoffed, “Sweet Archimedes, no. No playacting. We’ll just talk. If you notice our being followed by a crow, just say...oh I don’t know...”
“Jabberwock?”

Minerva’s mouth crimped incredulously and one eyebrow sprang aloft, “Perhaps something less like the direct invocation of a monster, while we’re traipsing about behind the scenery of sense.”

“Jubjub bird?”

She sighed, “If we must.”

Hermione dismissed the muffliato charm.

“So. Which direction?”

Hermione held up her closed hand, thumb on top pointing forward. She turned slowly in a circle until she felt a sharp stab under the nail, “This way.”

They walked along a little ways before Hermione checked again and they had to turn. There was no way to tell whether they had meandered off-course or whether the path through the dark simply curved.

“He...he was so relieved when I told him you were headmaster.”

She sighed, “I wonder if that means he forgave me.”

“I’m pretty sure the only one he was ever angry with was himself.”

She nodded, “I know. But when I attacked him...in those last terrible days of the war, I truly believed...and I of all people should have known better.”

“About his loyalty, you mean?”

She nodded gravely, “He grew up in a half-blood household, like me. You learn to live like the tip of an iceberg, cold and discrete and concealing a vast world unto yourself. In another life I think we would have been great friends. He was a good man. It must have been very painful that so few people knew it.”

Hermione didn’t know what to say, thinking of how long it had taken her to understand the meaning of her professor’s reserved gentility, the enormous weight she carried for others by being steely and impersonal, and how to properly appreciate the little cracks in her facade that let through the bright glimmers of wit and tenderness and acerbic charm.

“Are you really so angry at Happy?”

A long pause, “Yes.”

“Why, because she embarrassed you?”

Minerva gave a sudden squawk of laughter, “Professor Granger, I have been a teacher for over sixty years. I may not be immune to embarrassment exactly but I am old enough not to bother becoming angry about it.”

Hermione let her tone hold a sharp point, “So you’re just torturing her for nothing, then?”

“That certainly sounds like something I would do, don’t you think?” her parching wit scoured like sandpaper.
“No, of course not, but it seems like something you are doing.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“But it is. You can’t pretend that Happy has equal footing to you when you make your displeasure felt. She might not be your literal property anymore, but you’re in charge of everything that she’s built her precarious life around, her children and grandchildren work for you. You can’t pretend that this is just two old friends having a bit of hurt feelings between them. Your anger could literally destroy her life’s work, or the literal lives of her family, without hardly meaning to. I have to at least try to speak to you on her behalf because she can’t possibly risk it, and I don’t think you should be allowed to feel like quiet is the same as peace. Not on this.”

Minerva’s lips had tightened until Hermione was surprised she could move them in reply, “I have done a great deal for the elves under the school’s care, and I will not be accused of being some kind of—”

“I’m not accusing you of being any kind of anything. It doesn’t matter what you are or what you’ve done, in this case right now it matters what you’re doing, right this second, and making Happy suffer for this is wrong.”

“She knows the reason.”

“I honestly don’t think she does. She seems to think she hurt your feelings and embarrassed you and that you’re digging your heels in over some circumstantial perception of a threat to the school. You seem to think it’s more than that.”

“It is.”

“Then tell me.”

Minerva stopped and stood very straight, eyes closed, breathing in like she was gathering strength from the air to lift a mountain of ice from the sea. She opened her eyes and took a long stride, and Hermione had to hurry to keep up with her.

“One of the hardest things, as you will find when you get older, is outliving all the people who can understand you in your proper context. If you’re very lucky and live a long time, the other threads in the tapestry of the world as you know it leave off before you do, until you’re just a...a loose end, a single stranded witness in the locked dock of an empty court.” she sighed harshly, “True to form, I can certainly survive that. I’ve a great deal I mean to do before I succumb to anything, and when I do, it certainly won’t be to anything as pedestrian as loneliness or queasy existential doubt. Still, don’t mistake my reluctance to explain myself as a lack of conviction. It’s just that it’s tedious and tiresome always having to bring younger people up to speed.”

Hermione checked the invisible horizon with her thumb and walked in the most painful direction she could find, “On behalf of my generation, we are grateful for your continued tolerance.”

Minerva scoffed, “Don’t pretend you don’t know a little of what I’m talking about, Mrs. Weasley.”

That didn’t seem to need a response, so Hermione didn’t bother with one.

Minerva sighed, “Happy thinks she knows. And you’d think she would, she’s more than twice my age. I’m more than twice your age, but I think you’re closer to understanding what it is to age the way it happens to us. You know what it is to think about death as a thing that will happen. I don’t know that she does. She knows that it happens to us, has seen it happen, grieved it happening, the way a person might with a pet, but she’s got a few hundred years yet to live. She’s never crossed that
border into the reality that it waits for us all. She doesn’t understand what it is to need to have ideas about about death. Not that she’s stupid or thoughtless, it’s just that, in my experience, none of us do until we’re basically forced to.”

Hermione nodded, doing her best to warm to her mentor’s apparent sincerity, “I do know what you mean. I could use some help on what you’re getting at, though.”

Minerva sighed, speaking softly, “What do you think you will experience when you die, Hermione?”

She shook her head earnestly, “I don’t know.”

Minerva nodded, “Very true, but your not-knowing isn’t the same as Happy’s, or Nikita’s, or Beasley’s. It’s like asking ‘what are you doing this weekend’. A person who hasn’t thought about it at all and a person who has devoted a great deal of planning and care and thought to it but is still too uncertain of too many factors to know what to expect might both say ‘I don’t know’, but be saying very different things.”

“So you and I have death in our day-planners, is what you’re saying.”

“Quite so. And even without knowledge, I think we’ve built up certain parameters about what to expect, a few if/thens, sorting of hopes and fears into categories, just to manage the surreal enormity of it, wouldn’t you say?”

Hermione nodded vaguely, scanning again.

“And even if they’re not the most comforting thoughts, just having them sorted is comforting. Better than letting hope or fear run away with you at any odd moment.”

Hermione winced, the pain was becoming stronger and fading less between searches.

Minerva sighed wistfully, “I loved a man when I was very young. Dougal. It was...riotous. The kind you never recover from, and I knew it even then. He was so handsome that, at first, I had to spurn him, thinking things couldn’t work out if he were so much prettier than me. But he seemed to love being rejected by me more than being wanted by anyone else, and by the time I realized it I’d already laid my heart at his feet with sharp words and pointed observations, and he’d gathered it to himself with care and wrapped it in that,” she laughed lightly, “that damn smile of his. I still spurned him, of course, saying he had no poetry in him, no head for genius. He came by every day to recite John Donne poetry to me, from memory, the sacred as well as the profane, and with such lyrical earnestness,” she laughed again, sounding quite set-apart from the darkness around them, “Indefatigable. Of course,” the dark closed in around her voice, “I couldn’t admit to him, or myself at first, that the reason I had to spurn him was that he was a muggle, like my father.”

Hermione blinked, struck-through by the implication, “Oh Minerva, I’m so sorry.”

She waved a hand and gave a bitter little laugh, “Oh I know, it’s all very tragic. But don’t be ‘so-sorry’. It’s such an unctuous phrase. I don’t even know what it means, really, and I say it myself in all the appropriate places. And mean it, too, somehow.”

Hermione nodded, “You said it to me at Ron’s funeral.”

She frowned, wrinkling her nose, “Well for that I AM sorry.”

Hermione laughed, putting her thumb to her lips reflexively to try to soothe it, “I tend to think it means ‘I wish this weren’t the kind of world we live in, or that there were anything I could do about it, and even though there’s not I feel like someone owes you an apology on behalf of the universe,
and since I'm here it might as well be me.”

Minerva nodded, “I suppose it is better that we shorten it then. Funeral receptions would take weeks.”

“Anyway, you were saying?”

Minerva cleared her throat, clutching her collar lightly, protectively, “Well...I had to choose. The mandates on secrecy would have meant living as my mother had, hiding everything, tutoring my children in how to hide their gifts. Living in arm’s reach of him and preventing him from ever…” her voice caught, “ever really knowing me.”

“So you decided on magic.”

She sighed, “I realized there was really no decision. If I married him, I had to stay hidden from him. If I broke our engagement, I had to stay hidden from him. So why not at least have magic to console me?”

“Did it?”

Minerva wrinkled her nose, shook her head, “My life has had an abundance of wonder and joy and excitement, but no, nothing I would really call consolation. Over many trials I’ve found that letting go by choice is so much harder than having things taken from you. It burns and burns, and you just have to let it. I’ve never found a remedy for it.”

Severus’ voice echoed in Hermione’s memory, *I was so afraid you wouldn’t come back, and I would burn awake forever.*

Minerva sighed, “But at least it let me live in hope. I disappeared from his world, but I always thought, someday, I would find a way back to him, or he would move heaven and earth to find me. I...I still believe he felt the same way. I broke his heart without an explanation, and still he...the last letter he sent, he sent to my mother to give to me. He’d just written out Donne’s ‘A Valediction Forbidding Mourning.’”

Hermione smiled sadly, “I know that one, that’s the one with the image of two souls joined like a compass, the sort for drawing circles.”

Minerva nodded, “If they be two, they are two so, as stiff twin compasses are two: thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show to move, but doth, if the other do. And though it in the center sit, yet when the other far doth roam, it leans and hearkens after it, and grows erect as that comes home.’ And that’s how it felt. Even when he married. Even when he’d had children. Even when he died...murdered randomly by death-eaters during the first war, I always returned to believing, to certainty, that I would see him again, that a world could not exist where the true and final choice in the matter of loving him would be the sort I’d been faced with.”

Hermione nodded, “I do know that feeling, yes,” she did not feel it would be appropriate to assert that she didn’t credit it as anything but a psychological coping mechanism.

“I married too, of course, after he died, and Elphin was as wonderful a husband as he had been a friend for many years,” she sighed wistfully, “He was so persistent. I suppose I’ve got a soft spot for relentless men. We were only married a handful of years. He too died suddenly. A silly accident. A bite from a venomous plant. He’d have survived it if he hadn’t also been allergic to members of the aloe family. I do love him, truly, to this day, and miss him, but that’s never muddied my sense that somewhere beyond this ridiculous life and its duties I would find myself with Dougal again.”
Minerva’s expression had grown wistful and her pace meandering, she was silent for a while, then shook her head briskly, amending her stride, “Understand, I spent years trying to kill this perverse, irrational, and heedless feeling. When he was murdered, I hadn’t even spoken a word to him in years and I...” tears glistened on the sills of her eyelids, “I wanted to throw myself in the grave after him, abandon the war and just...I was useless. For days. I begged Dumbledore to obliviate him from my mind, let me forget.”

“How did he talk you out of it?”

Minerva gave a half-laugh, “He didn’t. He went ahead and did it. Brilliantly. Brutally. I didn’t think of Dougal for four whole months. When he occurred to me again, it was less like he had ever been gone and more like he’d simply been tucked away and had slowly unfolded again, like a bulb putting up a flower in the spring. All I’d gotten was a little time off from the pain. But I think that did help me heal.”

Hermione felt a guilty tug at her gut, wondering if Severus would remember her invasion of his dream before she could confess it, and what that would mean, what it would do, and whether she should want it. She pushed it away for being too complicated, “Are you sure that wasn’t just his plan? Dumbledore was rather crafty, and quite the advocate for love as an inviolable force.”

Minerva shook her head, “Oh no, he meant for it to work. He was genuinely shocked when it wore off. He was a good man and more arrogant back then. A good man and a magnificent wizard and a wonderful friend, but the things he’d suffered had left him sort of darkly frivolous and cynical about magic in many ways. When magic couldn’t scrub Dougal from my mind, it seemed to re-crystalize the world for him, in a positive way. He began making a more serious study of the deep and strange magical laws of love, as best we know them. It set him on the path to understanding why Harry had lived, and how to keep him safe. Why he trusted Severus’ loyalties with the same certainty as most of us trust time and gravity.”

Hermione struggled against selfish reverie and absurd jealousy, resisting the idea that Severus’ love for Lily would call him away as inexorably as it had called him to war, suspecting it was as certain as McGonagall had just expressed. Better to change the subject. She put out her thumb again, though it had long since ceased to react with any distinction and simply throbbed, “So what does this have to do with Happy?”

Minerva slowed and stopped, closing her eyes tight, “She knew all this. How Dougal’s been a part of the very fabric of the universe for me since I was eighteen, and has survived every cataclysmic shift in my personality and understanding since then” she chuckled ruefully, “and there have been a great many of those.”

Hermione nodded, speaking slowly, “So when you confided in her about Sir Nicholas, you wish she’d recognized how a...an intense connection via the texentes might complicate your concept of the universe...might challenge Dougal’s primacy?”

Minerva clucked impatiently, “It’s not about hierarchies, Hermione. I’ve always honored the fact that Dougal doubtless loves his wife and children every bit as passionately as he ever loved me, and as I love Elphin. Those facts have never seemed to interfere with my...my certitude in a place where we would meet and all love could be honored without shame or contradiction. Perhaps it’s silly, but that thought has been my comfort as I have aged.”

Hermione shook her head, “It’s not silly. So, what, Sir Nicholas doesn’t feel the same way you do about polyfidelity in the afterlife or- oh,” her eyes opened wide, realizing, “Oh Minerva I’m so-”

“Say it and I’ll turn you into a ferret.”
Hermione clapped her mouth shut, dodging around enormity with flippancy, “I thought you abhorred
the idea of using transfiguration for punishment.”

Minerva glared, although her eyes were fighting a wry smile that had rushed eagerly in amidst all the
pathos, “Only of students.”

Hermione sobered, “But I mean, I really am actually, for my own specific behavior. I’m sorry that I
assumed your reasons were, well, quite so petty. I know you well enough to admire you, I should
have expected it was more than I knew;” polity stopped her there, and she hoped fiercely she would
not eventually have to add but you’re still wrong, though she was prepared for it all the same.

Minerva waved a hand, “Well, your contempt wasn’t entirely misplaced. I have been monstrously
preoccupied. And it is my grievous failing that I do frequently forget how vulnerable are Happy and
her kin. And punishing her is to no good. I’ve been petty. You’re right about that.”

Hermione nodded, “But that can be fixed. And you...you really have had a lot on your mind, I
imagine.”

She nodded, sighing, “Sir Nicholas has been my dear friend for decades and this...this thing that has
recently broken free between us...I can’t reconcile it. But he’s a ghost, and here I am needing to
determine how to navigate my remaining years and I’m back to the same sort of impossible choice I
had before. If I move on, if I follow that pull I’ve been yearning after all my life, Nicholas can’t
follow me. As near as we can tell, ghosts give up the ability to pass on. But were I to remain…”

“You give up on Dougal and Elphin.”

She nodded, “And my brothers, my mother and father, seeing them truly together someplace without
secrecy. Moreover I give up on ever really knowing what it’s like, after living so long with waiting.
That’s almost worse. I know I can live without them, because I have, because I’m prepared to do so
as long as I’m able but...I’ve never lived without assuming I’d get a chance to see them again. I don’t
know if I can. It’s a dream that has been with me a very long time. Longer than I’ve known Sir
Nicholas, if only barely. But what I feel for him now...” she sighed deeply, “I don’t know. It’s felt so
real and so...well...riotous. Young and foolish but...”

“Safe.”

Minerva smiled faintly, nodding, “And right, and true. But that’s why I would at least like a chance
to let that blasted machine wind down. Let everyone get their bearings and gather their wits. Get a
chance to study it a little, to make sure there are no additions to the castle in the last thousand years
that it might interfere with, get a handle on what we ought to know and then...well, anything else can
wait for Neville’s decision next year, I think.”

“Oh, Minnie, thank you,” a light and raspy voice spoke from behind them, and Happy un-
disappeared herself. Hermione clutched her locket and Minerva gawped.

Hermione spoke first, “Happy...how did you...”

Happy shrugged, “Well you said my name several times while you were in your quiet bubble. It
began to seem like an imperative.”

Minerva recovered, “You can apparate into the gallery?”

Hermione blinked, “You can hear your name through a muffliato charm?”

Happy glanced at her hands before clapping them behind her back, “Apparently so, if I can feel the
bearing of a summons. Which I wouldn’t have if you hadn’t said my name,” she shook her head and her ears wobbled comically, “it’s no small matter when an elf’s ears start to burn.”

Minerva still looked incredulous, “But we’re not even really here! I’m dreaming and Hermione is doing some kind of…” she waved a hand in dismissive irritation, “…transcendental… transfiguration… nonsense… thing.”

Hermione glanced towards a sound from overhead, its source invisible, and she held up a hand for quiet, “Jubjub bird…”

Chapter End Notes

The next couple chapters are sort of appropriate for Halloween, so I might try to get them up tomorrow. I’ve a bit of an ambition to have the whole story up by new year, which will need a little more than two chapters a week to get done, so if you see occasional random postings that’s what’s happening there.
Bandersnatch

Happy turned her head, listening, nodding faintly as she tracked, mouthing the words “feathered grim”.

Hermione spoke low, “Can you tell where it is, is it close enough to petrificus?”

Happy nodded, closing her eyes, holding a hand close to her chest and tracing one finger upwards, circling it slowly.

Hermione straightened and took a deep breath, “I don’t see why you can’t just say you’re sorry Minerva!” she projected stiffly.

Minerva’s expression flattened into long tight horizontal lines that said fifty points from gryffindor for the death of acting. She said softly to Happy, “Can you do it? Can you hear it well enough to hit it?”

Happy nodded, gestured slightly, then shook her head, “No, I can’t. It’s a person. Hogwarts won’t let me.”

Minerva scowled and muttered, “Circe’s clapped-out cunt…”. Happy gave her a look that was a doctoral dissertation on the synergistic relationship between mouths and soap.

“But you’re the headmaster, can’t you just give her permission?”

Minerva sighed “Only if I honestly believe Kallida’s an imminent threat to the school...and I honestly don’t. Hogwarts keeps its own counsel on a great many things.”

Hermione had a thought, “Happy, take my hand. I find that sometimes in these dreamstates I can…” and as Happy took her hand, suddenly she could tell where the bird was. She couldn’t hear through Happy’s ears exactly, but she could feel the reactive tension in her wrist as she moved her finger, the impulse of motion her spine sent to her hand as she let her enormous ears do the thinking. When the order came to cast, Hermione obeyed it.

“Petrificus Totalis!”

The invisible wave skated into the air. There was a short silence then a soft thump. The three women hurried over to where a crow lay paralyzed and almost invisible on the black ground. Minerva leaned in with her lit wand.

“It’s Kallida, I’m certain. Stand back. Revelio!”

The bird vanished. No disapparative pop, no blink or gesture from the bird, just gone, as if Minerva had accidentally disintegrated it.

“People come and go so quickly here,” Hermione murmured.

Minerva gritted her teeth, “I do not understand this place. Did she break your enchantment?”

Hermione shook her head, “I didn’t feel it break. She just...left...even though she couldn’t have...” she could almost feel the waves of academic irritation radiating off the Headmaster, and she sympathized. Still, she’d made enough productive use of things-one-ought-not-to-be-able-to-do so recently that it seemed crass to complain.

Happy sighed, “Perhaps a quirk of her way down here. Every way has its own rules. Perhaps she
can only stay here in bird form...though that would be terribly peculiar. Animagi don’t fool Hogwarts.”

Minerva pursed her lips as if sucking a sour candy, “Well...nothing to be done about it now I suppose. Rescuing Severus must take precedent. Will you walk with us, Happy? Keep your ears open in case she returns?”

Happy nodded “Which way?”

Hermione felt her cheeks get warm, “I...I don’t know.”

Minerva actually startled, “What!”?

“I...the direction stopped being distinct several minutes ago. It just hurts, I can’t tell. We’re close but...if Happy can’t cast it means we haven’t gotten past the edge of Hogwarts yet. And we haven’t passed through the murmuring dark yet…”

“The what?”

Hermione sighed, “A place where I started to hear voices. Little snatches of things from my own mind to...to discourage me. Some sort of barrier between galleries, I thought. Or maybe it was just incidental, or not part of the environment at all.”

“But you got through.”

Hermione sighed, “The crow helped me. Kind of. It lead me in, and it warned me when to leave.”

“Well...bugger,” Minerva pursed her lips, “but I suppose it’s worth seeing if an animal’s eye-view yields us anything. Perhaps the disorientation down here can be deceived by animagi the way dementors are,” and easy as turning her head, her body spiraled upward from the ground to shoulder-height, and when she came down again it was to land on four velvet paws.

The sudden cat sniffed the air, cocked an ear, and trotted off into the indifferent dark, the other women hurrying to catch up. Before long, Hermione saw a dim beacon of amber light in the distance. As they got nearer Hermione slowed, stopping at the corner of the first dark box as Minerva-cat and Happy moved on ahead. She could hear talking, and wasn’t sure she could move as quietly as the other two, though in the silence the sounds were plain enough.

“...don’t want me to do to you what I did to Lucius, Severus,” the acidic purr was unmistakable, and the old, invisible scars on Hermione’s forearm ached like a dark mark, filling her with a sudden irrational fear that she might somehow be alerting Bellatrix Lestrange to her presence.

“I would bet my back staples you don’t even know what you did to Lucius, Bellatrix,” Severus tone was cool, disinterested, “or to Fenrir, for that matter.”

Bellatrix tone was dismissive, “I didn’t do anything to Fenrir. He’s got ideas of his own, apparently. He was just a prototype, really. Even Dolohov's not likely to be good for much but spare parts. You and I, on the other hand...I was his most cherished and you...you were late. We’re a breed apart in his creation. There's so much more I can do...” her lip curled like smoke, "to you."

“I’m not worried. I don’t think twenty years asleep in a canvas have done anything to improve your magical theory or slapdash arrogance.”

“Only because your own tendency to be boring and blindly bookish haven’t improved. I’m the early bird, bookworm. And I’ve learned quite a bit through my allies. For instance...”
There was a long pause, Hermione crept forward to the next black box. She could see Severus standing, one hand resting on the wing of his chair, the other clasped in the hollow of his back. Beyond the front wall of his painting grinned a woman dressed in dark weedy finery and crowned with a roiling thunder-cloud of black hair. She was clutching the distinctively twisted walnut wand that Hermione had last seen dangling in half in a news photo, though in her hand it was perfect and whole and seemed to glow with malice. Her other hand was holding a large heavy tome against her chest. The tome also looked familiar, and there was a handmade red-and-gold tasseled bookmark in it.

Hermione swore inwardly. She hadn’t noticed that, along with Severus, her newly borrowed copy of “Hogwarts; a History” had gone missing in the sacking of her rooms. She hadn’t even looked. She looked then, cursing her monofocus, trying to memorize as much of the room Bellatrix stood in as she could see through Severus’ cell. It was massive, drab, vaguely industrial, probably a warehouse but nothing she recognized. There was that same odd, churning, heartbeat sound that she knew but couldn’t place. Yellow-brown light came from a few weak and distant sconces and, off to one side and in the background, a cool rippling moon-like glow radiated toward the ceiling from a stone bowl with a rich-looking silver inlay...a pensieve. A man stood over it with his back turned, hands bracing on the rim of the bowl, his neck bowed so deeply his silhouette looked headless, the strange light and odd distances making it impossible to tell much about his relative height and mass. He was fit but not heavily built. He wasn’t one of the death eaters; after so many chaotic battles, even after so much time, she knew each of their silhouettes viscerally. Could he, whoever he was, have looked massive to a startled elf?

After a silence of stunned contempt, Severus cocked his head indifferently, his eyelids fluttering as heavily as his sigh, “Really, Bella, I’m afraid I can’t keep up with how very clever you are. If I’m meant to feel wounded by your finally reading a book, I’m completely failing you.” Hermione felt her throat tighten and her monofocus snap back onto him. He was trying to provoke an unhinged sadist for information. It wouldn’t be hard, but it was incredibly dangerous. Her every impulse screamed at her to run in and put her body between him and the threat but she hung back, trusting him. Horrible as it was, this was something he was good at.

Bellatrix grinned, “Oh don’t be so eager. We’ll get to you feeling wounded in due time. This little book spins quite a tale, you see. It seems that all my suspicions about you were accurate.”

Even with his back to her Hermione could hear him roll his eyes, “Really, Bella, I’m afraid I can’t keep up with how very clever you are. If I’m meant to feel wounded by your finally reading a book, I’m completely failing you.” Hermione felt her throat tighten and her monofocus snap back onto him. He was trying to provoke an unhinged sadist for information. It wouldn’t be hard, but it was incredibly dangerous. Her every impulse screamed at her to run in and put her body between him and the threat but she hung back, trusting him. Horrible as it was, this was something he was good at.

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Even with his back to her Hermione could hear him roll his eyes, “And you call me blindly bookish? You’re madder than you look, and the less said about that the better. Every copy is a bad copy, Bellatrix, every story a false story. You think at long last the muggle-loving historians got conclusively to my truth but the Dark Lord himself was mistaken?”

“Dead men have a harder time covering their false stories, dead man. When the Dark Lord rises again-”

Snape scoffed through his nose, “Stop it. He isn’t coming back this time. If you believe anything in a history book believe that. We lost. He’s gone.”

There was a vicious hiss from the witch. She flung a gesture and his cage flared with an acid-green radiance. The impact of the spell made a harsh scouring sound like a jet of water striking heavily against a tin wall, and the iron staples along the edges made an electrical sizzling sound. Severus grunted, pain curled his spine but he did not fall, and as Hermione crept closer she saw a small thread of blue light trailing down the back of his robe. He held her dark willow wand against his back, almost invisible against his robes, pointing to the floor at his feet. The blue mingled with the sickly pulsing green-black of the floor, creating a subtle pool at his feet that seemed to insulate him from some of the effects. Hermione’s stomach turned but her mind was fighting to be heard, pointing out
with mingled horror and excitement that Bellatrix was free of her painting, walking about and using magic and making up her own mad goals, living her demented life. Alive. Meaning real. Meaning there was a way.

When her wrath was momentarily sated she spat, “You are a traitor and you know nothing of what my Lord is capable of!”

Severus straightened, his voice a scowl, “I know that our Lord was capable of dying, and that he did.”

She grinned viciously and flicked her wand, laughing as he braced though she threw no spell, “Yes, and came back.”

“Not the second time.”

She nodded, her eyes glittering, “Not yet. But he will. There’s another little secret in this book, you see. One that the unimaginative might miss. He will return, and reign.”

“Not in this world.”

“There is no world where he will not someday reign,” her voice trembled with zeal, “It is simply impossible. He is the constant, the inevitable. He will always return, and I will always be the first to his side. I am his vengeance, body and soul, as are you whether you like it or not. While I live, there will be a way for him to return!”

Through the gnawing hatred in her soul for Bellatrix, Hermione felt a moment of sick recognition. She knew that feeling, that false indomitable confidence, that merciless and domineering hope. Bellatrix Lestrange was desperately in love, and just as desperately in denial. Seeing the pure human folly in the face of such an irredeemable monster was utterly surreal, and Hermione’s guts rioted against accepting any empathy for her. It could not be love, not the same as her own, not as pure and painful and selfless as hers...or Minerva’s...or Ron’s, or Ginny’s, or Harry’s, or George’s… but there it was, vital and vivid and defiant.

Glancing around to check on Happy and Minerva to reorient herself, she crept forward to the last box between herself and Severus, his profile coming into view. The two small figures were off on the far side, Happy examining an upright of Severus’ cage and Minerva sniffing at the ground a little further off.

Severus almost sounded kind, “He cannot, Bella. He tore his own soul to shreds, far worse than he tore yours and mine. And those pieces were well protected, you did your best, I know, but they’re gone now. Back from the dead doesn’t- aaach!”

The cage flared again and Bellatrix laughed, “There are many creatures of the murky depths who, torn to pieces, grow and thrive again. There are things beyond the sky that do not die, that cannot.”

His voice was tight with pain, “None that could ever love you back.”

She cackled, feigning pity, “I do begin to believe that this scribbly little book might be lying about you after all. There’s no way a slithering, frigid, fish-blooded coward like you ever loved anything worth defying a case of the hiccups, let alone the most powerful wizard that ever lived.”

The blue light protecting him flickered slightly but held. He struggled to unclench his jaw, sweat and spit atomizing from his lips with a croaked plosive “Past…”

“Sorry?” she dropped the spell, her tone sing-song, her grin mocking and serene.
He took a breath, uncurled and bowed slightly as if she’d simply taken his coat, smoothing the front of his robe, “Lived. Past tense. Full stop. Those he meant to kill, they are living. Present continuous tense...or imperfect, if you prefer. They are living. Are thriving. Present imperfect tense. I’ve seen them. Hogwarts stands. Present. Continuous. You think he was infallible, but he wasn’t then and he’s only perfect now in the grammatical sense: finished. Not ongoing. Dead. He lived. He once was living. He stopped doing so. Past perfect. Time to move on. There’s much we could accomplish together if you’d stop being ridiculous. There are flaws in your method with the dem-”

She lashed out with a spell but instead of a flare of light there was a soft ripping sound and he clutched his chest, red darkness pooling at his feet as the blue light flickered out, “That you seem to want to die painless tells me you are not beyond redemption. It must eat at you how none of those you betrayed him for bothered to save you en route to living happily ever after. How many days was it before they even knew you had died? Did no one check? They don’t give much detail in their self-congratulatory account, so it can’t have been flattering. Was there even a single moment when all your slavish sucking-up to the petty tyrannies of heroism allowed you to bask in love and peace and clarity, or is it only in dead dusty books like this one where the golden-hearted mud-sucking morons ever praise you? I promise it doesn’t tear at your heart half so well as I can, considering that you are caged, unarmed, and, as usual, completely alone.”

He turned away from her, subtly sliding the wand along his side to keep it concealed, changing hands and gripping the chair for support as he faced the back of his cage, lips murmuring a quiet incantation and then the words, “And still it matters…”

“What did you say? Don’t mumble. And don’t-” she gestured, there was another ripping sound and he arched, “-turn your back to me.”

Hermione reached into her sleeve for her wand and realized with a cold jolt that she didn’t have it. Severus had her wand. How...did that work? She stepped out from the side of the dark box, determined to go to him, certain she could ease his pain by putting a hand on his frame or...or something, but something soft and cold brushed her cheek, reaching from the box beside her. She jumped, turning. It was just a ribbon of black cloth fluttering gently in some unfelt breeze. She stared at it, slowly comprehending. It hung from the back of the...empty cage, along with many other such ribbons, waving silently and almost invisibly in the dark, shredded on the side leading into the gallery.

Shredded by claws.

She turned back to where Minerva, still in cat-form, was facing vaguely towards her, still sniffing the ground intently. And behind her, dark grey against endless black, something large shifted.

“Jabberwock! Jabberwock!” Hermione screamed.
The cat sprang forward without looking as the monster leapt. Bellatrix and Severus both turned their heads, not toward Hermione but toward the place in Bellatrix’ room where Fenrir Greyback’s painting would be. Fenrir landed in the faint haze of light cast by Severus’ cage, slavering and bristling with savage joy, a moment too late to rip the small cat to shreds. A single grimy claw caught in her flank, plucking out a high growling squeal and a little blood. The wounded cat ran straight at Hermione as the monster hunched to leap again, but then she cornered hard and streaked off in the direction they’d all approached the prison from, perhaps hoping to draw him off into the dark.

Unable to check himself mid-air, the wolfman landed a scant pace in front of Hermione, and the acrid scavenger stench of him plowed into her nostrils, activating a terror response in her spine that was older than bipedal apes. His head was turned to track the cat, but swiveled around to fix his gaze on the human instead, nostrils flaring as he pulled in her scent.

His voice was a boulder wreaking destruction down a mountainside, “I smell someone that I mean to kill…”

Hermione spun backwards, dodging around the corner of Fenrir’s shredded cage, remembering in limbic pictograms how a werewolf’s heavy frame and relatively small footprint made cornering their slowest maneuver. He apparently remembered it too, and instead of scrabbling like a dog on linoleum he simply sprang overtrop, landing close to her but still needing to turn, and she spun around the next corner, buying another moment, “Happy!”

“What is all that…” Bellatrix’ snarled peevishly.

Severus coughed damply, “Summon Fenrir back to his frame and ask him...if you can.” He lowered himself to sit on the floor and lean against the chair.

Happy snapped in between Hermione and Fenrir, giving him a hard slap across the muzzle before disapparating again to the far side of his cage. His resulting startelement gave Hermione several seconds to backpedal away from him but it wasn’t enough. He leunged just as Hermione got far enough away to register that Happy was frantically repairing the rent canvas of his cage.

She dodged aside. As Fenrir turned, Happy popped in to pop him another good one before vanishing back to repair the cell. He roared and snapped his head around to note the elf’s position, but his nostrils flared and he turned back to Hermione, his burning gaze fixed on her sternum.

He lunged again, both hands out, claws bared, wrists together oddly, as if he meant to dive into her chest. She was able to spin aside again, grateful for his brainless lunging, but his hands glanced off her chest and she clearly felt him catching wildly at her locket.

Her mind spun. Objects of vengeance. Fixated on her locket. I smell someone I mean to kill. Ron killed Fenrir, Fenrir meant to kill Ron. Could he smell Ron on the locket? That made no sense, Ron had never touched it so...more nonsense. Fine. Magical recognition. Or suchlike. Fine. Wand core cords, paintings, artifices, magical threads, channels, whatever. Whatever it was it was happening. She’d kept it with her always because it was a part of him, why shouldn’t a nightmare know it too in a place like this?

Only the presence of larger concerns kept her from fretting about how easy it was becoming to accept the patently ridiculous.
She spun away from him again, only avoiding being flayed because she chose to dodge left when he’d begun to expect her to always go right, “Happy, he’s fixated on my locket!”

“Just a little longer!”

*Bollocks.*

Her wandless defensive and offensive spells weren’t nearly enough to slow down a fully-grown werewolf. She hadn’t worked on them because they were enormously inefficient and she’d resolved instead to never go blundering into dangerous places without her wand.

Fine. Time to think like a mudblood.

He lunged again and she just barely won the coin-flip of how he would anticipate her, turning so close along his outstretched arm his prickly shoulder-hair abraded her neck. She leaned into him, letting his forward-motion spin her until she was behind him. Then, as he regained his balance to turn again, she lunged.

The hair on his back was slick with rank sweat but coarse enough to make for good handholds. She grabbed hold and pressed herself against him, feeling her locket heat to burning through her shirt as she did. He roared and reared. He reached back and managed to claw her ankle without getting a grip, his great twanging chest muscles too tight to allow him to properly swat the painful nuisance clinging to his back. More painful was the sickening unmediated rage inside him that was trying to worm its way through her skin as she held on.

“Hang on!” Happy yelled, not looking back to realize the timeliness of her advice, repairing the last of the canvas with a hurried flourish and putting a hand on the frame. There was a stutter of red light at a few of the corners but nothing more happened. Happy looked startled for a moment then stamped her foot and screamed “Bollocks!”

Bellatrix had moved beyond where Hermione could catch hyper-aware adrenaline-soaked glances of her through Severus’ cell, presumably standing in front of Fenrir’s painting, hopefully thinking of summoning him back. Severus was taking advantage of her distraction to try to heal his wounds in earnest.

Happy yelled “Hermione! Throw me the locket! I can’t command the painting! It’s warded against elf magic!”

“What!? But you just fixed it! That doesn’t make any-” then she yelled as her calf erupted with tearing pain.

Fenrir’s back rumbled as he gave a cruel laugh and got his claws into an ankle again. Hermione lashed a forearm around his throat and hauled back for everything she was worth, hoping she could keep him off-balance while her other hand wrestled the locket off over her hair. He reeled like a wobbling top and for a moment she had to cling close to him, locket in hand. As he bent double, digging at her forearm, she kissed her token of Ron for luck and flung it in the general direction of Happy, who apparated a few feet to the left and caught it like a charm.

Hermione let go and fell to the ground with a hard thump, hoping his obsession with the locket was strong enough to make him ignore easy prey.

He charged Happy, who apparated away from him as easy as blinking, behind him and beyond arm’s reach, then did so again, turning and turning him, “I fixed one side! The other is somewhere else! Activate the frame! He’ll have to return! Then you can put him to sleep!” she hollered.
“I don’t have my wand here or I’d have put him to sleep already!”

Happy unleashed a string of curses several seconds long before finding sentence structure again, interrupted by quick apparition jumps “What in the twelve belching hells do you mean you don’t have your wand here? You had it before!”

“I know but that was a different gallery! I...I think in this one I gave it away!”

“What in the flying fairy-farting fuck are you talking about?! This is still Hogwarts! Otherwise I’d have put him to sleep already!”

“I...I...I have no idea. Where’s Minerva? Did she wake up? Go find her!”

Happy popped in again, beginning to flag, “You’d be a sitting duck! We can’t leave this monster free to roam the gallery! Think of something!”

She glanced at Severus, her reeling brain scrambling together a plan, “Alright...alright just...give me sixty seconds!”
Happy was a moment slow dodging a Fenrir who seemed to be getting larger and faster as his anger grew, his reach lengthening unpredictably. A claw caught her shoulder and she screamed shrilly, popping away a little further the next time.

Hermione collapse-hop-hobbled to Severus’ cell on her flayed leg, losing her shoe in the process, crawling as she pulled herself against the rear flap, grateful that it was still there and hadn’t disappeared simply on the principle that things had to go wrong.

His head turned towards her as she leaned through, his haggard smile less about open joy than the bemused shock of pessimism displaced. He turned away to check for Bellatrix, and beckoned her in.

Forty seconds.

She scooted to the back of the chair, bracing herself up out of sight and putting a hand on his hand, tracing a trembling hello as the pain in her leg extruded a chilly perspiration from her face and arms to match his own. He turned back to her, beckoning along her wrist, and she kissed him, his hand coming up to her cheek, his thumb stroking her and leaving a streak of blood.

She mouthed words, barely making a sound, “I need my wand, Fenrir’s loose and…” she hoped the fear in her eyes communicated that she knew how much she was asking, “I’ll come right back, I swear. Get her to summon him back if you can. I might need the incantation, and she might need the help. There’s apparently some segmentation.”

Twenty seconds.

His face became forcibly calm. Brave. He nodded, putting the wand on the floor and deliberately opening his tight grip, closing his hand again against the shaking. She picked it up.

“Here,” she whispered, pressing him forward, aiming a cauterizing beam at the deep clean cut that she was certain Madame Pomfrey could do a better job with later, after she had a chance to think and rip his cell open. She just needed to get Fenrir sorted first.

He turned his head over his shoulder, his words muffled and bleary, “The pensieve...she found...a demon-door...she’s making...”

Ten seconds. Her own blood-loss was making her a little dizzy.

“Save your strength, I’m coming right back. But, I wanted to give you,” she put a hand to her chest and realized the locket wasn’t there, realized she couldn’t remember what she meant, her brain making odd giddy connections in the excitement, “never mind, just...I got your letter. I owe you a reply.”

He nodded, his grim smile softening, glancing at the room where Bellatrix stalked, then back to Hermione, gesturing at the back wall with his chin.

She nodded once and left without a second to spare.

It took her eyes a moment to re-adjust to the vast stretches of darkness. There was no sound of struggle, no cursing and popping. About twenty yards away, past the last dark cell in the row, moving very slowly, Fenrir was stalking something Hermione could not see. Apparently Happy had gone invisible, perhaps having reached the limits of her ability to apparate.
Hermione took a moment to run a cauterizing line down her calf, zipper her shredded skin shut and hopefully keeping her torn ligaments somewhat organized. Something touched her supporting hand and she flinched. The bespectacled tabby cat had come around the corner of Severus cell and nudged her hand silently.

“Oh thank Beow’s backside, Minerva,” Hermione whispered, “We have to-”

There was a snarl and a shrill elfin scream, and Hermione winced as the cat deftly leapt to the top of Severus’ cell using her shoulder as a springboard, then leapt onto Fenrir’s cell, then to the third in line.

Hermione spat bitter oaths, dragging herself to her feet with one hand on Severus cell. She didn’t know the bedamned incantation to order a portrait frame to summon its rightful occupant. That was gallery magic, and there had been no books on it in the library.

“What are you waiting for?” Severus voice was mocking as a muffled trumpet, “Afraid you can’t do it?”

She reflexively muttered about where and how he could go, realizing that Bellatrix was yelling something similar.

The main difference was that, at the end, Bellatrix also yelled, “Vocavi Carcerem!”

The corners on the far side of Fenrir’s cell glowed red briefly but nothing else happened.

Fenrir himself had stalked around to the far side of the cells, sniffing again, tracking an invisible Happy who was likely beginning to flag. Hermione thought of hexing him but couldn’t risk hitting the elf she couldn’t see.

“You really have no idea what you’re doing. The Dark Lord will be so disappointed.”

Hermione braced to cast on Fenrir’s cell the instant Bellatrix did, but instead the cell at her back flared brightly and Severus screamed. Her own hand throbbed where it touched the canvas, and reflexively she pointed her wand at the upright, muttering a charm that sent a faint trickle of blue light into the walls, her mind finding incantations for durable protections easily, her magic flowing more fluidly than she’d ever felt before, as if the connection between herself and the painting were wider than the tip of her wand. The iron-studded wood wanted to resist her, and she felt some hint of what Happy had been screaming about...there were odd and hard protections over the front half the painting, strange intricate forces connected to much larger wards she dared not test. But the back wall was as responsive as her own hand, and she wove it through with simple spells to absorb and channel pain away from the floor, away from the center.

His screaming subsided just as Happy’s broke out again. Fenrir had lunged and cuffed her close to his own cell, and she was pelting away from him as hard as she could on her short legs, making small stuttering apparation-hops to keep ahead as he sprang after her.

She didn’t have a clear shot, and she dared not stop shielding Severus while he had Bellatrix’ attention.

Happy sobbed, getting out past the last cell in the row once more.

Minerva McGonagall stopped being cautious.

The little cat jumped to the fourth cell, then the fifth, and then seemed to erupt outwards from herself as she flew through the air towards Fenrir’s back, blooming explosively into a roaring, muscular
lioness. She collided with the wolf-man with a slam of mass and a crunch of bone, just as Happy’s strength gave out and she collapsed.

The two cells at the end glowed an eerie green. They’d begun, dimly, when Minerva’s paws had hit them, intensifying while her back was turned and she tangled with the massive monster.

Bellatrix yelled “Vocavi Carcerem!” and four front corners of the werewolf’s cell glowed red.

“Shit,” Hermione muttered, pointing her wand at the back of the painting and doing the same, concentrating as best she could through the haze of blood-loss, confusion, and adrenaline. The corners at the back began to glow, brightening. The glow spread along the connecting lines, and then along each plane of canvas with the maddening syrupy leisure of passive absorption.

Finally there was a snap and Greyback appeared in the center of the cage floor, torn and bloody and howling with rage, and Bellatrix promptly hit him with a sleep spell to shut him up, muttering ominously, “Well look who volunteered to be next.”

Hermione hobbled as best she could down the line, her injured leg doing its best to crumple under her every time she hopped over it. She tried frantically to believe that it was just a dream, that she wasn’t injured, that her calf wasn’t burning with the agony of a ragged and filthy wound, but the pain was intractable. She tried to apparate, but felt the familiar prohibition. How could they still be in Hogwarts? Maybe it was someplace else with the same properties? That would narrow possibilities handily…

The green light was intensifying from the cells ahead of her, and from behind her she heard Bellatrix snap, “Oh what now!?”

Hermione noted with slow horror that Minerva had reverted to her human form and was crouched by Happy, gathering her up gently in her arms, oblivious to the dark silhouettes that had stood up in the boxes behind her and stepped out into the dark…bulky round-shouldered silhouettes, similar as siblings and silent as shadows.

Hermione lunged through the space between cells, trying to get a clear shot, dragging her useless leg, ”Minerva move! The Carrows!” her voice was tight and muted by too much screaming.

Before Minerva could react, Alecto had raised a hand and muttered something wandlessly, seizing Minerva in a net that slowly rose into the air. Minerva wrestled her wand into position and threw some hexes, but they were ineffective. She cast a shield about herself and Amycus laughed harshly.

“There is no barrier to vengeance!” the squat man yelled.

Alecto chuckled, “I smell someone I mean to kill…”

Hermione threw a binding charm at Alecto’s back, but she barely seemed to notice. She threw a counter-curse at McGonagall’s bindings but it bounced off her shield.

Everything was going wrong with the slow, crushing precision particular to nightmares.

Her leg finally succeeded in dragging her down, and she hit the ground, landing hard on her shoulder, unable to look away, “E-expecto…”

Happy stirred.

Amycus and Alecto lunged at the bound Minerva.
Three figures vanished in a crystalline bang of green light. There was an ominous, echoing ripping sound. The light of the two cells went out. Something terrible in her mind whispered like a candle...

Happy sat up blearily, “Minnie?”

Hermione tried to scream but all that came out was a high, nigh-inaudible keening whistle, her eyes squeezing shut against tears, certain with the clarity of dreams that what had just happened was unspeakably horrible. Where was her magic? Where was she? Where had the Carrows gone? Where were the crows? The crows were supposed to help. She needed the crows. They would know where to go...bring them to Minerva...bring them right to her...

There was a rhythmic windswept sound she mistook for wings and hearkened to...

When she opened her eyes again, her horror redoubled. She was sitting on the stone floor, staring into the dazzling blue-white wind of the whirling texentes somnia, Nikita leaning over her, staring back. Her right leg throbbed with a vicious charlie horse.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, freezing cold in the wild wind. She lifted a hand to brush them away but realized that that hand was holding her wand. For a moment she couldn’t remember why that was horrifying in the readjustment of waking. Of course she was holding her wand. She’d been holding it when she came into the texentes’ alcove. She’d been holding it when she’d caged Fenrir…

Her stomach dropped, staring stupidly at the fancy stick in her hand, “Oh no, Severus…”

Her mind lunged forward with a masochistic eagerness: werewolf...Happy...cat...lioness...Carrrows… … …

“Minerva!”

She got up and ran.
Later, she would not be able to remember the time between when she opened her eyes and when she opened the door to Minerva’s office. She wouldn’t remember saying the password. She wouldn’t remember knowing the password. She would seldom try and would never manage to recall how she wrenched her shoulder on the door frame as she fell to her knees, borne down by a weight whose description remains lost, triggering a pain that, as of this telling, continues to keep its own counsel.

She’d remember Neville and Filius rushing past her, having followed her as she, presumably, rocketed through the school just as dinner was letting out on a Wednesday evening. How Neville went to where Minerva lay beside her desk having fallen from her chair under the detached gaze of her nearly-finished portrait. How he knelt down, full of a hope that would not rise with him again. How Filius held back, old enough to know better.

Indelibly, she would remember the small green spark that shocked Neville’s finger when he touched the still-warm face, even though he’d forget, having taken so little note of it as he tried to revive his mentor. She would remember the sea-like rumble of curious students at the bottom of the steps, the high shouts of prefects trying to usher them away.

She would remember how, when Sir Nicholas arrived and knelt by Minerva’s side, she noted abstractly that she’d never seen him seem to touch the ground before then, and wondered if he realized he was doing it. She would remember small details of the carpet, for no reason.

Everyone would remember the unearthly castle-shaking sound Sir Nicholas made. Everyone but Minerva. She wasn’t there.

Mostly Hermione would remember the headmaster’s office as a very brief tableau between opening her eyes in the texentes alcove and opening them again in the dim light of her bedroom, one arm aching from a sprained shoulder and the other immobilized by her son’s warm, sleeping weight curled against her. Ginny was sitting on the edge of the bed, paging through a book, looking sober and sad. Rose was leaning against Ginny, back-to-back, asleep, apparently having succumbed while trying to imitate her aunt’s mature vigilance.

Unable to reach out, Hermione just whispered, “Hi.”

Ginny turned her head and smiled, closing her book and deftly easing away from Rose until the girl lay beside her brother in the bed, then crept around to the other side to slip in beside her friend.

She tried to keep the panic from rising again, “How long have I been out?”

“A few hours.”

“Hours??” she whispered harshly, trying to sit up and relenting as pain sent white stars dancing in her vision, “Ginny we have to do something right now. Bellatrix has him and he’s helpless. I took his wand. My wand. He’s helpless. We have to…”

Ginny took a deep breath, “We will. But we’ll do it smart. And in force.”

“In force?”
“Everybody’s here. We came as soon as we heard. About Minerva.”

“Everybody? Who’s everybody?” even through the thick bedroom door she could hear several voices pattering in the main room.

Ginny widened her eyes for emphasis, “Everybody.”

“Where’s Hap-”

“Shh shh shh,” Ginny put a warding finger up, “Don’t say her name, not right now. She’s with Minerva. It seems like she, Flitwick, Sir Nicholas, and Neville are going to sit a bit of a vigil.”

“Where?”

Ginny smiled wanly, “There’s a room just down the hall.Apparently it’s tradition. Draco keeps trying to get everyone to come back to his house but-”

“Draco’s here?”

That widened gaze again, “Everybody.”

Hermione worked at getting her good arm free from her child reluctantly, feeling incongruously and acutely aware of how soon it might be that he’d feel too old to snuggle with his mum for comfort, “I can’t go to Draco’s, there’s class in the morning.”

Ginny shook her head, “Neville went ahead and cancelled classes until Monday. There’ll be owls to parents in the morning. Funeral on Saturday.”

“Right…” Hermione’s head swam. Neville was headmaster. Headmaster Longbottom. It felt right but unpleasant, like new shoes. They had time to plan. They’d make a plan. Bella wasn’t going to kill Severus. Hermione had left him some protection against torture. They had to make a plan.

She couldn’t get anyone else killed.

She sighed, pushing the unhelpfully fatalistic thoughts away with old habit. Push down the panic. Use it to heat the boiler of her will, “Does...is there anything for people to eat out there?”

Ginny nodded, “The staff have been remarkable. And mum brought a few things.”

“Molly’s-”


“Ok, ok, push out, I’m getting up,” she shifted and her shoulder ached.

Ginny grimaced at her and tapped her on the shoulder with her wand, delivering an elementary antinflammatory and mending spell that stung like the dickens, “Only if you promise you’ll drink some water. You fainted. Dehydration and exhaustion, Poppy said. I’m not even going to ask how many hours of real sleep you’ve gotten in the last forty-eight, but we didn’t heal you or wake you because you really couldn’t afford it. You’re setting up to hurt yourself. Promise me. Food. Water.”

“I will, I will but...I have to go see her. And then I’ll tell...everybody?”

“Ev-v-v-v-v-v-”
“Ok ok. I’ll go over what I know with anyone willing to help.”

Ginny grinned, “And we’ll bring you up to speed too. We’ve been working on leads all afternoon and evening.”

“Really?”

Ginny nodded, getting up, “I told Harry that since you were careering around having dangerous and emotionally fraught adventures he owed it to you to quietly collect life-saving information for you, for once. Give the arc of your friendship some symmetry.”

Hermione shook her head, her heart swelling, “Writers.”

Ginny hadn’t exactly been exaggerating. The large front-room was crowded with old familiar faces talking back and forth about a remarkable woman, and who smiled at her warmly when she made a quick round.

In one of death’s many perpetual and recurring absurdities, the process of walking about the “wake” was as disorientingly dreamlike as most of the rest of the week had been. Faces of familiar people, altered along the thematic yet randomizing vector of age, and representing as haphazardly specific a cross-section of her life as her own mind might assemble to populate a hypnagogic tableau, circulated in a setting catercorner to the ones she would consider proper for them. Harry and his two aurors Hawkins and Braithwaite, George and Angelina, Percy and Audra too, Fleur and Bill, with Molly making the rounds and playing hostess. Draco Malfoy had come along, sharply dressed and not really mingling, staying close to Harry. Beasley sat, looking about the sea of famous faces she didn’t recognize expectantly, but Nikita wasn’t there. Gathered in a rather tight group of smaller groups were Parvati and Padma, Luna, Cho Chang, Michael Corner, Lee Jordan and a half a dozen other alumni of Dumbledore’s Army, with a rather specific subset made up of Oliver Wood, Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet...but not Dennis Creevey. And no Hagrid. She made a brief announcement about going and coming back and having more announcements to make, then slipped off down the hall.

The room wasn’t hard to find. Its doorway spilled light into the end of the dark hallway, and a low quavering keening seemed to draw her like a thread. Several professors and staff stood along the corridor wall talking quietly.

Minerva lay in peaceful repose on a low stone table, hands folded over her heart, a small pillow under her neck, dressed in a clean nightgown and covered from the chest down in a clean white sheet. Neville sat on a low stone bench by her head, elbows on his knees, hands clasped, leaning in towards her intently as if listening, searching her face for instruction, suspended in a silent storm’s eye while simple comprehension and irresolvable confusion went round and round. Filius sat beside him, eyes shining, patting the younger man on the back with an avuncular gentleness. Sir Nicholas floated in the corner, several feet higher than was his norm in any mostly-empty room, his expression distant, his posture neither attentive nor relaxed, like a soldier at-ease. The Fat Friar haunted beside him.

On a bench by her feet sat Happy, keening softly and rocking slowly, Arthur Weasley sat by her side; silent, grave, and still. Happy had one hand clutched to her chest, the other flat on the bench beside her. Arthur’s hand was on the bench by hers, just the sides of their little fingers touching. Hermione wondered if the two had ever met before, but then, as Happy ran out of breath and paused for a new one, the old elf glanced at the aging wizard and Hermione saw a breed of recognition in their eyes that she was glad she did not share; she was looking across a chasm at parents who had lost children, several times over, and knew that it never got easier.
All the same, she went and sat on Happy’s other side and put her hand flat on the bench, offering, and simply sat like that. She thought of what Happy had said to her when she had been the one crying, *It is my wish that I could go to where your heart is and put it right. My heart can not go to your heart. Yours has gone to ground, and I am not its secret keeper. But my hands can be where your hands are. And I wish it. Especially when you feel helpless and unseen.*

Ever granting wishes, Happy put her hand down on the bench, the tip of her small finger touching Hermione’s. Hermione wished for the empathic awareness of dreams, for the ability to tell, through Happy’s skin, what she needed to hear. There was no time to waste, and she did not want to simply stand up and leave. *I’m sorry* got stuck in her throat thinking how complicated and out-of-place it would be to apologize for her genuine failings in what had happened, and how Minerva might sit up from her bier just to hex her into a marmoset if she dared to play apologist-for-the-universe with a fatuous *I am so sorry*. She wanted to say *Happy, you are known to me by name, and I want to help you* but she realized she still hadn’t bothered to find out what that phrase really meant among elves and didn’t want to use it wrongly.

She had no right to say anything, so she sat beside her, finger next to finger, woman next to woman, company to misery, not rushing off to what had to happen next.

And it was not the wrong thing.

After a while, Happy grew still, then leaned against Arthur, breaking contact with Hermione. Arthur put a sheltering arm around her and crooned low in his throat. Hermione murmured, “I’ll come back.” Her throat almost closed on the words, how they echoed the promise she had just broken to Severus. It wouldn’t stay broken, she told herself, setting her shoulders and giving the doubts in her head a shake.

Happy gave no recognition but Arthur tucked his lips up into a warm, sad, understanding smile and nodded. As Hermione stood, Neville stood with her, sighing and following her out.

“I’m doing no good here, and I’ve done everything an acting headmaster can,” he muttered when they’d gotten to the door, “So what’s next?”

Chapter End Notes

Massive info-dumps ahead! Sacrificing plausibility of coincidences for brevity in a lot of places. Y’all are tough, I know we can get through this next bit.
In which we begin to spin out the answer to that eternal question: "What the fuck?"

“Neville, would you mind going back to my apartment and letting people know I’ll be just a bit longer? There’s one more person that really should be here before we start. There’s food, too.”

“Tell me who needs getting and I’ll go get them. I’m still full from dinner, you’re the one fainting. Go sit, eat. Let me run my school.”

Hermione sighed, “Alright. I was thinking Hagrid should be up here. I’ve got a chaise he could sit on.”

Neville nodded, “I’ll have to bring him all the way around to the front corridor, but I’m sure he’ll come. Go, sit. Drink some water. I’ll only be a few minutes.”

Hermione nodded, giving his arm a squeeze, “As you say, Headmaster.”

He winced a little and turned down the narrow back way past the kitchens.

When Hermione got back to her classroom, she was startled to find Nikita sitting on one of the desks, the Krowse brothers seated in front of him, looking cowed.

“Nick, hi. Dorian, Anglen. You’re up late.”

Nick gave her a puzzled look that she was getting used to, “It took me a while, but I found them. And this,” he held out what looked in the dim light like a long, slim book.

It was an unframed painting of a woman sleeping. Her dark hair made a smart twist that kept wisps away from a strong brow that reminded Hermione acutely of Viktor Krum.

Hermione blinked, “This is a...a portrait of Kallida Krowse.”

Nick nodded, “Yes, you said.”

“Did I?”

“Yes, when I found you by the machine and you woke up. You looked at me and said ‘Where are the Krowse’, so I went and found them. When I found the boys, they were hiding in the library, fretting over this painting.”

Dorian mumbled something.

Hermione looked at him, “What did you say?”

Anglen replied, “He said she won’t wake up. Something must have happened to her.”

Hermione sat down, folding her hands on the desk, “Yes, something did. She’s not in any danger, though. If you’ll tell me the part you know I’ll tell you the part I know. And I’ll help you to wake
her.”

Dorian scowled at her. Anglen put his forehead in his hands.

Nick grimaced, “Dorian, as your head of house, I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist.”

Anglen held up his hands, “All right, all right. It was me. It was my fault. All of it.”

Nick and Hermione exchanged a puzzled look.

Anglen cleared his throat, sitting up very straight, “Mister Kalil, Professor Granger, our mother… we lost her last summer, suddenly. I didn’t let Professor McGonagall know because I didn’t want...I thought we might lose our place here without her. This portrait is all we have of her, and...and Dorian wanted to bring her here, because the Hogwarts gallery is the best of any wizarding school in the world and we thought...well it would be nice for her. We didn’t realize there was a...a method to artificing a frame and connecting a painting to a gallery. When we found out what it would cost we couldn’t ever afford it. So I made a deal, with an artificer, a gallerian. He gave us a half-measure,” he showed her the fine silver mounting wire on the back of the canvas, “said it would let her slip her painting’s rule and enter the gallery, but only when she was in her animagical form.”

“As a crow.”

Anglen nodded, “And it worked. He said we could keep the wire and decrease the cost of a real frame considerably if we could help him locate something,” he looked away from Hermione to the floor, “something hidden in the dungeon here. All I had to do was find it, not steal it.”

Hermione scowled, “It was you. You scared Ha...the chief porter half to death and tossed my room looking for…”

He nodded, “The dream sphere. Yes. I am so sorry. I...I tried to be careful with your books but I had to make it look...I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have done it at all except he said that it was his family’s rightful property, that it had been lost and the school had refused to help him. And I had to seize the opportunity because...well he said I wouldn't be the only one looking. He had another big request that the texentes would be a good price for. Mother tried to gather information, spying from the gallery, looking out for whoever else might be looking, in case they were dangerous. She heard the elf and the painter talking about sneaking into your rooms, it seemed like the ideal opportunity.”

“While she kept an eye on me at the restaurant to make sure I didn’t come back and surprise you. But how would she have warned you? There are no connections to the gallery in my apartments.”

“I brought her canvas with me. She can return to it at will.”

Dorian mumbled “Mirrors work too. Sometimes.”

Anglen nodded miserably, “We tried to be very careful. I swear I wouldn’t have hurt you, or the elf.”

Hermione waved a hand testily, “I swear it would have gone badly for you if you’d tried. But why did you take the painting?”

He looked confused, “I- I told you, so mother could warn me if you were headed back.”

Hermione squinted, “No, the painting of Severus Snape. Why did you take it? What did you do with it?”

Anglen shook his head, “No no no I didn’t steal anything, I swear.”
“What about the paint brushes?”

His head shook so frantically it made her dizzy, “No no, I swear it.”

Dorian mumbled something. Anglen looked at him in shock.

Dorian spoke fractionally more clearly, “...was the only time you and mother wouldn't watch me, and the artist would definitely be occupied.”

Hermione’s eyebrows jumped, “What did you do to occupy Enith? Where is she?”

Anglen reached into his sleeve and pulled out his wand so abruptly that Hermione reflexively expelliarmus’d it and caught it one-handed as it flew. Anglen held up his hands again, “I- I was just going to show you, I haven’t cast anything with it since the one little sleep spell I put on her. You can check. She’d been in here waiting for the elf to come unlock the door, I put her to sleep, right over there at that desk. I’ve...developed a fair hand for sleep spells, this last year,” his eyes flicked unconsciously toward his brother, “She was sound asleep when I left. That’s the last I saw of her. I was going to see if there was a way I could get in to assist the research team this weekend...they probably would have let me, but…”

Hermione sighed loudly, her towering ire warring with her compassion for a young man struggling to do his best, “Well, I'll tell you what, if you'll help me get my room in order and my books properly alphabetized this coming Sunday, I’ll say no more about it. Your brother, on the other hand, is Mister Kalil’s problem.”

Mister Kalil nodded ruefully, “Fifty points from Slytherin for theft from a guest and five more points for stealing something you couldn’t even use effectively. Not terribly cunning, that.”

Dorian mumbled, “I only wanted to see them. I was going to give them back. But then everyone was saying she'd disappeared.”

Hermione blinked in frustration, “She wasn’t the only one. The painting that disappeared was very important. As important as your painting of your mother, do you understand?”

Dorian scowled, thinking. He nodded.

“So I need to find him. Your mother will be just fine. She was trying to spy on Minerva and me in the back-gallery this afternoon, and I petrificus’ed her animagical form.”

Anglen looked puzzled, “Spy? Why would she...we were done with all that. We were just waiting for the ministry team.”

“Spy? Why would she...we were done with all that. We were just waiting for the ministry team.”

“I suppose she could have figured out that Minerva was bluffing about that…”

Mr. Kalil’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline, “What?”

Hermione sighed, “But if our resident compulsive legilimens missed that I suppose she might have felt some remorse and been trying to help.”

“Our what!?” his usually resonant voice was taking on quite the panicked lilt.

Hermione peered at him, baffled, but continued, “She helped me collect information on the whereabouts of the missing painting. Anyway, I expect that when Minerva tried to revert her back to her human form, it violated the partial frame’s stipulations so the representative part of her returned,
but her animagical self is still bound up with effects from that under-place, bound up in a spell put on her by a dreaming witch. It should be wearing off very soon. I didn’t hit her very hard. We could let her sleep. Or I could wake her.”

Dorian nodded, scowling in assent. Anglen nodded as well.

“Finite Incantatem” Hermione felt a small thread un-knot in the back of her mind as the spell ended, and Kallida stirred.

Dorian’s smile shone, “Mutti?”

She opened her eyes, “Mein Barchen?”

He put his cheek carefully against the canvas, and Hermione smiled glumly as Anglen put an arm around his brother, squeezing him tight, trying to compensate for what wasn’t there. It seemed a very accustomed gesture. She had questions for Kallida, but the painting and the younger boy were speaking to each other in German rather intently. She turned back to Anglen, exchanging the look of recognition between people who know what it’s like to substitute for an absent parent and forever fall short.

Hermione cleared her throat, “So who is this person who sent you to find ‘his’ property?”

“Orlean, and his cousin Galrig.”

Hermione blinked, “Why do I know those names?”

A soft feminine voice from the doorway made them all turn, “They own the Galleon.”

Hermione found herself looking up at Hagrid’s incongruously massive frame as he sidled under the door, baffled until he stepped aside to reveal Headmaster Longbottom and the much-sought Enith Stoke. Enith continued quietly, “Galrig is the one that knows the spatial manipulation magics and gallery work. Orlean knows how to stoke and pilot quicksilver displacement engines.”

Hermione shook her head, “What...how...where…”

Enith just smiled semi-apologetically and moved over to stand by Hagrid as Neville chimed in, “Apparently Enith has been visiting with Hagrid.”

“But...what?”

Enith sighed and sat down, peering at the assembled group owlishly, “While I was waiting to do something only somewhat unlawful, I was put to sleep, and when I woke up I was being framed for something considerably more unlawful. Seemed a good time to lay low. I had noted Professor Hagrid here in my comings and goings and asked if I might be able to work up a family portrait for him, his brother, and their dogs for a few evening’s room and board. It seemed like an interesting challenge.”

“Did...did you take Severus?”

“Technically no,” she smiled, then seeing her humor was ill-received, offered, “I simply opened the back passage for my cousins. When they failed to find the texentes in your room, they took your painting. Admittedly they did so with me in mind, ultimately.”

“Back passage?”
Enith sighed, fiddling with the tip of her ear, “Through the bathroom. It used to be a stairway down to the old dock, back in the old days. The very old days. Before the lake rose. The Galleon can still dock there because it’s fine underwater.”

Hermione squinted, feeling a headache coming on, “How come the aurors didn’t find it? They searched for spells and hidden exits.”

Enith nodded, “Because it’s not a door. You have to over-extend the opening charm on the drain. Goblin magic, waykeeper magic; older than the Merlin, old as the Grendel,” this she intoned with an air of catechism before reverting to brisk conversation, “But it has to be done from inside, or else the castle will think it is being tunneled into and fight back.”

“So they took the painting out through the bathtub?” her rational mind declined to comment.

Enith nodded, “They’ve been working with a collector with an interest in death-eater paintings. They’d consulted with me about the collection before but I’d never heard of it. Didn’t see the appeal. Asked me to have a snoop around Hogwarts when I got the opportunity, made me an offer if I would meet with the fellow making the collection, talk it up so they could raise the price. I went ahead and met him, looked at the pieces he already had. I must admit, it changed my mind about whether the collection was interesting. The pieces were...remarkable. Repellant. Sublime,” her gaze drifted rapturously.

“Enith.”

“Yes?”

“You were explaining what happened. To Severus’ painting. This collector...”

“Oh. Yes. He had a Dolohov, two Carrows, a Lestrange, and a Greyback. Said he’d had a Malfoy but that it had been destroyed. Said he was still looking for a Snape.”

Hermione sighed, “So when I started asking about the possible origins of such a painting apropos of almost nothing, I as good as handed him to you.”

Enith looked stricken, “Don’t feel embarrassed. You have the most wonderfully transparent face.”

Hermione set her jaw self-consciously, “So what you said the other day, about paintings, about how they’re not really alive, did you mean that?”

“I…” Enith looked honestly flummoxed, “I don’t believe that’s what I said, but I meant what I did say.”

“You weren’t just talking him down so I would be inclined to give him up?”

Enith looked vaguely scandalized, “No no. The intent was always to steal him. It didn’t occur to me that you’d take it upon yourself to try to sell an artwork that most immediately belonged to the school.”

Hermione sighed, “So then what happened.”

“When my plan to simply gain access to your rooms was hijacked, I let my cousins in and asked if they might let me keep the Snape. I suggested he might have information about the sphere, that I would be best able to question him, but I think they saw through that angle to my appreciation. Because...truly...” her greatly magnified eyes got misty again.
“So they didn’t let you keep him.”

“They said they had a better idea.”

“Which was?”

Enith somehow made her naturally sour expression beam graciously, “The plan had simply been to let them in so they could assess whether the painting seemed worth the trouble, but with your room in such a shambles, it was likely to be trouble regardless, and the Elf would feel compelled to say everything she knew. I could see her blaming herself for school property going missing after she’d let someone in to see it, but that is a petty and diffuse enough fault that a free elf could choose to save face rather than confess it. The school owns much, and many paintings. But the way elves view honor...the destruction of the room, your personal things, everything you had in your own home, I assumed it would be too much of a wrong to conceal, too massive an insult to a member of the house, and would compel her to be honest, which meant I would need to lay low. Easy for a woman to do alone, harder to do with a highly distinctive and probably willful piece of art.

“But my cousins saw an opportunity. The destruction would mean concern, possibly police, but it would definitely mean involving Hermione Granger, infamous among goblin-kind for successfully breaking into and out of Gringotts Bank.”

“I’ve made amends for that...”

“Referring only to your reputation, not to any unsettled score. He assured me that, having raised Hermione Granger’s ire, they could sell the Snape to their buyer and be assured that it would still likely be returned to Hogwarts, possibly along with five others, within the week, and that surely Minerva would wish for me to examine them and advise, and would have the power to trade them to me in exchange for a discount on her own portrait. I will admit I was greedy, I wanted more assurance. So they promised me they would throw Harry Potter into the investigation as well, to assure the case was attacked with rapidity and rigor.”

Hermione boggled, “But they couldn’t have known that people would so badly jump the gun as to assume I had to have been kidnapped or worse. Harry’s a good friend but he’s an auror. The likelihood that he’d feel the need to come investigate a smash-and-grab if I didn’t call him myself seems dubious grounds for a goblin’s good word.”

Enith smiled, “Assuring Potter’s involvement was rolled into the price for the painting. The collector is a patrol officer, you see. He got to frame the call for backup.”

Hermione groaned and dropped her head into her hands, “Dennis? Dennis Creevey?”

Enith nodded.

“And he didn’t mind that stipulation? Didn’t feel like he was being set-up?”

Enith shook her head, “On the contrary, he was all too happy to have Potter involved.”

Hermione sighed yet again, wondering if she would ever breathe normally, “Where is the painting now?”

Enith shook her head, “I haven’t the slightest idea. Galrig and Orlean had planned to turn it over to Creevey yesterday afternoon. Said they would get him to contact me when it was done, get him to send me his little squid patronus to invite me to see the whole collection, but they haven’t. I’m a bit concerned.”
Hermione looked at Neville, “I’m a little lost about how to proceed here. I feel like we should get Harry in on this.”

Enith held up her knobby hands, “There’s no need for that. I’m pleased to cooperate.”

Hermione shook her head, “It’s about complication, not cooperation. You’re his missing person, and he needs to know you’re alright. If your cousins are missing instead, he needs to know that as well. He and Ginny are the ones who have been trying to work out the details beyond what you apparently know...what Creevey is up to and where you, now your cousins, might have run afoul of it. If this entire investigation has been part of a ploy to get them to bring Bellatrix Lestrange inside the walls of Hogwarts, they definitely need to be told.”

Enith made a high squeamish noise in her throat, but Neville broke in calmly, "You’re probably not going to be in trouble. You conspired to do some things that are illegal among wizards and a poor response to hospitality from guests, but not, as I understand it, especially illegal under goblin laws when property grudges are involved. It would be a diplomatic hassle to try and punish you for some petty trespass and accessory to theft."

"And, honestly,” Hermione volunteered, thinking of Minerva’s painting, how vital it was to see it finished, “I don’t think Hogwarts can spare your good will, as long as the headmaster agrees.”

Neville nodded.

Enith nodded too, enthusiastically, “And I can replace your book.”

Hermione blinked, “My...you’re the one that took my Hogwarts History? Why?”

She shrugged, “It was a long shot. I thought perhaps you’d discovered the dream sphere’s hiding place through study, that you might have made notes. It was an impulse more than anything. I didn’t realize how new the book was when I grabbed it, so after I’d looked through it I just left it. I can replace it, happily.”

Hermione’s growing suspicions clicked and became certainty, the answer preceding the question in her mind as she asked it, “Left it where?”

“Aboard the Golden Galleon.”
Standing in front of the potions classroom near midnight, with most of her wizarding family and former classmates seated at the old desks in attendance, was hardly the most surreal thing to happen to professor Granger since beginning her tenure at Hogwarts, but it was still hovering in the top fifteen, at least. Despite that, it seemed the most appropriate setting for the surreal reality of the lecture she had to deliver to everyone.

“You’re here for Minerva, and for each other as students, friends, house members, and alumni of the school she so unfailingly lead and served. I want to honor that, but understand that this is not a funeral speech or memoriam for her. I have it from headmaster Longbottom that those offices and services will happen Saturday on school grounds, by the lake, with a reception in the great hall to follow. I’ve called you all in here to explain how she died, and why, to the best of my own understanding; to answer as briefly as possible for my own part in the tragedy, and to beg any aid you have to give in preventing another. I’m afraid time is of the essence.”

She stood very straight, listening to her own voice from far away, feeling the first-day numbness of that listening room settling back into her joints, buttoning up her affect as she lectured on the strange nature of her dreams and the imperiled life of a dead man. She gave, as best she could, the present timeline she had from Anglen and Enith, and the past timelines which saw the creation of the paintings and the use of the texentes. When she explained what she had seen of Voldemort’s ritual in the pensieve, she noted that Luna was writing intently. She gave as basic a gloss as she could of what she had encountered in the back gallery and what sensations she recalled as relevant, reluctant to claim much at all as objectively real, but touching on her encounters with time, nonsense, memory, and empathy. She explained, as best she understood it, how the texentes worked to make these things more tangibly integrated and malleable within the laws of magic.

She explained finding the cells, twice, the strange activation of their occupants, and their brutal curation by Bellatrix Lestrange. She described, as best she could, the abilities and motives of the monsters they had met there, and the strange indicators of place in that area. She recounted, as delicately as she could, the heroic efforts of the chief porter, the magnificent courage and lamentable murder of Minerva McGonagall, and, contritely, her own fault and inadequacy in as few words as possible to avoid seeming pompously humble or extravagantly ashamed. She summarized the history Nikita had compiled about who else might be a target, and Severus’ mention of something called a “demon door”. She included, as gently as she could, the man she saw over the pensieve in Bellatrix’ room, how it was probably Dennis Creevey. She emphasized the unfortunate contradiction of needing to act both quickly and wisely, for the sake of honoring Minerva’s life and preserving Severus’.

For the first time in that classroom, ever, Neville raised a hand, “So where are they? The things you describe don’t seem to add up.”

Hermione took a deep breath, “I think they’re aboard the delivery barge, The Golden Galleon. A book got left there that I saw Bellatrix holding, and it’s owned by the goblins who have been handling the paintings and seeking the texentes. I expect she’s double-crossed them. I kept hearing the churning of the engine and the stink of the quicksilver fuel. I didn’t recognize it completely because I’d slept through most of the use of the displacement engine on the way here. But it would make sense that they’re someplace mobile. My second journey out there was a lot shorter than the first...distance-wise. Where the Galleon or its gallery actually are, I have no idea.”

Luna chimed in, “There’s a lot of artifice magic in what you describe. Your average goblin holdfast
is so heavily enchanted that not even elves can apparaet into them. They’re practically a universe unto themselves. That the paintings are somehow connected to Hogwarts as well is evident, if puzzling.

Hermione nodded, “The Hogwarts Gallery is vast. It extends all the way to a restaurant in Hogsmeade, and no real telling where else. And the Galleon uses a quicksilver displacement engine to move it slipwise through reality.”

Luna nodded, beaming as calmly as her namesake, “Oh! That would make sense! That murmuring dark from your first trip was probably the side-effect of an attenuated reality blister expanding trans-dimensional time to navigate space. Getting caught in one of those would make anyone hallucinate. They’d have to be headed towards Hogwarts at the time in order for…” Luna noticed people staring uncomprehending and changed tack, “I expect they’re very nearby. Docked below I shouldn’t wonder. Either in reality or in the gallery, but I couldn’t say which.”

Hermione turned to Enith, “Is there a real dock down there still? At the bottom of the bathtub stairs?”

Enith nodded, “It is complicated to use, only by goblin magic and only from inside, but yes. The stairwell is like a cistern, and the drain spell sends the water all the way down for a time. If they’re back down there, they’d have to wait for someone here to drain the water and open the back way.”

Neville spoke up without raising a hand. Also a first for him in that room, “So they were certainly there before. But if they can’t get in that way, would they stay down there after taking the painting? Seems an unnecessary risk, unless they still have a confederate that knows goblin magic in the castle.”

Enith shook her head adamantly, and Flitwick laughed when Neville glanced his way, “You can check me for imperius curses if you want, but you won’t find anything.”

For the first time that evening, Draco spoke up, “The artworks don’t necessarily need a true door, just a weak spot and an order. But they do need to be inside magical defenses to find their target. That seems to be how it worked for my father, in any case.”

No one spoke. Hermione gestured for Draco to come forward, which he did with genteel reluctance.

“The paintings of my father and my Aunt Bella had been hidden in Malfoy Manor since the war. Father had locked them away. He felt they were too dangerous to meddle with and too embarrassing to leave hidden in plain sight, static as they were,” he glanced at Hermione, reassured when she didn’t frown at him, “I met Dennis Creevey four years ago when I’d asked to have some graffiti on our property investigated and he responded to the call. It was the same old war-criminal stuff against my family, so we fell to talking about the war. I asked him to stop around for drinks whenever he liked. We got along, and having a patrolman coming and going can be useful.

“A year later there was a bit of a break-in. Just burglars, but they broke into the guest suite, where the paintings were kept. He found the paintings while taking an inventory of the room. I didn’t think much of it, explained them away as broken portraits I’d been meaning to fix or throw out. He began drinking a bit harder during his visits, to the point that I often had to put him up for the night for his own safety. I didn’t think much of it. His marriage was troubled, but he was still holding down his job, he wasn’t a drunk,” he glanced at Hermione again, seeming to plead his case before continuing.

“I didn’t feel like I was turning a blind eye to anything. I don’t know exactly when Bellatrix got her hooks in him or how he woke her if he did. I don’t know whether...I only recently put together...I don’t know whether causing the portrait to kill my father was a mistake on his part, or Bellatrix’s idea of revenge for his disloyalty, or something else. When we talked about the war I may have...I
may have given Dennis a...an emotionally slanted idea of their...our...the fundamental blamelessness of the death eaters and how Voldemort was the real problem. Aunt Bella would have no qualms with manipulating a vulnerable muggle-born with whatever he wanted to hear. She’s a...” His voice caught, “A compelling woman on many levels. She knows how to make people say yes when she wants.

“The last time I saw him, he visited me while my father was in a coma at St. Mungos, in the experimental treatment ward. The doctors were baffled. It was like he’d been pushed out of his body...almost like a dementor's kiss. I didn’t dare leave him. Dennis offered to go to my house for me, bring me some clothes, activate some lights to keep prowlers away, let the cat in and so forth. I...he was my friend and a policeman, I didn’t think anything of it. I didn’t really see or think of him after that. I thought that was me shutting him out. When Harry and Ginny came asking about paintings, that’s the first time I knew they were gone. But looking back...it seems obvious now.”

Without a cue Draco returned to his seat behind Harry.

Flitwick volunteered to break the tension, “Well, if they need to be inside the physical wards, being docked at the real dock wouldn’t help them. There’s a dozen old spells between the castle and the lake since the kraken invasion.”

Hermione blinked slowly, trying to process, her mind skipping to another thought, “Luna...the Lestrange wand...it was broken? In the experimental treatments wing?”

Luna nodded, “As of Monday, yes. I could send a patronus to check, but I feel sure they would have informed me if it had been repaired or gone missing. I know you said Bellatrix had it, but, I expect it was just a gallery version, like the one you gave Severus.”

Hermione scowled. She didn’t like that answer, and trying to work through it was like trying to swallow a spoonful of peanut butter. Still, if Dennis had gotten her a dream-version, and then found a way to make her real, was there a reason the wand shouldn’t come along? Or had she not been made real...had they just turned the hold of the Galleon into its own gallery with its own physical laws, to give her a bit more liberty? One of its proprietors was a gallerian...

Her mind wandered and the room began to cross-talk quietly as she thought, and Ginny was looking at her doubtfully. She shook her head, trying to re-orient to the most immediate task. Why break the St. Mungo’s copy? If two versions conflicted, what would happen? Twin cores were one thing, but cloned cores, cloned entire-wands...she had never heard of such a thing, “Luna...”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

“You were going to ask about the application relationship between duplicated wands of various phase attunements, weren’t you? I expect a stable duplicate could be created, but my nearest guess on the effect of trying to keep two copies of the same conduit in one reality is somewhere between ‘it’s complicated’ and ‘nothing good’. It certainly makes sense that she would want the other destroyed if she didn’t think she could get her hands on it. But it’s also possible that she became real after being given a gallery copy, and the existence or proximity of the duplicate shattered the original.”

Hermione sighed, grateful most of the room wasn’t attending closely. Luna Lovegood had an especial kind of genius, but it was hard to be comfortable with being so in synch with her as to have her questions anticipated and then to fully understand the answers.
Ginny, ever the people-mover, spoke up, “Alright, it seems like we’re starting to get into speculative details of strategy, so unless anyone has anything else to declaim to the whole group, we’re going to take...fifteen minutes for people to decide if they’re in or out, then we’re going to draw up a plan. Bring a chair up to the big desk if you want to contribute. Professor Granger’s the final word on the offensive mission plan, and Headmaster Longbottom’s the last word on coordinating defense of the school. Everyone else, write your name on the board if you’re willing to help and want to be given a job. It’s dangerous. Possibly deadly, and you could lose everything. Think seriously about that. Go visit Minerva if it helps. I see a lot of you looking at me and Neville like it’s the old days, when Dumbledore’s Army took up the fight against Umbridge and the Carrows, and maybe in retrospect it seems like it was inevitable, maybe over time you’ve come to remember it as somehow glorious and assured, but let me remind anyone that’s forgotten...we suffered. It was never glorious. It was squalid and terrifying and uncertain. I’ll tell you right now that we didn’t know what we were doing then and we sure as shit don’t know what we might be getting into now, and I really don’t want you to gamble anything on this that you’re not prepared to lose to help us,” Ginny’s expression darkened for a moment, concerned that perhaps she’d gone too far.

Neville, as if on cue, stood up next to her, “She’s right. Everyone have something to eat and drink. If you’ve got a logistical concern, tell me, don’t bother the brain-trust as they’re planning. If you know someone you trust who isn’t here and would want to be here, now’s the time to call them, but be prepared to do the necessary explaining and disclaimers. Otherwise, it’s been great to see everyone, but if you’re not helping you’re not going to want to be here pretty soon, and I’ll see you on Saturday. Probably.”

There was some gallows laughter and murmurs of assent, and people began to move about one another in a subtly organized jumble, like bees or magic brushstrokes.
Upon Reflection

Chapter Notes

I'm gonna try to get the rest of the info-dump chapters published this week, just so people don't have to keep too much minutia in their heads for too long for the sake of setting up the final events. I'm also trying to do this as briefly as possible, and if you prefer that I hope you'll be forgiving of the occasional hole. A fuller explanation would take another eighteen pages and not really be much better. :) Almost there. Be strong.

Eventually the planning table broke into two groups. At the front table sat Harry, Wood, Angelina, George, Cho, Nikita, and Enith, discussing the sticky particulars of breaking into a goblin barge, listing their assets and debating broad contingencies. At one of the longer work tables were Luna, Hermione, and Beasley, feverishly trying to retrofit metaphysical nonsense with some semblance of certainty around the questions of fighting revenge artifices, invading galleries, and countering wandwork. A third group coalesced when Professor Flitwick came back into the room and Ginny went to fill him in, gradually creating a conversation that included Molly, Draco, Neville, Hagrid and Anglen Krowse as well.

By the end of fifteen minutes, the chalkboard was covered in names, and planning began in earnest.

Hermione tried not to listen as Angelina and George pulled away to a corner to argue, dearly and angrily, over who was least allowed to risk their life. As planning went on, others pulled away to have similar quiet, private, universal conversations; love bristling resolutely in proximity to intractable death, breaking in among fears like weeds through pavement.

She lost track of them as she and Beasley set to work on the primary problem of the boat’s location. It made a big difference, tactically, whether the boat, as Hermione had seen it, was moored in the lake in reality or was, itself, a gallery copy, a separate reality, connected to the Hogwarts gallery some other way. Any sort of scrying or location magic on a Goblin boat, real or otherwise, was utterly impossible, and opening the drain just to have a look seemed foolhardy. So all that was left was to determine, arithmentically, what was possible based on properties observed.

Hermione got to work on the possibility that the boat’s cargo hold, as she had seen it, was strictly real, and the boat was moored below at the actual dock, its self-contained gallery limited to the space behind the paintings and merely adjacent to Hogwarts, and therefore superficially combining with the Hogwarts gallery in certain ways, perhaps through her connection to Severus, like two boats connected by a gangplank. Beasley took the possibility that the physical boat was moored elsewhere, its hold a self-contained gallery, and it had directly entered the Hogwarts gallery through some previously unimagined enormous portrait, or powerful dreamer, or other means, piloted through the dark underland from elsewhere, like a submarine stowed-away in a much larger ship’s bilgewater.

They each laid out a large piece of parchment and began setting out equations and models to determine which idea was the best combination of possible and likely, passing a ruler and a compass back and forth, slowly building a small pile of note-paper mistakes and worn-out quills. Hermione was only vaguely aware when Cho and Flitwick came over to check on their progress for the sake of explaining the metaphysics to the other tacticians and just said, very quietly, “Woah.”

Beasley and Hermione traded a look, and Hermione whispered, “It’s good to be scary.”
Beasley grinned.

Her only sense of time was how much wet ink was present on the page as she worked. She tried to keep the question academic, but she wanted desperately to be right. If the boat were real, if it weren’t a gallery, then Bellatrix had been truly freed from her painting and Severus could be saved. She tried to keep her mind on her own work, but unengaged parts kept trying to dismantle Beasley’s proposition instead. Keeping the physical boat elsewhere while a dream version did the dirty work was Voldemort’s style, not Bellatrix’s. The notion of a painting or tapestry or texentes-level device anywhere large enough, or any legilimens strong enough, to shove a whole barge-sized gallery completely into another gallery was preposterous. She had to be right. She had to be.

She wasn’t.

She re-did her calculations three times, and a fourth after Beasley had stopped writing altogether. The curves just didn’t match. The way her wand had disappeared had to have been a matter of proximity, cognizance, rather than domain, and Hogwarts’ influence wouldn’t have impeded Happy in a foreign gallery, no matter how proximal. The interior of the Galleon was its own gallery, and they’d brought it into the Hogwarts gallery. Somehow.

Math or no math, it still sounded impossible.

She started over a fifth time.

“Hermione…”

She ignored Beasley, double-checking the calibration of the compass and the magnitude of the model arc, the accuracy of her plotted value points, the range of wave tolerances for lucid dreaming.

There was some murmuring. Nikita to Beasley, and a quiet, “Oh…”

“Hermione stop.”

She cursed as a drop of salt water marred a column of runes. Maybe if she re-framed everything with their kabbalistic equivalences…

“Hermione,” large hands took her by the shoulders and stood her up, Beasley staring her in the face and giving her a single, sharp shake, “Don’t keep beating your head against it. It’s not going to move.”

Hermione bit down her frustration, “No, I know, but we have to get it right.”

Beasley sighed, “It is right. Look. It all fits the other way. The physical boat could be anywhere. We’re just dealing with its gallery. We might be able to get a triangulation but we have to get into the gallery to stop whatever she’s doing to Professor Snape and Officer Creevey and whatever she’s planning to do to our friends and our school and we have to do it soon. They’re inside the gallery. That means they’re inside Hogwarts. We don’t have time for…” she gestured mutely, shaking her head, “I’m sorry.”

She nodded, clearing her throat, eyes blurry, as the rest of the room began murmuring about plans again.

“Listen,” Beasley stepped in close, dropping her lips by Hermione’s ear, “We’ll figure it out. Just because she couldn’t work out how to undo the curses and bindings Voldemort put on her, on them, doesn’t mean we can’t. We’ll get him back first, and then we’ll rip that byzantine mess of a ritual to fairy dust at our leisure, ok? Either of us is smarter than she is, and together we’re definitely scarier,
plus we’ll have Professor Snape’s input and,” she gestured expansively at the small army of accomplished witches and wizards gathered to help, “ok?”

Hermione looked up at Beasley, tensing her cheeks without quite smiling. She squeezed the younger woman’s shoulder and nodded, envying her youth and absolute faith in cleverness, trying hard not to dwell on the undercurrent of maybe in her scenario, “Ok. Yes I...yes. Thank you Beasley. You’re right of course,” she patted her lightly and the younger woman smiled, “If you would, see if you can get an idea of where the physical boat is, to whatever radius you can manage. I’ll see if I can figure out what it would take to get something that large into the Hogwarts gallery, I bet that will narrow things down. There are plenty of paintings elsewhere that connect but...at that size?” she shook her head, “I honestly have no idea. In the meantime...anyone who isn’t working on a plan needs to get students to their homes or, failing that, their common rooms, and make sure to move any paintings out of them. And mirrors, too. And get that mirror out of my bathroom. Dorian said that those can be...can be used...under the right circumstances...” she looked over to the table by the door, “Anglen, where’s Dorian?”

Anglen’s expression was guarded, “I sent him to bed.”

“How did he get into the headmaster’s office to st-...to look at those brushes?”

“Oh...um...”

“Because he didn’t go through the gryphon door, disembodied states don’t seem to be able to take physically real things away from the real world, and other ways would have their own rules.”

Anglen swallowed, flushing slightly, glancing around to see if anyone else was listening, “He...um...”

Hermione sighed impatiently, “Do you know?”

Anglen nodded, looking terribly young and harried.

Hermione grimaced, softening, “Come. Come here,” taking the young man by the shoulder and ushering him into the larger supply closet at the corner of the room, “I have to know if it’s something that could be used to invade the school and endanger everyone, do you understand? If you’re worried about repercussions, explanations can wait until you can have an advocate and a proper hearing, but I need to know now if there’s a danger.”

Anglen nodded, then shook his head, “It’s nothing they could do. Dorian is...peculiar.”

Hermione nodded, “Alright, I believe you, but are you absolutely sure? It’s not something anyone else could do?”

Anglen repeated his previous pattern of head wobbles, “I’m pretty sure if any of the death eaters could do it, we’d have heard of it. They’d have used it in the war. I’ve been trying to research it but there’s nothing on it in any of the books on galleries.”

Hermione squinted, “But there weren’t any...oh...of course, you’d checked them all out for your own research before I got there.”

He blushed, “You did sort of frighten me that day, asking about paintings. But, no, no, what Dorian can do...” he sighed, visibly rewinding his narrative, “five hundred years ago or so, back when alchemists and artificers began learning how to...emulsify, durably, the ethereal threads of...of personal magic to oils and pigments, paintings were still not considered as valuable or valid as tapestries. But what they did have was a relative ease of creation, making it possible for the first time
for wizards of sufficient means and interest to have more than one painting of themselves existing at the same time.

“Galleries were older than that, of course. Gallerians had long-since refined the intentional engineering of spaces-between, to study those things that can slip through the sieve of the weave and haunt or inhabit the immaterial, the anti-material. The ability of properly painted fanciful figures to traverse such spaces was a well-known novelty, though little more. It was a potions master of hogwarts that first made paints durable and vivid and biddable enough to bind with a subject’s attuned threads, rather than just the artist’s will, to make paintings a respectable art for portraiture, and another, a generation later, that made them common enough that it became feasible for more than one artificed portrait of a single individual, rendered from the same memories, to exist.

“It was a genuine surprise to discover that two such twinned portraits would, essentially, become the same subject, with previously unimagined abilities to navigate between galleries. Those that favored tapestries thought this was the final nail in the coffin of painted portraiture: who would want an art piece that could wander away on you, potentially beyond the ability of a simple spell to make it resume its place? But most found it fascinating, a flattering testament to the super-humanity of wizards. Like most areas of study, it received attention because the aristocracy found it engaging. The material bound-ness of tapestries stopped seeming like a superiority and began seeming like a quaint liability.

“Galleries have properties we still don’t understand. I think if most people realized how much, they would find them unacceptably disturbing, but they’re such a familiar and defining part of our wizarding world, so much a thing we see as distinguishing ourselves from muggles, that we simply accept them as...well...just magic. But they’re more than that. They’re responsive to created and invented things, dreams, ideas. If an artificed subject recognizes itself as existing in two places as a single subject, a gallery will...acknowledge that. Accommodate it. It’s sort of void of properties, so any properties introduced it accepts. At least, roughly. No two galleries are really the same, for as far as the understanding presently goes. But a belief in a connection is a connection, and some galleries can make real passages between two images.

“Dorian...well...like I said, he’s special. Amazing, really. He can look at anything and get it set in his mind, be able to draw or paint it days later, as if it already were a painting. But he has a hard time with—” Anglen looked around and grabbed a pair of tongs from the shelf, holding them up, “If I show him this, he’d be able to make a picture of it, brilliantly, perfectly, just like this, even several years later. But if I showed them to him again like this,” he turned them sideways and leaned them slightly towards himself, “he wouldn’t recognize them as the same object, or at least it would be a real struggle for him. His perception of things is very much like a gallery of muggle paintings. It makes a lot of things difficult for him.”

“So...he has a special relationship with galleries and paintings.”

Anglen nodded, “I’ve only ever seen it work here, though.”

Hermione squinted, “Seen what work? There aren’t any paintings of Dorian here.”

Anglen smiled a little apologetically, “To him there are.”

Hermione felt her brow stretching upwards like fingers of dawn, “Mirrors.”

He nodded, “Only ones that he’s looked in, but yes. To him, they’re portraits, drawn with his memories. He’s utterly sure of it. So...as near as I can figure it, that’s how he does it. He just steps in and walks through. But only in a place like Hogwarts. And probably only because of the texentes making everything so odd, now that I think of it. And because nothing opposes him. I think it’s
related to being an animagus. He isn’t one, I mean, but it runs in our family and I’ve been studying how people with animagical and legillimetic abilities interact differently with—"

“Alright alright, I get it, or enough of it anyway, but…” she squinted, “There isn’t a mirror in Minerva’s office.”

“Oh...well...when I came for my interview last year, Dorian came along. There was nothing for him to do while he waited with me, so he just sat off to the side, in an awful chair by the window. He likes to watch birds. We’d arrived late, and when it got dark out, the headmaster lit the lamps and...”

Hermione sighed, “The window became a mirror.”

Anglen nodded, “I’ll see if he can still do it once the texentes winds down. If he can, and the headmaster doesn’t throw us both out on our ears, I’ll take responsibility to make sure that he doesn’t do it anymore. He needs an education, though. I think he could be a great artificer, and he’s not really suited to much else, and for that he really needs an education so he can be apprenticed...”

Hermione nodded, not really listening, ideas bursting to the front of her mind like a sudden flock of birds flushed from hiding, “Yes, yes, I expect something can be worked out, if anyone can sympathize with getting up to a lot of metamagical fuckery at Hogwarts for expediency’s sake it would be me and headmaster McGon...” she swallowed, stalling only briefly, “well...headmaster Longbottom did a fair share of that in his day as well. But tell me...” she tried very hard to reign in her intensity, not wanting to frighten the young man any more than he already was, “Try to remember, on the Galleon, the barge, did he look in the mirror in the washroom? Or did he perhaps look...” she thought of the still surface of the lake, only vaguely hearing Anglen replying in the affirmative.

She remembered looking over the iron rail at her rippling image. She remembered Dennis Creevey at his first-year sorting ceremony sopping wet because he’d fallen out of the boat on his way across, ecstatic because he’d been fished out by the giant squid. She got a sudden flash of her nightmare, of obliterating herself and plunging through a green glassy mirror of water into the depths of the lake, of dreams and memories and mirrors and paintings and pensieves and poems and wings made entirely from nonsense, and she came bursting out of the closet like an idea to the front of her mind, “Beasley I think I know how they got into the gallery, and I have a plan!”
Beasley moved the compass with entranced slowness as everyone around the table held their breaths. The last upward curve of the second wave came up and met the downward mathematical curve of the first on the zero-line with the uncanny precision of a finger meeting itself on the surface of a mirror.

She sat back, wiping a slight sheen from her forehead, looking back down the long table as Hermione edged towards her, checking her work. Hermione came to the last set, froze, lifted her head to lock eyes with Beasley. She nodded and Beasley threw her ragged quill to the floor in a kind of amazed and triumphant disgust.

“That’s absolutely insane.”

Hermione smirked, “Which is why Bellatrix would be able to do it completely intuitively.”

“That’s utterly, utterly...and this is coming from me, mind you...bat-shit insane.”

Hermione nodded, “I know. I figure she must have had some help from the goblins.”

There was a moment’s silence before Nikita opted to speak up from among the silent crowd gathered along the other side of the table, “What!? What is it?”

Beasley just grinned smugly at him as Cho spoke up in reply, “The boat...somehow they...they dove it into the water...it’s actually moored down there, but they also dove it through its own reflection on the surface of the water. So...so it’s both. It’s down there in the lake, and it’s in the part of the hogwarts gallery that the lake represents.”

Hermione shook her head appreciatively at Beasley, “I’m glad you remembered about the iron railing that circles the deck.”

Beasley nodded, “I’m glad you remembered about iron lysing the surface tension of dream-states. With that and the mirror of the lake and the apparent porosity of the gallery to dreams when the texentes is running...gargling grims, we’re up against a lot of nonsense.”

Hermione sighed, “But I think we can count on having some advantages. Like, Dennis Creevey. He’s muggle-born, a police officer, and unstable, so there must be a pretty compelling reason for her to keep him around if he’s still alive now that she has everything else in place. She’s relying on someone vulnerable for something that she needs, and that’s a weakness.”

Enith made a grim noise, “Putting a person to use with a pensieve is a bad business.”

“I hope there’s another explanation. Could it be she’s just keeping him pacified?”

Enith shrugged, “Far simpler magics for that, or even non-magics. No, I expect she is gathering his anger. His vengeance. Stirring the feelings in the dark place beneath his better self, perhaps to increase the power of her artifices of vengeance, or of herself. He’s a living thing, and can reflect his own anger back and back upon itself and himself.”

“Could that be the demon door? The pensieve?”

Enith shook her head, “I have never heard of a demon door. And I would wager more likely that she’s using the pensieve to cultivate something in him, than the other way around.”
“Is there anything that can be done to unmake whatever she is making from his mind and his memories? Can we save him?”

“Separating him from the self-reflecting provocation...even the raw materials of artifice need the living to make them truly live. For lack of antagonism, or with some disruption by gentler thoughts, the darkness she needs from him will go back to sleep. That malice which has already been gathered might still be used by her, but it would not be as effective without the living person who shares the vision of vengeance to which she is attuned. Anger can die as easily, or as hard, as anything else.”

“What about that? Her, as an artifice of anger, of vengeful memories. How do we fight her?”

Enith looked meaningfully at Beasley and Cho as well, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but with the method she used to insert the gallery of the boat into the gallery of Hogwarts, she likely used the alchemical properties of dreaming and the dream-weaver as well. She’s in a dream-state as well as in the gallery...a dreamer as well as a discorporated soul?”

Beasley nodded, Cho nodded as well but waggled her hand to indicate that this was only a rough approximation.

“The thing that will limit her is that she is dreaming. She loved the monster that made her. Whatever she is truly capable of, she cannot dream beyond what he wanted from her. She cannot believe she is more than a painting, more than his purpose, and will be as fragile, though no less deadly to those who enter her dream. And her dream is bound up in the gallery, so there will be as many ways in, with or without her consent.”

Ginny spoke up, trading a nod with Harry and bringing her semi-famous team-captain tone to bear, “So I think that clarifies our goals considerably. Galleon team will get in, separate Dennis Creevey from the pensieve, get the pensieve away from Bellatrix. Secondary goal, get control of the boat. The easiest way to do that by far will be if Orlean and Galrig are on board somewhere. Don’t try to muck about with the goblin protection magics if you like keeping your organs on the inside. If we can’t get control of the boat, we get the canvases and get out. They’re key to controlling the death eaters. The ship is much bigger on the inside, so I’m going to suggest that me and the rest of the quiddich hooligans get on the Galleon team. We’ll need to cover a lot of ground quick, so I’m thinking brooms.”

Ginny took another deep breath, “Professor Longbottom, Professor Flitwick, mum, I’m thinking you three should sit this one out. The chance that you will be a valuable distraction for the death eaters that are gunning for you doesn’t really outweigh how immediately deadly they apparently are to their attuned targets. I know you’re all capable, but so was Minerva, and she wasn’t even ever directly responsible for the deaths of the Carrows.”

Flitwick and Neville nodded. Molly’s expression was grim and stern, and Hermione couldn’t deduce what was going on in her mind, probably craving another chance to thrash Bellatrix in an open duel, but after a moment she nodded as well.

Ginny continued, “Gallery team, I think you’re mostly going to be backup, distraction, information gathering, anything you think would be useful. Your only hard goal is to find Severus Snape if you can, arm him if possible, stabilize him if necessary. Professors Granger and Bolger are going to head up that team and be in charge of planning.”

Hermione nodded, “I think it would be good if Cho, Neville, Draco, George, and Professor Flitwick were to stay here and be in charge of backup plans and school defense, counter anything that slips
through the cracks or that we aren’t foreseeing. Between you you know Hogwarts, arithmancy, death eaters, and strategy as well as we could hope for. I’ll need Beasley and Nikita with me, at least.”

Cho and Draco both grimaced, clearly not liking the idea of being kept apart from the other fliers but nodding. George glanced at Angelina anxiously.

Nikita grimaced, looking deflated, “Why me? I’m a flyer.”

Hermione sighed, “Yes but you’re also a legilimens, and I need you to talk to Hogwart. If he has anything to say on the subject of anything, charades just aren’t going to cut it. I expect things are going to move fast, and we’re going to be making up a lot of nonsense on the fly.”

He continued to look crestfallen until Beasley added, “and we’ll need some of the better fliers staying back in case the monsters invade Hogwarts proper instead of just defending the ship. We’ll need you to help keep the primary targets in motion.”

Hermione saw Ginny and Beasley exchange a look, detecting some mentorship between them as Nikita, heartened, strode toward his assigned role.
The fliers assembled and jumped on the floo network to go gather their brooms, except for Ginny, who had Harry’s assurance that he would fetch hers as well. Hermione was directing people to move some seats into the bedroom, less out of need and more to assure that people had something to do with their nervous energy. Draco helped her carry two into the texentes chamber. She pointed where she wanted his put, and he obeyed her without quip or question. Despite having run into him a handful of times over the years, and finding each time that he was a very different sort of man than the boy he’d been, it was still disorienting that he took direction from her so gracefully.

As she turned towards the tapestry to fetch Beasley, he delayed her with a tap on her upper arm that was almost apologetic in its excessive gentleness and brevity.

“I’m concerned about your mother-in-law. You should forbid her to go.”

As Draco seemed very serious, Hermione did her very best to smother the sarcastic smile at the thought of forbidding Molly Weasley from doing anything, “Why?”

“She’s...she cornered me, prodded me about my father’s painting. I think she thinks...that Arthur’s sudden illness years ago...and Ron...she thinks Bellatrix might have been to blame.”

Hermione paused, her instinctive political reins of how can I help pulling back on her galloping sense of I do not have time for this. Sometimes it was faster just to let people say their piece, “I’m sorry, Draco, I wasn’t listening properly. Forgive me.”

The formality put him at ease, and he straightened, nodding gratefully, “As we were talking she fixated on blaming the paintings for Ron’s dying so suddenly. The coincidence of the timing and so-forth.”

Hermione blinked, trying with minimal success to keep her carefully ordered plan of action from tipping over and spilling across her mind as something beneath it shook violently. She pinched the bridge of her nose. Molly was a marvel, but she’d never truly stood-down from the war, attributing every lingering imperfection of the world to the long machinations of the people who’d murdered her son and several of her friends, and it made sense that the return of Bellatrix LeStrange would set her off, presenting a face for the capricious and unsatisfying nature of tragedy. But what shook Hermione was her own dawning uncertainty in the matter, unable to parse whether it was rational or the same need Molly had nursed for so many years. She cut off trying to assemble concurrent timelines in her head and simply nodded at Draco, “I’ll talk to her. When Nikita gets back from gathering loaner-brooms would you help him to secure the Slytherin common room and check it for artwork?”

Draco nodded, apparently relieved, and swept out past her. She followed, allowing herself to mutter under her breath about how she did not have time for this.

Molly was sitting by the writing desk, louring in the way that Ginny had inherited, lost in thought. When Hermione sat down on the desk’s rolling chair Molly looked up, using her avowal voice, “I’m going with Ginny and Harry.”

Hermione sighed, “Draco told me.”

Molly’s lips set in a line, “Did he.”
“I won’t try to stop you but-”

“But you’ll try to handle me. I know. You’re worse than Harry.”

Hermione smiled, “Well yes but in your eyes who isn’t?”

Molly laughed but her smile collapsed, “That creature hurt my baby boy. I know it, I know it in my heart. I can’t make you believe me-”

“I do.”

Molly blinked at her as if she’d been slapped.

“I know, belief isn’t really my forte. And I...hector about how pureblood wizards go overboard believing in things to avoid seeming like unimaginative muggles, but, honestly, it’s been such an odd few days and...and I think literally everything I’ve tried to predict rationally has turned out...so wrong...” she felt her eyes starting to well-up, and did a passable job of staunching them with willpower alone, except then Molly squeezed her hand warmly, cancelling the pressure of propriety, and so they flowed freely into the space between, “I just,” Hermione sniffled briskly, “I know that your heart is a much bigger badass than my brain, so...so I’ll just believe you. And I don’t believe that you should come along, but I’ve honestly got no argument to stop you.”

“Oh my dear,” Molly gave her hand another affectionate squeeze, “You talk such nonsense sometimes.”

A laugh burst out of her, and she mopped her face with her sleeve, babbling uncomfortably while Molly tutted and searched her pockets for a handkerchief, “If I’m honest, I mean, I don’t think Greyback was able to get to Ron. My only reason is that he described Ron as someone he meant to kill, but honestly that could mean anything. And the fact that he was there at all even though Dennis told Enith that his Malfoy had been destroyed...which I assume happened when Draco’s father passed...which I assume means they vanish once they’ve found and done away with all their targets...though that’s a lot of assuming...but...Molly,” she turned her hand over, gripping her mother-in-law’s, “Greyback wasn’t able to kill me. I mean, he might have been, but he got his claws on me and I survived. The Carrows, they barely touched Minerva and she...” Hermione shook her head, “It could mean any of dozens of things but I think it’s more dangerous if you go. You and Flitwick and Neville and Luna. It seems like a costly risk. Our only strategy for keeping ahead of them is brooms, and none of you are flyers. And Bella has a wand even. And I...” Hermione’s tears dried as her expression slackened, all her attention turned inwards, “...I don’t know if she’d even recognize you. Severus...even though I’d told him what year it was he didn’t recognize me at first. It didn’t sink in naturally for him that...anything had changed in twenty years...”

“Hermione dear?” Molly squeezed her hand, “You’ve gone all mooncalf again.”

Hermione nodded vaguely, “Yes...I’m just thinking...Bella’s painted monsters are so fast and so fatal, but only to their associated targets, it seems ludicrous to let you anywhere near her but...she’s also dangerous in and of herself...and it certainly seems like their pre-determined target is their most effective distraction but...it doesn’t have to be literally you...my locket...why was Greyback so certain it was Ron?”

Molly sighed, “I’m going to say ‘love’ and you’re going to promptly forget your resolution to trust my intuition.”

Hermione nodded, “No, it’s as good a notion as any I’ve got,” she slipped the locket off and considered it in her palm. She fingered the braided cord. One unicorn hair from the hand-me-down
wand he’d broken and spent a year trying to mend with spell-o tape. One hair from the first wand that was really his own. And one dragon heartstring from the wand he took from Wormtail when they’d broken out of the cellar at Malfoy Manor, the one he’d wielded when he’d rescued Hermione from Bellatrix...when he’d disarmed Bellatrix and taken the walnut wand.

Hermione’s breath caught in her throat. Ron was the master of the walnut wand. Hermione might have kept it, the researchers at St. Mungos might have examined it, Dennis might have taken a version of it beyond reality and given it back to Bellatrix, probably used his investigation as an excuse to destroy the original for some reason, but Ron was the last person to have taken it by force. Hermione remembered the feel of holding the wand when she’d posed as Bellatrix, its contempt and malignancy, almost as biting as a horcrux. Other wands might be made to respect those who quietly steal them or trade them. The walnut wand, the wand thirsty for inflicting pain and humiliation, it only respected force. Combat. Brazen dominance. It knew that Bellatrix had been disarmed and defeated by a mere boy in Malfoy Manor, long before she died at his mother’s hands, that it had been locked in a hospital and forced to facilitate healing for years as a result. The only way she could have regained its respect would have been to murder Ron.

Which meant that she couldn’t have. Because the wand was still fighting her, or else she’d have better control of the paintings. And she knew it, or else she’d have been more suspicious of Snape’s ability to resist her despite holding his portrait and the wand that had essentially created him. She was probably wooing it vigorously with capricious blood and torture, trying to get it to forgive her for its long captivity and humiliation, trying to get it to overlook a defeat that she didn’t even know about because it had happened when her painting had already been hidden by an embarrassed Lucius, slumbering in some guest-room closet while her living double schemed and tortured and was defeated in the last days of the war. And it was defeat that she wasn’t even aware of, because that part of her story wasn’t in the book she’d read. It hadn’t happened at Hogwarts.

For all the surviving half of Bellatrix knew, Molly Weasley was the master of the walnut wand. She’d have every rational reason to suspect it. And they could flood her with nonsense.

Hermione kissed her locket and held it to her heart, calling loudly for Luna and Ginny, and then Angelina and Enith as an afterthought, disgorging her mind to Molly in a rush.

“Why didn’t I see it? Molly you’re right you do have to go, but we’re going to be smart. We’re going to keep her so mixed up she won’t know who to go after. But to be smart about this you have to accept...she didn’t go after Ron. She had no reason to bother. It’s you she wants, you’re all she knows, you’re the root of all her problems. Ginny, Angelina, we need some golden snitches. Luna, I need you to help me with the locket. If we put the charm in one snitch, that will keep Greyback busy. Ginny, you should wear the cord. I want that wand to recognize its master. It will help with the illusion.”

Ginny’s smile was guarded, “What illusion?”

Hermione stood up and put her hands on Ginny’s shoulders, “You’re turning into your mother.”

Molly turned scarlet “Absolutely not!”

Hermione put up two hands, soothingly, “Molly hear me out…”

“Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare ask me to hear this. I will not let my precious daughters go into this fight without me,” her voice was loud but even, and she looked from Hermione to Ginny to Angelina with steady ferocity, “Nothing short of my being dead in the ground will ever keep this body from standing between that...that...that…”
“Cunt?” Ginny put in helpfully.

“Yes, thank you Ginny dear...and my girls.”

Angelina traded a look with Hermione, eyes brimming, before both of them and Ginny closed with Molly to hold her tight, Luna completing the circle from behind for good measure.

“Molly, you’ll be there I promise. But Ginny looks more like the you that Bellatrix will remember. Bella’s been spending all her time in a locked boat with paintings and goblins who look the same as they did twenty years ago. There’s been nothing forcing her to come to grips with the full reality of her situation. She’s still fighting the battle of Hogwarts. She’s still living for the sake of her master, still living a life where he hasn’t died. It would never occur to her that Ginny isn’t you, but she can’t just push Ginny through the curtain the way she could do to you. And that will scare her. It will give us a chance to disarm her, to rescue Dennis, and ruin whatever this demon-door is. Do you trust me?”

Molly snorted, “More than you trust me, apparently. Where’s Harry, what does he think of all this?”

Angelina and Ginny rolled their eyes in tandem.

Right on cue, their mother’s favorite came spinning through the fireplace beside the desk, two brooms in hand, just as Hermione was saying with some force, “Harry trusts me.”

He grinned, nodding blithely and handing Ginny her battle-scarred Hollyhead Harpies Hurricane X-series, “Too right I do. What are we talking about?”

When Hermione had finished explaining, Harry nodded guardedly, “I think she’s right, mum.”

Molly’s stern expression melted into what everyone affectionately referred to as her Harry-simper, and she nodded, “All right. As long as you’re not trying to leave me behind. And I suspect Neville and Fillius will feel the same way.”

“Hah!” Professor Flitwick interjected as he levitated chairs on the other side of the room to create a tidy circle around the table, “I may have been a hat-stall but I still came out a Ravenclaw. I’ll trust in a good plan over personal honor on this one. Don’t let my timeless good looks fool you, I’m not as young as I used to be. And Elodie would divorce me! I’ll sit with Minerva until I’m needed, as a friend ought.”

Hermione nodded, “You and Neville are the most competent to protect the school if something goes wrong. But if we might get a patronus charm from you to ride in with the fliers...they seem much more durable in galleries, and I expect they would help to confuse and distract Dolohov and Greyback. Enith, Luna, can you think of anything else we can do to bring multiple targets to our single-minded adversaries?”

Luna and Enith both nodded.

Luna said, “I’ll need to borrow wands.”

Enith said, “I’ll need two minutes with each person, and about a dozen glass vials.”

Hermione nodded, considering, “Alright. Everybody go do what you’re thinking, report to Ginny when you’re done. Send me Nikita and Beasley if you see them. Final briefing is in thirty, and then we’re going in.”
Everyone cleared out, but Ginny lingered behind.

“Are you ok?”

Hermione nodded, “I think so, actually. It’s a good plan if you don’t think about it too hard. I...I think it will go well. I have a feeling. Like I’ve been promised...something good will come of this.”

Ginny smiled, “Woolly witchy bullshit, Granger. You’re the one that taught me that the wizard and muggle worlds aren’t as different as pureblood wizards tend to want to believe, that we default too hard to believing that things like senseless tragedies just don’t happen here. And that’s all well and good until it gets you killed. It’s been a crazy week, a crazy year, but keep your head, alright? Nothing is promised. You and me, we know that. Just...just keep your head.”

Hermione nodded, looking down and taking Ginny’s hand, pulling her close, “Not nothing. Not a lot is promised, but not nothing,” she kissed her, fierce and frightened and certain, “we’re coming back from this, and when we do, I’m coming home to you. And Severus too, in whatever way he’ll let me bring him. I’m done letting life sneak away from me.”

Ginny held her, nodding, then pulled away, wiping her eyes, “Ok. Sounds good. But it’s gameface time. And when we get back... I’ll let you read my novel.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Aye, matey.”

Hermione laughed, “Ok. Could you close the door when you go out, I need just a minute to...gameface.”

Ginny saluted with a hooked finger and went out. The door closed and all the bustle from the classroom was silent.

She ran a hand over the inlaid surface of the writing desk, then tugged gently at each drawer until she found the one that wouldn’t open for pulling or jiggling or any of the basic spells that would typically unlock anything and everything.

She hesitated for a moment, overwhelmed by the feeling of walking instead of running because running towards ghosts and hoping against hope could be so painful in the end.

She pressed her fingertips to her lips, then to the small brass keyhole-shaped knob, whispering “Dicam Mysterium”

A young Severus Snape’s unmistakable pure baritone emanated from the drawer, “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”

She took a deep breath, giving the countersign that had sounded so bloody clever when they’d thought of it together in a fit of giddy weariness, “Both are ideal tools for picking apart the legacy of a war.”

The lock clicked.

She squared her shoulders, hoping against hope that he had not revisited the drawer to take what he had promised to leave for her. Twenty years was a long time to resist peeking, to trust in self-imposed secrets.

She opened the drawer. It held the vial she’d hoped for, containing only the slender silver filament
that had hurt terribly when she’d cut it away. The label had yellowed, but the word “Maybe”, in his
sharp script, was still clear.

Underneath it was something she hadn’t expected. A small piece of paper, with an incantation, and
beside it, a partial date: October, 1997. She thought carefully. That would have been after he’d
begun as headmaster, a spare few months since he’d been compelled to kill Dumbledore. A dark
time, lonely, when he felt like he’d murdered his only friend, the anniversary of feeling like he’d
murdered his only other. No wonder the memories had begun fighting their way back enough that
he’d remember the drawer. But whatever he’d done that day, he’d put the vial back for her to find. It
contained no memories, after all, nothing that would help him understand. Just a connection he didn’t
want anyway.

She gazed at the incantation quizzically. “Expecto Mutare”: I expect to change. Had he been
thinking about death? Had he been looking forward to a different life? That spur of his life was lost
to her, peeled-off from the version of him she could still save.

For the last time (she swore) before getting her “game face” in place, her eyes welled with tears and
she pressed the label to her lips, “It’s true,” she murmured, “Not much is promised to us. Not much.
But not nothing.”

She tucked the thread of “maybe” into her pocket, straightening her face and her clothes, under the
uncanny impression that she was being watched by someone unseen, well-meaning, and not entirely
as competent as she might like.
Great Expect-o-tions

Preparations done and orders established, the fliers formed up in the classroom beside Dorian, prepared to follow him through the mirror and into the Galleon’s guest lavatory after Hermione and Beasley had gotten a twenty minute head start at traversing the gallery. Hermione stopped by as Anglen was giving Dorian final instructions, “Remember, Dorian, once we’ve got everyone through, we only stay as long as it’s safe. We wait if we can, but if I say you leave, you leave. If you feel unsafe, you leave. The fliers can take care of themselves, they’re grown, and it will probably be easier breaking out of the ship than it would be breaking in. It’s important that you come back here and finish school, right?”

Dorian nodded solemnly.

Hermione nodded to Anglen too, pleased that Ginny had taken it upon herself to lie to him about how goblins view security. If absolutely everything went wrong and they couldn’t find the boat’s owners, and they couldn’t foil Bellatrix, and something went wrong with the boat, it would likely be extremely difficult to get out by force. Goblins had a habit of wanting to punish thieves as much as prevent them. But the fact that his getting away safe was of paramount importance had been accurate. Involving him still troubled her. She couldn’t bear the idea of any more children getting caught up in the blowback of a war that had gobbled up her own childhood, but if the gallery had let him in and out of the headmaster’s office, she was fairly certain, after confirmation with Enith, Luna, and Beasley, that the goblin gallery would not be able to trap him. He was their best shot at defending the school and what it stood for.

Hermione lead Beasley and Nikita into the bedroom, gesturing for Nick to sit by the bed and Beasley to go through into the texentes chamber as she made introductions.

“Nikita, I would like you to meet Professor Hogwart, architect and first headmaster of the Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry. Hogwart, this is Nikita Kalil.”

Nikita’s eyes got wide for a moment, then he nodded, “Pleased to meet you as well, I’m sure. I-” he broke off and leaned in intently, nodding a few more times before turning to Hermione, “He said you and Happy have been getting it wrong. He’s one of a pair. His twin brother was the architect. He was only the headmaster. It’s been bothering him all week.”

Hermione gaped slightly, torn between having a dozen follow-up questions and not feeling like there was time enough for what had already been said, “Oh, I, I apologize, Professor Hogwart.”

“He says to call him Hogarth.”

Hermione bit back her impulse to reflexively continue with polite pleasantries, “Yes, so, I need the two of you to talk. I need you to convince him to let me and two patroni through into the gallery once I’ve gotten into the proper state for travel and Beasley’s gotten into the proper state to most clearly hear her patronus at a distance. You’re a legilimens, you have VIP privileges in relation to the sorts of way he guards, which means he has to deal with you, right Hog- ah Hogarth?”

Hybrid head-wobble nod.

Hermione nodded sharply, “Right. Nick, here’s a list of things you can offer him if he gets demanding.”

She handed him a slip of paper on which she had written the words pretty much anything you think
Nikita’s eyebrows rose incredulously, but he nodded.

“Beyond that you’re free to chat to your heart’s content, as long as Beasley doesn’t have any questions. She’ll be astral too, but you should be able to hear her the same way you hear Hogarth. She’s going to be in charge of keeping tabs on how I’m doing through her patronus which...it seems like she should be able to do. We’ll see. But if anything goes too wrong, I’ll send hers back first with information, and that will be your cue to try and pull me back to my body if I haven’t gotten back on my own in another twenty minutes or so. I’ll try to keep your patronus along to help you guide me back.”

Nikita nodded distractedly between Hermione and Hogwart, “Alright, yes, sorry, only he’s telling me to tell you to remember that Hogwarts is a living thing. A model like the texentes.”

Hermione nodded, “And we’ll do our best to protect it, like we always have.”

The blurry figure in the tapestry seemed to sigh heavily, and vaguely flicked his fingers to dismiss her.

Hermione grimaced but turned back to Nikita, “Alright, if you cast a patronus I’m pretty sure I can get it to follow me.”

Nikita blushed, but stood up with his wand in hand, taking a deep breath and obviously struggling to clear his mind. Hermione struggled not to tap her foot impatiently. He raised his wand, balked, and lowered it several times. He cleared his throat, “Would you mind going into the next chamber? I...I can’t do this if you’re staring at me.”

Hermione pitched a few more burning questions into a “to wonder about later” box, shrugged, and did as he asked.

Beasley was sitting primly, watching things spin with a keen eye that might have seemed vague if what she were watching had been invisible. She looked at Hermione, surprised, “Where’s his patronus?”

Hermione sighed, “He’s going to cast it out there. It’s fine. It’s not worth the time it would take to explain,” even if I could she thought, desperate to finally begin.

Beasley looked irritated, “Oh certainly, because why should he have to follow what he’s asked to do if it involves my part of the plan. That would just be silly.”

“I don’t think it’s that. Some people have trouble producing them. It’s embarrassing. Look, I don’t know, but we just have to work with what we’ve got. It’s wretched to have to be the bigger person, I know, but it’s what I need from you right now.”

Beasley seemed to sober and nodded, closing her eyes and smiling slightly, “Expecto Patronum!”

A flying fox came winging out of the end of her wand, beautifully detailed. Hermione nodded, impressed, “Alright, let’s just start, if Nick can catch up so be it, otherwise his was a redundancy anyway. The more important thing is that he get the door open.”

Beasley nodded, and Hermione took a seat. She watched the great bat circle the room, seeming to grow more vivid with each pass, and realized it was picking up threads between itself and Beasley. Watching its arcs helped her relax her eyes until she could see the filaments in the air, and the...
especially thick one that ran between Beasley’s heart and the patronus. She listened to the wind and the sound of it became more real than the walls, the threads in the air more integral to life than the air around them. Her hands tingled finely in the pattern of her skin’s underlying weave. Her willowy nerves sparked and her twining arteries pulsed, threads made from threads. She didn’t need a cocoon, she didn’t need to pull or push, she simply had to stand and leave her thready garments on the chair in order to move freely. She reached out a fine strand and beckoned through the air with it, and Beasley’s great angelic bat swooped and took it in one clawed foot, binding to her voluntarily. As it swooped away she let the gentle pull of the thread help ease her transition to standing.

She turned and looked down at herself in the chair. She looked tired, but her attitude was one of serene contemplation. From her place of remove, she felt a stab of pity for this separate person; the sorrow and loneliness etched around her eyes warring with the stubborn stiffness around her lips, who so seldom trusted anything but herself, and who did not even like herself very much for being so solitary and untrusting.

She saw in that face someone who was letting her go, risking her life to let her go, trusting her, as Severus had, with everything that might keep her alive.

She leaned down next to her own ear and whispered, “I’ll come back for you, too.”

As she straightened, tucking her wand into her sleeve, Beasley’s fox came and settled heavily on her shoulder as its owner hadn’t quite found the right way to debark from her accustomed conveyance and it had gotten tired of showing off. Thinking it might be better to give her a little privacy, she pushed back the tapestry and went into the bedroom just as Nick was proclaiming “-atronum!” and a second flying fox joined her on her opposite shoulder. He looked at her sheepishly and she couldn’t help shaking her head.

“You’ve known her a few days, Nick. This is starting to seem like a fixation.”

He peered at her, “How very peculiar. I can only see you from the chest up, and only as a vague misty sort of image, as though the patroni are casting a faint light on you in an otherwise lightless room,” And then, adjusting swiftly to the oddity, he shrugged, “As for your continuing condescension...we knew each other for years before this.”

“And hated one another, if I’ve got the gossip correctly.” she tried not to change the inflection in her voice as Beasley peeked out invisibly from behind the tapestry.

He straightened, speaking quietly as if he hoped not to be overheard in the adjacent chamber, “Not hated just...I was an arrogant young idiot and I didn’t understand her. Or myself. But when I finally chose to see her...to look in her eyes and see a window into the person she is instead of a mirror for my own vanity and shortcomings... it’s not like I could help going a bit batty for her.”

Hermione nodded, relenting, “I suppose I know what you mean. Minds move faster than bodies. If it’s just that she doesn’t trust your sincerity yet, she can probably get over that with time. And effort on your part. And wanting to on hers, of course.”

He blushed again, nodding, changing his volume upwards again, “I promised Hogarth I would teach the lost histories of this school again, at least as much as he knows. That’s all he asked for. He’s ready as soon as you and the bats are.”

Hermione nodded, “Thank you, Nikita.”

“And he said,” he blushed more intensely, “that when I’m headmaster, after Longbottom, I’m to support the rights of elves and goblins to learn here, no matter what it costs me.”
Hermione’s box of questions was beginning to groan with weight, but she soldiered on, “I swear you’ll have all the help I can possibly give. Thank you for this, Nikita. Then it’s all agreed?”

“Yes.”

She turned to the smiling tapestry, who opened the door, and she walked through. Beasley sat on the bed, letting a listening thread spool out after her bat, her eyes on Nikita and shining for reasons that had nothing to do with the natural glow of her astral form. Hermione smiled as she headed into the dark, feeling she’d helped to get at least one thing sorted that week.

It was the last thing that would go right that day.
The trip down was as she remembered, dark and disorienting. She felt the lack of her locket keenly, and held up the vial of Maybe like a talisman. It guided her, glowing brightly with a skittering pulse when she faced the correct direction, the accustomed stab in her thumb sliding along her arm to her heart like an infection in her blood along scoured channels. The giant bats occasionally let out little shrieks to test the space for objects, making the entire journey oddly familiar but enormously strange. The prison itself was even more disconcerting. Severus’ cell was still there, still lit, still holding him like a moth in an airless jar. The other four structures were barely standing, barely structures, their sides shredded and impossibly decayed, the remains of chairs crumbling at their centers, their uprights bowed and warped, splintering. With a gesture from her, the flying foxes soared away to search the area for escaped death-eaters. Her gut told her they wouldn’t find any. Something had happened in the last few hours. Something mad.

She closed with his cage at an incautious tear, not knowing how long she had to find out what had changed and whether it would doom the plan. She ran even more swiftly through her goals in her mind; contact Severus, arm him, get any information he’d gathered to the others through Beasley’s patronus, secure his safety any way she could and, if possible, evacuate him into the gallery to wait until his canvas had been taken beyond Bellatrix’s control.

His spare figure faced outwards from his usual place beside and slightly behind his chair, but even with his shoulders slumped he seemed somehow taller, attenuated. Horror dawned with realizing he was suspended just off the ground, his body hanging slack though he seemed to stand. She moved around the side of his cage, drawing her wand instinctively and pocketing the glowing vial, seeking his face to determine if he was...no...to determine the extent of his condition. He could not have died so senselessly as that.

_Dreams die_ the darkness murmured, _all the time, and for no good reason._

“No,” she hazarded to hiss, still feeling the burning Maybe in her pocket, “Not this time.”

The massive room beyond his cell panned as she circled, and finally, far off to one side, she caught sight of Bellatrix. She was turned away, her wand pointed behind her at the canvas cell, all her attention on Dennis Creevey who still stood, ghastly pale and lit from beneath his chin by the glowing pensieve. She was admonishing him in sharply sibilant words Hermione couldn’t make out.

More out of desperation than sense, Hermione took her chance and slipped to the back of the cell, pressing through the sharp ache of the gap in the canvas and immediately crouching down behind the wing-backed chair as silently as she could, her heart audible to only herself, she hoped. She reached out to the ankle that dangled just beyond the edge of the chair’s back, slipping off his shoe and feeling for the pulse-point on the top of his foot. It took her several long moments to locate it; strong but very slow and irregular, as hers was hammering to the point that she could feel it in her fingertips too clearly. She didn’t know if he could feel her, but she traced the pattern of their first hello on his skin anyway.

Bellatrix’s voice clarified as she presumably turned back towards the painting, “-and Potter will be here soon enough with the Order of the Phoenix. So just stand by. It’s more than enough even without this fool. _Revivo_”

The air pressure within the box throbbed once and Severus’ head snapped up. His voice was ragged.
He had been screaming. And though he did not look, Hermione knew he was speaking to her. He shook his head at Bellatrix ruefully, "Why are you still here? Why don’t you give up? You have to know-" his voice cracked, "-to know you can’t win. Nothing is as you think. You’re dealing with something so much more powerful than you realize."

Hermione muttered, “So is she,” reaching into her left sleeve for the spare wand she’d brought for him. It had once belonged to Gilderoy Lockhart, before he’d lost his mind to a malicious act that backfired. She held it by the tip, brushing the end of the handle on the fingertips of Snape’s left hand behind the chair. She’d watched him blast that wand out of the hand of an arrogant fool with barely a motion. She hoped there would still be some sympathy between them, perhaps some recollection of refusing to submit to the arrogance of his lessers. His fingers twitched away from the touch of it, closing into a fist that slowly relented, beckoning and pointing up his sleeve, hanging slack again when Hermione had slid the wand safely into hiding. Bellatrix was rambling on malignantly about how nothing more powerful existed, but Hermione felt herself missing details because she was too busy worrying about Severus and ignoring uncomfortable similarities between her own blinkered fanaticism and Bellatrix’s. What finally caught her attention was when the mad witch’s tone softened dramatically.

“It doesn’t have to be this way, Severus…Severiori…Servum Meum...You don’t have to die here in the trap...or worse yet, fail to die and sit a lonely vigil at the bottom of the lake, the bottom of the world, where no one would ever find you or bother to look. With the protective magics it possesses, it might take your frame a thousand years to disintegrate. You could come with me for a little visit instead. My canvas is far from here, quite safe, among friends. I’ve got a couch all to myself, and a small library, and that’s only a limit until I can seal the deal for another gallery chamber like this one. The goblins that wanted this boat destroyed will trade anything for that mystical contraption, even if I only manage to crack the school wide enough for them to retrieve it themselves as part of a repair effort,” she chuckled deeply and Hermione recalled the condescending, serpentine head-shake that went with that sound when there was something LeStrange wanted, “They won't know or care if I serve myself at the same time. You, of all people, should know the premium fools put on dreams.”

Severus said nothing, for once speechless, though Bellatrix left him an opening large enough to launch a full volley of snarky retorts through. Doubtless his mind was whirling to process information, weigh options, find some answer that would keep everything from tipping off the razor’s edge a little longer.

Hermione got there first.

She carefully slid the vial of Maybe into the pocket of Severus’ robe. It sizzled through the glass at their mutual proximity, yearning after its rightful poles. Then she touched the pit of his wrist and drew her fingertips down the surface of his palm, trailing away from him, then pressing his hand forward, away from her, telling him wordlessly that he should go. He clutched at her as vigorously as he dared, eyes fixed unflinching forward, refusing. She flattened his palm between both of hers, making him still, pressing his fingertip against her pulse-point so he could feel that she was suddenly calm, she was thinking, she meant to see him again. She trailed both hands down again, wrist to fingertips, and this time he let her go, clenching his hands into fists, but nodding.

“Fine. Yes.”

Bellatrix was silent for a moment, apparently surprised, a jagged incredulous smile evident in her laugh and lingering in her voice when she spoke again, “I didn’t hear you. Say it again.”

“You heard me.”
"Say it. Again."

He growled, "I said yes, Bellatrix," he voice strengthened with an affectation of reluctance and a modicum of loathing, "Against reason, memory, good sense, and long habit, yes. You win. I'll trust you."

A stunned silence, then, "You're giving up too easily, perhaps you are finally too broken to be of interest to me. Rarity alone isn't the same as value, so why should I accept this late consent?"

His tone was chilly, derisive, "You shouldn't. It's all a terrible idea, and yours. But you need someone who knows you, who shares your needs, your appetites, your memories, and everyone else is gone."

She laughed. Hermione realized with a kind of fascinated horror that he was actually flirting. Seducing the inveterate sadist with insolence and the nostalgic prospect of keeping him close to torment him.

He let slip a little weakness like a seasoned burlesque dancer baring a shoulder, "You were right...I was a traitor to myself for the sake of fools, and apparently it got me killed alone in an...an empty shack for imaginary ghosts," he glanced around his frame, clearing his throat and covering his momentary indiscretion modestly, "I don't care to honor that fate, if you're willing to offer me something else."

"What is it that you think you could possibly offer me in exchange?" She was enjoying being difficult to an indecent degree.

He glanced away, feigning fear, shame, performing to her appetites,"I think it's a fair exchange, for once," he reverted to a diaphanous bluster, "You need someone who understands alchemical aethers, who's just as invested in finding answers as you are. Now that you've dispatched all the other death eaters into your cannibalistic stewpot and gotten your mudblood fool suitably demented, I think a partnership would work out very nicely. I just could never stand Dolohov, frankly," He dropped his voice to a resonant whisper, "Though if you're planning to keep Creevy I'd just as soon you killed me. The man's an insufferable ass even with his soul intact. Merlin knows what a bore he'll be once he's finally coughed up his calamari for you. Do you know, this whole time he's had delusions of betraying you?"

There was a silence, and Hermione could picture Bella glancing over her shoulder as Severus continued, "He's never wanted to kill Potter, just to show him up, show him what a real hero is, get you far enough in your plans to threaten them all, make them look at the pain he's carried because of them all this time, then swoop in at the last moment and save the day. Like Potter should have and didn't."

Hermione couldn't know if Severus was telling some truth he'd managed to gather, lying for Bellatrix's benefit, or unintentionally projecting his own regretful dreams onto another of the war's cast-off souls.

The canker-sweet lasciviousness in Bella's voice turned Hermione's stomach more with loathing than prudishness, "We'll see if you're right. But I think a partnership will depend on how you do at paying your penance. I'm not one to hold a grudge, but there's tradition to think about."

Severus' tone returned the viscous innuendo in a way that flared her hackles like a frilled lizard, "I long to pay it, my lady, kneeling at your feet..."

"...and working upwards," Bellatrix completed what was unmistakably a conversation that had been
had before. She laughed throatily, drunk with power, utterly seduced, “you must understand of course that I did not expect you to fold without a lot more torture, so you’ll have to permit me one final malice and we’ll call that part of it done. I hate to leave things...hanging. Crucio!”

Hermione barely got her wand out in time to counter-curse the floor of the frame, fighting feebly with the walnut wand for authority over the tiny demesne, finding it much harder without her locket. After long days with little sleep, three quarters of a hobbled cruciatus curse was still enough to throw her into a fetal clench. She held back her scream, though the fight of her reflexes to force it out on held breath brought her to the edge of blackout. Fortunately Bellatrix’s whim passed first.

Severus had dropped and was down on one knee, coughing, one hand braced on the floor so close by hers she longed to simply grab it and try to apparate them both away. His tone was a sour growl, “If the heroes of Hogwarts really are gearing up to try to invade as soon as you expect them, we may have to let that tide us over for the time being,” his condescending sternness promised recalcitrance in a way that must have titillated Bellatrix endlessly, “Get me out of here.”

“As his highness wishes,” she purred.

Breathing a deep inward sigh of relief, Hermione slid herself to the rear wall of the painting, feeling quickly and quietly for the place it had always parted for her, already planning her next steps. Severus would be safe enough for the time being. Bella was a monster, but he could deftly coddle monsters. It was practically his signature skill, and he would at least be armed and have more freedom. She still had his memory of the ministry ritual back in her room, and he had a compass to her in his pocket; they’d have a better-than-zero chance of finding one another, whatever happened, even if he moved beyond her splinter connection to the frame that she had daubed with her blood. She had to warn the others before they walked into a trap. They had prepared for death eaters, but those were apparently all gone, transmuted to something else. They were prepared to search for Bella’s painting, but it wasn’t on the boat. They were prepared to take Bella’s stronghold, but she was prepared to destroy it around them.

Hermione was prepared to return to the textentes room but...for some reason she was having trouble finding the opening out of the painting. By the time she reached the frantic realization that it wasn’t there anymore, there was no time to brace herself.

Bellatrix spoke a rapid series of words Hermione didn’t register in her fury of irrational indignation. She felt a levicorpus-like lurch and two heavy thuds in rapid succession as she was yanked back against the heavy chair, tipping it forward as her whole body crashed against the painting’s front wall like a bird attacking itself against a window.

She stood up slowly, turning with a sense of dread, looking out from the small chamber into the much larger one where Severus stood beside Bellatrix and both were looking back at her, stunned. Her mask clamped down over her fear, but she was too flabbergasted to make good use of the four or five seconds of bluff it bought her, and she blurted out the first even-remotely-plausible cliche’ that occurred to her, “Give it up, LeStrange. We’ve got you surrounded.”

In a moment of perfect abstraction, Hermione resolved to put “Get Bellatrix to look at me as if I’m the craziest person in the room” on her bucket list, just so she could immediately cross it off.

Bellatrix laughed so hard she stumbled backwards and had to catch herself on the rim of the pillar holding up the pensieve. Dennis barely blinked, but the vessel emitted a thin wail, like something deep inside it was crying for lack of blood...its own or others’. Dennis put a hand on the rim and the wailing stopped. Bellatrix straightened, murmuring over her shoulder to the roiling bowl, “Soon, soon…” as she returned to Snape’s side, “Severus, who is this then?”
He was an amazing liar, “I haven’t the faintest idea. Some forward spy that got into the gallery, I expect, listening at back-walls. Whatever you did to pull me out must have pulled her in,” he flicked the backs of his fingers across his chest as casually as if he were brushing away lint, then rested his palm on his sternum briefly so that his thumb and forefinger each touched a clavicle. Even through her panic she recognized the signal, and it immediately centered her.

“I need your help. If you have a plan, show me.”

“Her name…” Dennis rasped from behind the pensieve, “is Professor Grassley. She teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Dennis was staring at her intensely, and Hermione could see in his face that Severus hadn’t been lying. Even through the thick sickly swirl of binding enchantments between himself and the roiling pensieve, Dennis had begun to realize that things had gone too far, and the appearance of Hermione Granger on the scene meant he had a witness, so maybe it wouldn’t be for nothing to switch sides.

Hermione fired up her political tongue, working to think of things she could say that were true so she would not tip her hand by lying badly, “My dearest friends call me Harmony, you can call me Professor,” she slid her hands into her pockets, affecting swagger. Severus imitated her. She tried very hard not to watch as his hand closed on the vial it discovered there, nor watch too intently as the static-y sting of memory began to flicker behind his eyes.

Bellatrix sneered, “Just in the neighborhood, Harmony?”

She nodded, rolling the fingers of her right hand idly as if working something loose, mirroring his left, “Maybe.”

Bella was enjoying herself, “Thought you might do a little snooping? Didn’t expect there’d be such an undertow?” she studied the tip of her wand as idly as a manicure, admiring the weapon that she probably assumed was finally coming around if it was commanding the last of the frames so strongly.

Hermione crossed her arms, resting her right hand against her chest, trying to speak words that would bolster Severus’ remembering, “Maybe. Maybe I believed what the history books said about him,” she fidgeted defensively at her robe with her thumb, easing the neckline towards her left shoulder to expose the skin over her heart.

Severus sneered, crossing his own arms, glancing at the label he’d palmed off the bottle, his expression not even flickering as he scoffed, “You’re clearly dreaming,” but he flicked a finger subtly in a tactile question mark. Are you dreaming?

She shook her head, fairly certain that the out-of-body state she’d adopted wasn’t exactly the same as dreaming. She wasn’t safe, she couldn’t just wake up, it might be dangerous if he tried to force her out, “No, I was just wrong. One more Hogwarts professor is wrong about Severus Snape, for old time’s sake, and is going to die for it. Happy?” she did her best to inflect the elf’s name like any other word.

His smile was so snide it made Bellatrix laugh and Dennis cringe, “Quite,” he forestalled the motion of one hand with the other with some vehemence, their tactile word for a hard no. No, not wrong. And not happy.

Dennis Creevey, still struggling through a heavy, dreaming abstraction, snapped. He plunged a hand into the pensieve and threw a handful of green lake-water at Bellatrix. She hissed in annoyance at being splashed and his face fell. Clearly he’d been expecting something else to happen, expecting a control over his creation that he didn’t posses. For several long seconds she stared at him, livid, clearly understanding what he had meant to do even if Hermione didn’t quite. While her back was
turned, Snape drew the vial from his pocket, working the stopper out one-handed with the dexterity of a man who had started every day for twenty years doing up two dozen covered buttons. With a flick of his wrist, he slid the cherry wand into his hand from his sleeve, and a flick of that wand sent an almost-invisible silver filament lashing towards the frame like a fishing line, legillimetically fastening around her heart just as he touched the other end of the line to his own, accepting a timeworn and half-imagined “maybe” as a means with a real end. It took less than a second, but Bella had already begun to end Dennis by the time he turned back.

“Pathetic mudblood moron,” she extended a clawed hand towards his face, muttering something low and terrible beneath the high breathy wailing that surged in the bowl. A similar clawlike shape reached for him from the bowl like a black mist. It threaded into his nose and throat and Dennis retched, something small and glowing and pointed, with an oddly tasseled end, sliding from his lips into the yawning pensieve and the crushing clutch of the dark and ghostly hand. His knees buckled under him, and he crumpled to the floor, staring blankly but still breathing.

“I swear, you can take the mudblood out of Gryffindor...” she shook her head ruefully, “Kill him, Severus. My gift to you. The first of many. I trust you still remember how.”

He shrugged coldly, “At least he was clever enough at last to recognize when he’s being replaced.”

She nodded, “I don’t even need him to be able to find my way back here anymore. It won’t even be a ‘here’ in a few minutes.”

Severus leveled his wand and intoned "Avada Kedavra" with such indifference that Hermione barely stifled a scream, falling to her knees as she watched. Dennis stopped. The bowl seemed to be trembling slightly, small sparks stirring from its surface and falling back in again, aimlessly boiling.

Bellatrix smile was radiant, “You say the sweetest things.”

He was about to respond when there was a sound from a far corner of the magically massive room. Bella’s eyes flared in excitement.

“They’re here. Stun that one so she can’t shout any warnings. Don’t kill her, she deserves to suffer what’s coming. I’ve got to finish this.”

Bella reached with her wand and stirred the quiet surface of the pensieve until a small shrill whine began to leak from the surface. She gestured over it and began speaking words that made Hermione barely stifled a scream, falling to her knees as she watched. Dennis stopped. The bowl seemed to be trembling slightly, small sparks stirring from its surface and falling back in again, aimlessly boiling.

Severus plucked the empty vial from his pocket again, closing it in his hand as he strolled towards his former prison, his expression sobering as he walked with his back fully turned to a distracted Bellatrix. His lips made words that made no sound, “I’ll come back to you, I swear.”

She nodded, feeling the fragile possibility between them tighten around her heart, “Maybe.”

He brought his wiry grip to bear on the tiny tube of glass and it crumpled like foil, the seams between his fingers welling with needle-thin channels of blood. He stopped a foot from her, their eyes level as she knelt in the raised foreground, his expression stern and oddly reverent, his shoulders square, his motion and posture and lips all at once insisting, “Yes.”

He moved his wand carefully, “I don’t know how to get you out, I don’t know what she did. I might tear you apart by accident if I tried. I’m sorry.”
Hermione shook her head, “It’s alright. I’ve got help on the way. Just stay alive. Or come find me, but be quick. I’m no blushing damsel. If I get bored I’ll save myself. Anyway I still owe you a...” she touched her chest, remembering again that she’d given her locket away for the sake of one last battle of the war.

There was some commotion coming from the far end of the room. Bellatrix began laughing. She gestured with her wand and a small, wailing ball of sickly light rose from the pensieve and streaked like a comet into the dark, seeking a target. She repeated the process several more times. She called, “Severus, stop taunting it. It’s time!”

“As you say,” he called, then only slightly more quietly, “Goodnight...” and then with no voice at all, “my favorite,” as he rested his bloody hand on the canvas that was suddenly her canvas.

“Somnulum Semper.”

And just as the shouts began to clamour and brooms began to whiz by, Hermione fell into a deep magical sleep.
Promises to Keep

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Falling asleep while dissociated from her body was nothing she had ever done, or would ever recommend. It was unlike sleep in every way, except for her crystalline awareness that she was dreaming, and the propensity of all actions to become surreal and self-narrating. Her vision did not even go black, just sooty grey, all time beyond her own frame slowing to a glacier’s inexorable creep.

Bellatrix’s triumphant trap became an illumined tableau of a frozen moment, static as a painting: The mad witch off-center, arms raised, lit with the fountaining penseive in tones of mist and ash. Severus, back turned, rushing to her aid, his dark hair and robe rendering him almost invisible in the close shadows. In the foreground was Angelina on her broomstick, her face turned away as well, wand raised to deflect a bludger-sized comet that seemed to be streaking towards her. Across the room, far back, Molly Weasley clung to Oliver Wood on another broom, her wand pointed behind her so her patronus, a great shaggy highland cow with impressive horns, could charge towards another comet of light that was speeding towards yet another figure on foot. Ginny was striding to Bellatrix with a wand in one hand and a broom in the other, a thin braided cord looped around her neck. Bellatrix expression was sadistic, jubilant, crackling with cruelty.

Ginny’s grey-limned expression, even at Hermione’s considerable distance, was hard, calm, and far more dangerous. Despite Harry walking just behind her, significantly taller, she seemed to loom like a grave and forbidding angel. As Hermione stared at her best friend, frozen in a moment of danger and courage, she felt her worst fears thunder in the pit of her stomach and then grow calm, mimicking the resolve modeled by the woman she’d more-than-loved, and felt loved-back by, practically her whole life, since before such things were even a definable curiosity.

She couldn’t just wait for Beasley to wake her. She couldn’t stay stranded. Considering the glacial pace with which the broom riders and flying spells seemed to ooze through the air, she might go mad with anxiety and boredom before twenty minutes of their time had passed...if it was to be only twenty minutes. Beasley’s patronus might not have even gotten back. It was hard to imagine that Ginny would have gone through with the attack if she’d gotten the warning that it was a trap, and harder to imagine that she might be summoned from the heavy frame..

She looked around the box that held her. Every side was a sealed wall, impenetrable except for...

She pressed a hand to her heart, still feeling the silver thread embedded there. Dreams, memories, hopes could cross the barrier between the canvas and the living world. So why not her? That’s all that she was. Her body was far away. She closed her eyes and explored the nonsensical notion of dispersing herself into a fine enough mist to slip through the walls. Hesitantly she found those places inside her that kept her gripped together tight into a self, and tried to relax them. She felt a few threads slip their bundles, but they did not weave about her as before. They simply flowed downwards, like roots seeking soil, threatening to bind her more tightly in place, unable to fly in the stagnant air, though they retracted easily enough on a panicky reflex.

That wouldn’t do. She needed to fly. She needed direction. She needed the ability to follow the silver thread to Severus, to travel along it like lightning on a wire, but she felt her faith in nonsense wavering badly and could not bring herself to trust it when so much was so immediately at stake. But she was stuck, and there was no way-guardian to negotiate with. She wanted to call for help, but
what help could have heard her there? She’d called for Happy, but Happy might not hear her through her grief. Hermione felt her resolve sinking into the floor. She’d lost or given away everything that might link her to the world and still have meaning in that twilight place.

There was a croaking cry, an impossible susurrus of wings, and the scratch of pushpin claws about the roof of her cage. She couldn’t see much through the thick fabric, but she could just make out the inverse shadow of a brightly glowing bird.

The patronus crow had returned.

Hermione couldn’t help herself, blurting, “Where in the fuck have you been? Where did you go? It’s been days!”

The bird hopped and quorked, pecking the canvas smartly a couple times.

“You came here. Fine. Of course. Makes perfect-enough sense. Beggars can’t be choosers. How can I get to Severus? He’s out there, fighting to save the school. This line should lead to him,” she tried to describe the place she felt the thread leading out from her heart with a gesture, apprehensive when her fingertips couldn’t find the wire outside her body, only barely feeling the idea of it as they passed through it, “How do I follow it? I’m too...too bulky...”

The bird cocked its head aside unhelpfully.

Hermione sighed, “You’re worse than Hogwart...Hogarth...whatever. At least he’d have told me to do something dangerous and fundamentally…” she caught her breath, “…transfigurative.”

Her mind turned. The specter of her lover’s sorrows had forced him into the canvas that held her, perhaps a specter of his joys could force her out. She would need to pull it in past the barrier legillimetically...then get it to drag her along...hopefully in one piece, or in a clean enough tear that she could heal later, like repairing a book. But mightn’t she tear herself in half? Her rational brain couldn’t believe, after everything, that she was even considering it. She let her ideas ramble further and faster than sense could easily follow them, and she got a vision formed of how it might work, so she could fly to him as surely as her thoughts did....

Even if it wasn't perfect, it would get her out of the cage and she'd be able to find a way. She asked herself what was the worst that could possibly happen, and acted quickly before she could begin generating discouraging answers, her nonsense mind heedlessly clear.

“Can you see the line between me and him? Can you fly out along it and through me, drag me into that thread, take me to him? At least this much of me? Preferably in one piece?”

The bird made a skeptical sound and took off into the air. It flew so far out she was afraid it was actually abandoning her to her reckless speculations, but then it dropped, leveled out and flew straight at her, toward the back of the cage, and the thrumming buzz of the line in her chest made her certain that the bird was skimming along its length, javelining towards her. She levelled her wand along the line she could only feel, sighting.

She needed words. She hadn’t given herself time to think it through. If one demanded a protector to impel a patronus out, how would you pull one in and demand that it...

“Expecto mutare!” She reached and pulled the bird faster, drawing it with all the ferocity and conviction it took to project a patronus, accepting the pain of the future with the same relish that she might recall the joys of the past to ward off deforming fears, embracing that she might be torn to bits and wanting consequences more than safety, more than protection.
Beyond that thought, it happened too fast to remember. The bird became a line so infinitely fast and thin it could pass through walls, defy reservations, a force so unstoppable that when it passed through her it still caught and dragged her along despite its near-zero surface area. But instead of ripping her apart it spun her together, her head turning far faster than her feet and wringing her into a tight spiral that lengthened and tightened infinitely in a matter of seconds. It yanked her from the floor, and for less than a breath, she was flying. She heard swiftly flipping pages as she uncoiled, dropping, and then suddenly she could breathe again.

She crashed to the floor hard, unfurling in a heap, numb and tingling at once, the world around her still gossamer and stagnant grey. Carefully she rolled over, taking stock of her shape and finding, happily, that no bits were missing. Still disoriented, she looked up to where she’d fallen from. The canvas hung on the wall. It looked the same as the first time she’d seen it: Severus Snape, frozen on the edge of action, bracing against the amber velvet chair. It made no sense to her.

Then she realized that the wall was the wrong wall. She stared around herself, disbelieving. She was back in her bedroom. No...his bedroom. Except the bed was missing.

She struggled to sit up, head swimming, still unwinding.

He was sitting, asleep, on the floor a few feet from her, leaning against the leg of the writing desk, his slumping form as static in the muted grey of her dream-state as his image was on the canvas above them, unbreathing. He was no longer a young man, and there was no artifice in the rendering of his form to flatter him. Self-neglect, overwork, and despair had taken a hard toll. One knee bent up, the other leg straight out. Crumpled papers and desk sundries lay scattered about him, the skewed chair testifying he hadn’t gotten down out of it carefully. His head was turned aside towards the armoire, slumped in a bow to utter exhaustion. She recognized it, from back when her will to live would abandon her violently, sabotaging her strength as she got up to try to do just one more thing too many in defiance of despair. She remembered the feeling, after collapsing, of finally having no hope of rising, felled and finished. An empty whiskey bottle wouldn’t have seemed out of place, though there wasn’t one. Just a small glowing vial in one slackened hand, its contents resonating with its continuation around her heart, a small drawer above his head still slightly open. His extended leg ended in an odd, misty stump, laid across the wards that hid his bed from her discorporated form as well.

Hermione groaned, shaking her head, “Oh Severus, what did you do? Oh love…” she hovered right at the point of touching him, suddenly fearful of waking him, realizing that if the painting were there, then he was the other half. The one who was destined to die. Soon. As much as she longed to comfort him, to say or do whatever it was he had so longed for that he’d broken the seal of their secret, she seriously doubted whether she could even face him, whether she could bear to start again as strangers. Her hand stalled at the edge of stroking his hair, chastising him in a fond whisper, “You were supposed to leave that alone, remember?”

A deep voice behind her pierced her voyeurism, “I’m sorry, I did try. More than you know.”

Chapter End Notes

Bet you thought all that infodump was leading up to all-action-sequences from then on and no more meandering conversations about feelings and angst and death and maybe-just-maybe some more smut...
Just between us, I really really hate trying to write action scenes and, trust me, you'd have hated reading them. So, yep, more time travel. Saved by the spell.
Red Cognition

Hermione pivoted on her knees as a far less disheveled version of the sleeping man stepped out from behind the armoire near the door. She shook her head at herself, wondering at how little she was learning despite the all-consuming intensity of the lessons lately. Of course his dream-self was already there with her...he was sleeping. She gave his corporeal form one last sympathetic glance and stood to face him. She ceded him the lead, taking a deep breath for yet another conversation she was dreading, “In what way is it more than I know?”

He took a skeptical step, head tilted, “There are things in my memory, as I suspect you're aware, that I keep from my own conscious mind. A simple part of a much larger regimen, really. Even things pruned away willingly tend to come creeping back, but dreams and ideas are far more amenable to being forgotten than memories are,” his gaze flicked over her warily, his tone respectful and guarded and smoothly hypnotic as a stalking cobra, “Do stop me if I’m being condescending. I recall now that you taught me quite a bit of this in the first place.”

Hermione shook her head, gesturing for him to continue, “I can know things and still not know their effect on you. Please.”

He nodded, “These forgotten dreams hide deeper. They tend to squirm less, usually, and as they could not be sealed by my own promise without my consent, I have always taken what little effort I must to ignore them. Just a small drop in my well of unthinkable monsters. But tonight I...” he cleared his throat matter-of-factly, lips pursed. He gestured at the the self-evident scene with terse understatement, “there has been a bit of a lapse.”

Hermione nodded in sympathy, leaning against the armoire, trying to figure out what she should say and slowly sobering to the realization that there was likely nothing she needed to keep from him anymore for anyone’s sake but her own. The portrait was made. Dumbledore was dead. She and Harry and Ron were on the run and beyond contact. Voldemort was perfectly primed to believe that killing Snape would be a useful expedient in becoming invincible. Nothing she could say would change what was going to happen in her past or his future. The only thing she could touch was their shared present, and she owed him a few moments of that at least, considering he’d wanted them enough to bring her to him...and considering she’d willfully set his course to that very moment, mere hours ago by her reckoning and decades by his. A thrill of shame, cold and terrible, gripped her heart from below. She pushed it away before it could peer out from behind her eyes. She longed to claim she was in too much of a hurry, that she had to get back, but she knew time wasn't passing for her while she dreamed, not with him and not twenty years away where her body was.

She swallowed, looking him in the face, pushing her hair back as best she could where it had gotten free of her hasty plait, “You haven’t done any harm. I can’t blame you for wanting answers. I owe you that and more for you patience. And your courage.”

He twitched a suspicious squint at the praise but nodded, composed and understated as ever, “I mostly just wanted to...to see you. To find you again. To know whether you were ever real.”

His stifled sweetness stung her and she stood up straight, braced for whatever might come, “Do you recognize me? You don’t need to. You’re dreaming, so you won’t see unless you...unless you wish it.”

He looked at her properly, his dignified mask rippling pensively. After a long beat he took a small step back, his hand stalled halfway to his parted lips. His expression expanded in recognition and then contracted into something less focused, “Miss Granger...” his hovering hand made a small
motion towards her face, fingertips reaching, but stalled again, “You’re…”

She smiled, affecting banter, “Old, I know. I’m from a long time from now…” her companionable tone faltered as she realized there were tears heaping on the sills of his lower lids.

“You survived- you survive this war. You get to-” his hovering hand raised another fraction of an inch.

She nodded, still smiling, taking a small step towards him to see if he were afraid, to show him that she was not, “I get to grow old.”

“-to grow up, I meant. You live.”


"And you're here," His vague expression clouded, brows rumpling, and she recognized that, too: That least-productive kind of anger: dawning outrage, mixed with embarrassment, his agile mind working to access and decode a long string of memories via a new key. He glanced past her foot at the vial in his own sleeping hand, and she could guess the arc of his realizations and recriminations. Harmony. Hermione. Recognition.

She nodded, spreading her hands apart defenselessly, “Yes. To everything you’re probably thinking right now. It’s all my fault and I…” she bit down on a meaningless apology, shrugging, “Yes.”

He turned away, bowing his forehead into the fingertips that finally found a face, rubbing stiffly, “Don’t, please. Not that, not you, not now.”

“I didn’t mean to...what did I do?”

He shook his head, not turning towards her, “Yes,” he said bitterly, then recognizing her confusion and splaying his hands in unison, “the word ‘yes’. Remembering you isn’t my only lapse tonight. When my promise to avoid remembering you broke, several things scattered out of their places quite forcefully. Bad memories refusing to be managed, and I-” he sighed again, conceding helplessness but still with that irritated, formal edge, that posture of a migraine, “It's stressful. I apologize.”

She took another yearning step towards him, “Please don’t. Don’t apologize to me.”

Something sparked behind his eyes as he rounded on her abruptly, his upper lip twitching in a poorly-mastered snarl, not especially seeming to have heard her, “Was it him? Like every other misery in this life, were you his idea?”

She mostly resisted the instinct to recoil, “Who, Vold-?”

His eyes flared wide and he leapt the space between them, pain forgotten, and seized her around the waist, clapping his other hand to her mouth, “Shhh silence, are you mad? I don’t know what blithe time you’re from but in the here and now that name is under a very powerful magical taboo and I doubt if even our dreams are safe.”

Despite how he’d surprised her it felt natural to relax into his touch. The commanding press of his mortal flesh reassured the stupid part of her brain, the one that would not accept being strangers again, that he was indeed her lover. He certainly seemed to meld and linger against her more intimately than fear would explain. She nodded under his hand and touched his wrist gently, encircling it lightly to see if he’d permit her. He withdrew just as suddenly, smoothing his robes and expression hastily.
She shook her head, pride wounded, “Forgive me, I’d forgotten. It’s...it’s been a long time, and I’m still a bit disoriented, unaccustomed as I am to being summoned.”

He looked down and huffed a bitter laugh, nodding, “In any case, I was referring to Dumbledore. That night, were you acting out some stratagem of his? Are you now? More of his perverse pragmatism dressed as mercy?”

Hermione blinked, an absurd smile tugging back the borders of her face. Her rational mind insisted no, not at all, he’s long dead, that would be impossible but her sense of nonsense needled though it certainly does sound like something he would do, doesn’t it? She shook her head, “I understand why you would think so...to the point that it seems odd that he didn’t...but to the best of my knowledge, no. No one sent me. What I did...what I’ve done to you was,” she shut her eyes, head bowed, “a perversity all my own. As I told you at the time, I’ve been trying to rescue you, to bring you home, but I keep losing my way.”

He turned and paced the room, then stopped. His hands clenched like claws, digging into his hair, shaking his head and muttering forcefully, “Gods of Grendel...all this time, all this bloody time…”

She wanted to touch him but took only a step, “I’m sorry that I manipulated you. And I’m sorry that I left you alone.”

He turned, “Left me alone?” his harsh laugh sounded like a whipcrack meant to chasten an advancing lion, and he shook his head, “If only. Since the first time you spoke to me...”

He rounded into agitated pacing again, his cadence like a ticking bomb. To give him space she sat on the narrow edge of the writing desk, looking at his physical form where he splayed like a broken doll, then at his restless dream, not entirely certain whether it was his despair or his anger she was addressing, but drawing tepidly on her diplomatic experience all the same, “The first time we spoke...you were barely an adult. I intruded on your deeply personal suffering. Those things you heard me say, they were things you believed but denied believing, not some deeper truth. I convinced myself that there was no other way to help, purely out of vanity, thinking of what I needed from you, not what you needed. It’s monstrous, making a young person into an old woman’s mirror. Even with your fevered consent, even feeling that you’d called me, even with the best intentions, I had no right to...to bully you into the life you’ve lead since.” she sighed, “I don’t mind that you brought me here, truly, but I hate that I brought you here.”

As she spoke he’d turned towards her, hands lowering to his sides, his face contorting into a mixture of incredulity and shock, “No not...I don’t mean...” he was trembling with manic irritation as if she were a dull student, “Here. As your teacher. From the first moment you spoke to me...my dislike of you...”

She grimaced, “Oh, that. I really...I’m willing to let that be over and done if you are.”

He grunted, barbed words softened by seeming to turn aside from her, “You don’t understand. Neither did I until now.”

The rumbling intensity of his cryptic assertion filled her with a dread she hoped to avoid with civility, “Sev...Professor Snape, it’s perhaps fair to hold yourself accountable for your behavior no matter what you’ve suffered, but...I’ve felt your suffering. I’ve carried a piece of it with me since then. Even without knowing you, I know a hint of what it’s been like, and I know that even survivable pain changes what it touches. I can’t blame you for your bitterness.”

He shook his head, ”Oh Miss Granger...my antipathy for you...” he ground his teeth, crossing to the armoire to face her but drawing up short, looking disdainfully down at himself on the floor, “...more
than Potter, or Black, or reason. So much that I hardly questioned it, though it never stopped calling itself to my attention,” he glanced at the painting, his diction crisp as his words came faster, “I thought that it was something about you, at first; your glaring relentlessness making my responding detestation so relentless,” he snorted, his voice becoming stentorian and snide, staring into his own hands, “In my more charitable moments, I fancied I hated you so especially because you reminded me too much of myself, of every flaw that’s ever caused me suffering and shame all reflected and rejuvenated; your smug loyalty, naked ambition, reckless intelligence, muggle heritage; and yet you somehow always turned it into acclaim. I’ve quite the natural facility for finding reasons for hating anyone and everyone, but every time I’ve looked at you, nothing like reason could ever explain or contain it. I look at you and…”

He halted, finally looking at her again, his voice harsh and his eyes pleading, “The first time I saw Harry Potter, Lily’s eyes in James’ face, I knew I could never look at him without outrage, but at least it was something I could understand, something I could eventually predict and even pardon. But you, your eyes, your face,” he shot a hand at her so rapidly she flinched, “…eyes that I didn’t know...memories vanishing behind them like far ships below the horizon, connected to feelings that rise like a tide regardless,” he dropped his hand helplessly, slumping against the door of the standing closet, “But now it makes a miserable kind of sense. That forgotten dream stirring fitfully under memories that I have had a powerful need to forget, when I have most needed—” his momentum stalled and his gaze roved over her face, tightening into a scowl, “Your presence has ever been unendurable to me, even as I...” he waved the other hand in violent dismissal, pushed off from the armoire and continued pacing, growling in undifferentiated disgust, “But rest assured, you have never once ‘left me alone’.”

Hermione folded her hands in her lap and studied them, struggling to fathom (but not too deeply) what it must be to look at an unknown child and feel a seething from one’s subconscious, tinged with mocking streaks of comfort, promise, nakedness, indictment, humiliation, longing, sympathy, jagged-edged fragments of feeling loved back, inexplicably heaving up from far below with the relentlessness of grief and fear. And meanwhile his very life depending on impeccable self-command and autonomy. His world required protecting from an evil that could bend minds to exactly that sort of suffering. How far might she or anyone go to protect themselves from such madness, or to protect a child from their own provoked wrath?

“You must have thought I was some kind of death-eater stratagem.”

He shook his head ruefully, his loathing seeming to turn inwards briefly, “Only until your second year. Though you instantly attached yourself to Potter and worked so ingeniously to funnel him into the late Professor Quirrel’s clutches, though you threw yourself into my path whenever I tried to take Potter’s measure, and though you’d seemed to assist Quirrel that day at the Quiddich match, there was no magic in it that I could find. The next year, you were literally petrified for weeks, flawlessly incapable, but your effect on me persisted. While fulfilling my duty to try and revive you I made sure to include every method of nullification and curse-breaking in the book, and a few I had to invent. I was certain then that it couldn’t have been any of your doing, and that if I could not ignore you, I would simply have to endure you.”

She opened her mouth a few times but no words would come. How bad were the countermeasures he’d considered if his snide abuses were his mildest means of “enduring” her? Raw contradictory reactions ground her between their gears; righteous outrage, burning shame, and reluctant understanding.

She heard his pacing stop. He was facing the wall, head bowed, one clenched fist braced against the small of his back, his other hand on his chest, smoothing his clothes, gathering his composure.
She cleared her throat. Talking gently felt awkward across the empty room but moving towards him seemed unwise, “I...I don’t think there’s a...a fitting form of absolution for...how you treated me or...or all that I’ve done to deserve it. But I...” she cut herself off and shook her head. The maelstrom of circumstances and consequences surrounding them was so much larger than herself that the apology on her lips felt too like the apologist-mundi offerings that she’d resolved to give up in Minerva’s memory, “I think we can agree that we had good intentions...your cruelty, in an imperfect way it...protected me.”

He snorted again coarsely, his diction smoother and more agile than before, putting one palm to the wall as if idly admiring the stonework, “I was protecting myself. I longed for you...not the child, you...my dream...longed like an orphan, a penitent, a self-loathing narcissist. And sometimes when you...the child you...when you would burn as brightly as you do...when you would crash in on me like the tide...sometimes I have felt a fierce and formless sort of...jealousy. But, no, not for your protection.”

“And yet-”

He waved an unhearing dismissal, “Children repulsed me even when I was one. For all my unwilling obsession I never...lusted after you. Or Potter for that matter. I see several dozen skinny awkward obnoxious young men and women every day, you hold no special fascination for me. Even if you ever did grow to-” his ears burned red and he pressed at the wall like a man being scourged against it, as if the words were confession and penance together, even in the exponentially magnified safety of a dream, “my self-command is nigh-pathologically excellent, fuelled as it is by selfishness, self-preservation, and misanthropy. Against those, you’ve always been safe from any...cruder predation.”

The corners of her mouth twitched up fondly, sadly, inappropriately, recalling sweet scenes of his adamant self-control, how gratefully and gracefully he'd surrendered it, and the elegance of their mutual predations. She sincerely doubted that his self control ever came from a place of selfishness. A small skeptical noise slipped through her throat.

His head bowed a fraction as if she’d struck him, “I swear it. Whatever the impulse, you would have been safe from it. I can always stop myself.”

She shook her head, feeling too much to say and no room to say it, “If that's true then what scared you so much?”

He turned his head to the side, not quite glancing over his shoulder at her, his voice heavy, “I could never stop you.”
Past and Repast

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains explicit sexual content at the end. At the triple line break marked with "....." please skip to the next chapter if that's not something you enjoy. There is no vital plot information involved.

She longed so much to touch him that her hands hurt, edging towards understandings that kept slipping away, trying until she couldn’t agonize over it any more. A few experimental steps towards him gave her time to cram her own feelings back into their assigned places, still hoping to salvage some meaningful reconciliation without complicating things for him further.

She shrugged, “So you tried to repel me. Or crush me. To stop me from...disturbing you. I know it doesn’t matter to you, but I understand. You don’t need to tell me. I was there, both as the obstreperous child and the incautious old woman. What we did to each other wasn’t so different, mine was just faster, more sudden. I couldn’t move you from where you’d fallen, so I tore you apart and infected you and...I failed to trust you with your own future, even knowing how...how brilliant you are. How trustworthy,” as she neared him her fingertips burned.

His hands closed into fists against the wall and he leaned on them heavily, “No. You didn’t cause me. If you knew half of what I’d already…” he swallowed, starting over, “Even then, you saw it. You knew. You had to. I remember how I behaved. You couldn’t have fixed it, or made it any worse. I was already a-” he huffed an angry sigh and became combative again, though ponderously, like an exhausted bull, “Your need to take credit for the miserable monster I am seems more like arrogance the longer you persist. You never lead me down that path. You’ve just stood astride it such that I've...failed, utterly, to avoid you.”

She backed away, turning and stopping, torn. She cleared her throat a little too harshly, “And you suffered for it, and you made me suffer for it in some...in an obliquely causal loop that, frankly, is too much for me right now. I don’t pretend it’s all philosophical, or that guilt can be retroactive, or that it doesn’t matter now, or won’t matter later. Of course the past matters. It always will. But it’s not the only thing that matters.”

She heard his hand whisper down the stone again, “My dream of you is a comparatively small thing.”

His words bore a deflating kind of absolution, but she did not believe him, “So if all I did was send you into teaching with a prickling emotional allergy to me personally, I still think you’ve had adequate reason to hate me. Maybe it is all just a trap that I set for myself,” she shrugged and scoffed wearily, “But isn’t that a bad enough use of you? Morally, of course, I’m overjoyed to have been so irrelevant but ethically...” she felt herself radiating insincerity and petulance and turned aside from it, taking a deep breath to try and get her feelings back into their appropriate boxes, “I think you’re lying.”

There was a long silence and she stood, unmoving, attenuated between his exhausted body and his exhausting point of view, realizing as she tried to keep still that some suppressed thought was still bucking underneath her carefully sorted feelings, agitating them and spilling them out.
Finally she heard him turn from the wall, “Hermione, it wasn’t irrelevant. Just...small. And I’ve…” he sighed like his chest was full of fire, “I have so-much-more-than-hated you that the word doesn’t even apply. More than any poet ever loved, I’ve hated you. Not because of the pain but because of the light you cast on it. Because you required me to see my choice. That night and every night since,” he leaned back against the stone and stared away into the nothing where the bed should have been, speaking with a dreamlike calm and candor so complete it sounded like someone else’s story.

“When I was young and I met you, you uncovered a burning, terrible, miserable little light that made it impossible to be blind to the world around me, made it impossible to think that there was no meaningful difference between my past and my future, or my hands and the blood on my hands. You dragged that light into the lowest place I’d ever been, so I could never escape it through despair. That’s all you did, that night. You didn’t make me a miserable monster. You just took away my self-serving certitude that the whole world is miserable and monstrous, the delusion that I bore no responsibility to choose since I had no choice. I was already resolved and bound to serve Dumbledore, to try to atone. You forced me to choose to atone, despite knowing I would never be enough,” his voice lowered to a mutter, “That I’ve longed for you since has been my own folly, another bit of my nature that you never originated nor requested.”

Hermione muttered in kind, not meaning to be heard, “Just what your heart does, I’m sure. Like sneezing.”

He shook his head, hurrying on, crossing his arms over his chest, “And then...when you were young and you met me, you didn’t remind me of her, though you had enough in common to make the comparison a passable red herring. Her fierce and intractable innocence. The way she was always...” he sighed sadly, “she was always right, when I was merely certain...her psychotic willingness to stand across the path of the strong as they menace the weak, demanding her right to single combat...her ability to...to love people relentlessly in spite of their glaring flaws and the advice of their enemies. But then everything else about you...your obnoxiousness, your impolitic anger, your utter lack of charm, your bitter stubbornness and bookish zeal and outrageous talent...you reminded me every day, every year, not of the person I lost but of the person I lost the chance to be when I turned my back on the courage she gave me, when I gave up on wanting to be myself as she saw me.

A deep sigh billowed up, “I look in your eyes and I see my own eyes in a mirror long lost to me...that’s why I...I don’t expect I’d have felt or behaved too differently towards you if you’d never invaded my dreams...I’d still have hated and loved you, and spent seven years trying to crush you for it. That’s just...apparently that’s just what my love is, its entire catalog and capacity, if all available evidence is anything to go by.

“And through it all I’ve dreamed of meeting that woman again, both when I thought she was Lily and in those brief times between sleep and waking when I knew she wasn’t. I dreamed smugly of who I would be when I met her, clean of all my failings and stronger than my past, what I would say to assure that she would have no choice but to love me as I longed for, what I would do to make her forget that mewling, miserable, broken thing that pawed her like some kind of...of...and now here you are...and all this bloody time...she’s always been you. And she’s known all along what a bottomless bastard I am,” he made a sour face that resolved into a rapture of exhaustion and snide understatement, “So there’s that gone.”

She braced her forearms across her stomach. She wasn’t even answering him anymore, just saying all that she could without freeing whatever was trying to press itself out, “Alright. But we’ve both survived all that,” her voice choked shut as her guts muttered so far, “We could have, and should have, made better choices. There may be things that...that rightly defy forgiveness but I’m...I release you from it, now that I understand better. I’m willing to let this be the end of that path, for both of us. To finally get out of your way, if that’s what you want. Would you accept that?”
More from apparent exhaustion than agreement, he nodded, “If you’ll answer one question honestly.”

She waited.

“Would you have done what you did to me differently if it had been, say, Dumbledore that you’d found in that state? Someone you knew as destined to be wise and kind and nurturing? Would you still have done as you did? If you thought he was dying, if he begged you to do it…”

“Would I have tortured him to the point of madness, like Harry did in that cave? Or facilitated his longed-for death, as you did in the tower? Is that what you mean?”

There was a long silence. His posture seemed casual, hands clasped behind his back, spine straight except for a slight interrogative tilt to his head, but he was unnaturally still, even his breathing contained to a meagre oscillation that told her he’d had to take control of everything if he’d any intention of holding control of anything. She took a deep breath and considered his question, unwilling to walk either towards or away from him and so pacing towards the side wall, not looking at any part of him, feeling outnumbered.

She nodded, “I would have, no question. Not for his sake but...for the war,” she shrugged hopelessly, “I mean, why else have any of us done any of the monstrous godawful things we have in our lives? The war was...” she glanced at his sleeping form, wrecked on the floor, “The war is a monster. And...” And a hungry one. And I’ve served you up for it. Instead of warning you. Instead of saving you. Instead of moving you out of its path. She stomped it down. What purpose would it serve? What apology would be adequate? She shook her head, piling duty atop her perverse impulse towards pointless honesty.

He took a deep, relieved breath and nodded, closing the distance between them in the halting way of an introvert trying to be collegial, “Then I will accept this emotional armistice, on the understanding that we were not the recursive causes of what we each were made to suffer by the other. My malignant nature is not the result of you turning my heart inside-out like some cheap parlor prestidigitator, and your willingness to rip my heart out was never revenge for my grotesque personality.”

She ducked her head to keep from rewarding him with a smile, “You could have said that a nicer way.”

“No I couldn’t, idiot, as I’ve been at some pains to explain. Honestly it’s like you’ve never met me,” He stepped in closer to her, extending a hand.

She nodded, taking it to shake, “It is rather like that, I agree. Though you did brag about always being able to stop your worst impulses.”

He pressed her hand to his lips and she felt her heart flutter, “Just because I can stop the bad ones doesn’t mean I can set better ones in motion.”

She made an abrupt caricature of a curtsey, "I accept your evidence and concede that we are not, in fact, trapped in an endless cycle of our own making, and are, rather, bound together completely inexplicably by something neither of us can control. That doesn’t exactly make me feel any better about any of it, but I accept it.”

He held her hand against his heart, “Then into the past with it, where it belongs.”

The hand by her side clenched, whitening, and then eased, defeated. The past would never be just
the past. She’d denied him the choice of knowing his supposed fate once, thinking it was kind when it had only served her own myopic ends, thinking wrongly that she could save the memory by dooming the man. She took the other hand back from him, her expression pained but softening, the natural candor of shared dreaming settling hard on her shoulders, demanding to be heard, “Not all of it. Not until you know what happens next.”

His look was piercing but his affectation was droll, “You’ve told me that part. You fall in love with me. I don’t recommend it, obviously, but it seems rude to disrupt established history.”

She smiled and blushed but nodded, “Y-...I mean...I did. I do, I am.”

His expression was pleased but peevious, defensive, “Then I don’t care what else comes next,” he tentatively pushed back an unruly curl from her face, glancing briefly at his disgraceful situation by the desk, “though I must be a horrible hideous old man, where you’re from.”

Hermione tried to smile, but her eyes gave away the lie, and she looked down as he watched her too keenly, ever the extraordinary spy. She shook her head, “You...you don’t become an old man.”

His voice was even and gentle but edged, like an expertly wielded scalpel, so sharp she barely felt how deeply it cut, “But surely I’m nearly one already, if you think of yourself as old.”

She winced and tears hurled themselves down her cheeks. He really did take in everything.

His tone was still calm but more distant, “Oh I see. But then when would we…”

She looked up when he trailed off and saw he was staring at the painting. When he met her eyes again she looked away for want of words, furious with herself at having offered him a longed-for and long-promised future, only to reveal that he would never see it. But she nodded.

“Oh. I see,” He repeated, his expression closing with a nod, ruthlessly polite, “It’s never been me you were crossing the bounds of sanity to save...I’m merely a...an artifact. The remainder of an odd division.”

Something broke. Hermione’s mouth dropped open, desperate, horrified. She longed to make him hear her, but her own huge brain was foundering as it fountained out refutations of his underlying assertion, this heresy that she did not love him, that she had not come to save him. The vessel of her objections went far deeper than she expected, pouring forth the unbearable recognition that he was exactly the same man she was so desperate to save, but who she couldn’t, who she hadn’t, who she had already watched die helplessly half a lifetime before. Mere hours ago she’d assured it again with the mad rationalization that he were already lost and could be done without, as if watching him die were a thing that had happened and ended, as if it were not a thing that was always happening, echoing down her life and looming over her sense of the real, the possible, the reasonable. She felt keenly all the faults that war had etched, slowly, in both of them: the helplessness and compromise; the staring ghosts and the deep, savage, silent fears; the vicious keeping-calm; the painful carrying-on; the awful letting-go; the harmonic recognition.

Suddenly free to rage, her feelings for him leapt all her barricades in violent revolt against articulation, and all she could say was, “It’s always been you!” She seized his wrists and squeezed, desperately, angrily, “Always!” her flood of disjointed realizations fastening to him through her grip, determined to keep him alive through right of ownership if nothing else.

Stunned out of his own vicious calm by her fevered grip, he jerked against her savagely, trying to free himself from what bound him even as his sheltering rime of resolute inscrutability crumbled. He locked eyes with her and began chanting a curse to weaken her hold, to shake her loose, to reject her
nonsensical devotion. Reflexively she matched him in opposite, chanting each counter-curserhythmically to cancel and deflect, their syllables twining and rhyming in crisply annunciatedsyncopation. With each completed reply she bore down her grip on his wrists again and shook themsharply, showing him she would not be made weak for him, would not relent when the question wasone of whether his life mattered.

His last curse spent his voice trailed off. His eyes rolled back and closed, his senses overwhelmed and rationalized motives cast off, replaced by nothing, surrendering to the physical cue of being taken in hand after far too long standing terribly alone, the relief of feeling himself stopped by someone other than himself. He reached for her face with his fingers as she reached for his mouth with hers, and their bodies met in a kiss as sweet and bitter as any pleasure stolen, revenge against an awful world and its million-million insipid apologists. They wove a struggling waltz towards the place where she knew the bed ought to be, pivoting and pulling like eagles mating mid-flight in a terrible storm. They gasped and tore at one another’s catches and strings and hooks and seams, heedless and starving, ripping one another open down to the skin and only barely stopping there, unraveling their bindings and unspooling their reserve.

He pressed her to him, walking her back through the wards, his wards, which crackled and flickered with blue fire but did not harm her. The backs of her legs touched the mattress and she seized his hair, pulling him down to his knees as his hands roamed prayerfully over the rounds of her hips. He gazed up at her, and his hands skimmed down her legs, then slid between her knees, prying her apart and travelling up again like a wedge through a split tree limb. He levered his forearms through and gripped her backside, tipping her abed as he pulled his mouth to the seam of her thighs.

He leaned into her, back bent, pressing her legs back and mantling like a falcon to feed, fettered to the task by the gentle fingers hooked into his hair. He pleased her greedily, clutching her waist and pressing her to his mouth with all his avid strength, rooting and furrowing. His deep groans rumbled from the pit of his stomach to the pit of hers and came echoing up through her throat, her spine flexing and rolling to match his surging tongue. When her breathing grew tight and finally broke with a scream his ministrations slowed but did not stop, decanting her for every last thrash and whimper, rising and plunging with her on the waves of that blindingly bright sea, ardently slaking a very raw longstanding thirst.

He sank, panting, almost penitent. She sat up, caressed his cheek, took his hair and guided him towards her again, bending to kiss him, his lips swollen and fragrant with service. Gripping him behind one ear she whispered, “Onto the bed, onto your back,” and he obeyed without needing to be dragged.

She kissed the place at the bottom of his chest where his ribs swept apart above his belly. She kissed down him with flashes of tickling tongue and pinching teeth until his long frame writhed and swam against the covers. When she reached the soft tapering of his torso she nuzzled into him with her nose, her cheek, her eyelashes, placing kisses about the rooted base where his soft belly transitioned to hard flesh. She maddened herself with the scent of him, pungent and familiar and longed-for, tonguing the shaft that hitched up insistently against her cheek and lips.

He arched and sucked breath as she took him in. His trembling fingers stroked the bony line from behind her ear to her chin, confirming, trembling, finally crooking a finger under her jaw to stop her, make her look up into his eyes, intoning softly “Is this real?”
She shook her head gravely, “Just true,” lowering her mouth to him again, and for a long while both were unspeaking, but neither was silent or still, gloring in a distinct lack of words and a freedom from time.
Yes

Chapter Summary

This chapter contains two instances of explicit sexual content.

To facilitate skipping the first, I've included a "...begin skip..." and an "...end skip..." break. It does not contain plot information vital to the rest of the chapter.

The second involves character development and is marked with a "....." triple break.

Skip to the notes at the end of the chapter for relevant plot info.

Pretty much the whole chapter happens between two consenting adults in bed together, though, and I'm hoping people can just be ok with that part.

Chapter Notes

CW: discussion of past sexual trauma. Threats. Also more smut.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a long while later, when his surge subsided and the salty scour of gritty tears in its wake ebbed, when they had gathered against one another in a silence that prayed never to wake or to part, and they had all but fused together again with limbs and lips and small sighs that he finally spoke.

“Are you alright?”

She shook her head, “No. I’m in love with you, and you’re going to die if I can’t think of how to save you.”

He said nothing and brushed her hair back, and she saw he recognized the feeling.

She whimpered, “and it’s my fault.”

He grimaced, speaking with the kind of patient tenderness she’d once wondered if he was even capable of, “You really need to stop taking credit for everyone else’s poor judgement. It’ll drive you mad,” there was a very small, sly smile pressing up the corner of his mouth, and she touched it, memorizing.

She sighed, “I told myself that you...that you weren’t really you, when I met you in my dreams. That you...that this part of you was a different person, similar but unconnected, that he... that you was unattached to your death, unattached to how I’d...how we’d all let you die. But you’re not, are you? You’re you, you’re already gone. Your dream and memory and image and...and your place inside of me, they’re all you. And you’re going to die, really die, and I...I’m just going to stand there...staring...conjurin a bottle for your memories when I should have been...I don’t know…”

tears ran along the tracks of tears, “It’s so selfish to tell you this but I can’t bear it, and I don’t know how to fix it. I’ve felt that day every day for twenty years and I don’t know. But what about you?
What do you want?"

He looked at her, his mouth stern, his black eyes fathomless, “I’m an excellent liar, Hermione. Any way I could answer you’d be a fool to believe.”

“Then don’t lie. It’s tedious. I’d have the truth from you eventually anyway.”

The spot between his eyebrows twitched, his voice whispering and dry, “I love you. And I’m going to die. Now or soon or someday. Whether you believe it, whether you bear it, it’s so. And always has been.”

She shook her head, “No.”

He sighed, some modicum of his functioning facade drawing up the edges of his expression, “First honest thing I’ve said to you in twenty years and you’d brush it off as simply as that, ‘no.’?”

She smiled, the stark drama of unvarnished honesty predictably unsustainable, “Well you told me not to use the other word, that it was attached to painful memories. So, indeed, I have no choice but to deny you everything. Although it troubles me.”

He squinted at her, not following, “Why?”

“Because I’ve heard you use it, significantly. In your other life, with me, you’ve begged me to say it. It was...” she blushed at the memory, “...intense.”

He frowned, forcing indifference, “I expect it doesn’t matter.”

“That sounds like a lie.”

He blinked, squinted, “I don’t want to tell you. I’m sorry.”

She flashed anger, “Don’t bloody do that.”

“Well I don’t, I can’t. I can’t want you to know when you’re lying here looking at me with eyes that don’t know. Don’t lie here loving me and ask me to explain to you why you shouldn’t. That’s bloody sadistic.”

She couldn’t stifle a look of bemusement, given how fiercely he’d tried to insist on precisely that conversation in another life, “I completely agree, but that’s not what I meant. I just mean...don’t apologise when you don’t mean it, when you don’t think you’re wrong. It’s insipid. The whole world does that and just goes along its merry unbearable not-sorry way. People apologize for things on the world’s behalf and I...it’s insufferable.”

He sighed, “I do think I’m wrong. I just mean to be stubborn about it.”

She simply grumbled.

He shrugged, “I agree with you about world-apologists, though,” he paused and his voice softened, “Who did you lose?”

More unwanted anger stabbed her as she suddenly felt like a widow again, unwilling to accept the question, shaking her head, “Nobody, fuck you,” she turned away petulantly, “No one’s ever existed except you and me. And there’s nothing to apologize for because no one’s ever hurt us and no one ever dies.” She said it meanly but meant it kindly, begging to be spared, to be loved, hoping he shared her sense of recognition in their dreaming candor and didn’t feel truly rejected.
He slid in behind her to draw her against him, and she felt a warm flood of undeserving gratitude as he murmured in her ear, “That’s the spirit.”

His body was plainly ready again, firm as a tree-limb and resting pleasantly along the crevice of her buttocks, but his touch was patient to the point of being sculptural, forever lingering, poised and reflective, evoking more motion than it performed. The sense he communicated of being able to simply caress her indefinitely fanned her arousal to the point that she laughed at herself and shifted wantonly against him, nestling his erection between her legs. He rubbed against her slowly, enjoying without probing, still focusing the majority of his attentions on the slope of her neck and making every hair on it stand, twanging, at attention.

“Severus…” she moaned.

“Mmm?”

“If you’re going to keep doing that I’m going to need to know what it is about...ahh...the English language’s common affirmative response particle that bothers you so much, because I...there are some sentiments I want very much to express when you...oh oh please y-mmmm….” she clamped her mouth shut on the proverbial sensitive spot as his warm, slow touch found a pair of literal ones.

His lips touched her ear and his voice ran down her spine, “Stay very, very still until you can’t anymore.”

She gave a small gasp that she hoped he recognized as assent.

He sighed against her neck, stirring against her with the lazy sawing of a branch in a breeze, whetting them together with slow strokes that insinuated him into the warm rill that proceeded from her wet spring, channeling his length against her without dipping inside. She bit back a surge of assent again as the brim of his smooth bough lipped back and forth over her firm bud. The pliant ridge plucked against her straining shoot, sending shivers through deep roots that ran through her base and her belly and her breasts to her lips. She almost feared to move lest his casual presses miss plucking at her again. A sweet glowing sting of pleasure sang through her and built upon itself with startling ease, and she reached back and ran a hand over his hip, gripping gently, hungry to touch him, enjoying the resonance of his chest against her back as he groaned, gratified.

He slid one hand down her front and to her thigh, pulling her back, easing her open, and she whimpered sincerely as the rhythmic prod and beckon slipped away from its niche. He slid his hand to her parting, two fingers plying apart the lush cloven flesh still trembling in time to the breezy lapping of his hips as she lay back against him. He wet his fingers from her brimming well and let them trip across her swollen bud lazily before scooping his hard length against her again, continuing to press and recede along her slick gully with a firm pressure that kindled a deeper heat, a craving for deeper pressure.

He murmured in her ear, “put your hand there, hold me against you.”

She obeyed, wetting the pad of her thumb with silken dew and swiping it over the smooth tip of his thrust whenever it crested forward through the limits of her channel. He growled in his throat with each thrust and she squeezed, stroking him, pressing hard so he had to press harder to glide along her
sweetly aching slit, rewarding him with gently milking strokes at the end of his motion, encouraging him to leave his whole length pressed against her for longer and longer moments. His breathing shuddered and he murmured in her ears as his hand slid up over her chest to her throat and right below her jaw, turning her head back to an extreme that let him taste her mouth. He kissed with the ardor of a man who would be drowning if not for her breath, nearly biting. He thrust and slowed, and again, slower, and she moaned.

He rumbled in her ear, “Do not speak, do not nod or shake your head. Do you want me inside you?”

She made a hungry sound and he nibbled at her fondly, chiding her, “Don’t tell me. Take it. Take what you want from me.”

Through the thick inarticulate haze of pleasure she understood, and when he moved to thrust against her again she arched her back and pressed his thirsting dowse to her open well. He plunged, clutching her to him, running his hand from her throat to her cleft again, insinuating his hand under hers, letting her fingers show his where she needed them while the pressure of his palm steadied her. He thrust. And thrust.

She felt her own crest building and finally he moaned, “if you want me to stop you have to tell me now…” and she obeyed him by saying nothing as he wrapped her tight and clasped to her neck with his mouth.

Vicious fear slid into her mind, overlays of her first nightmare, the darkness wrapping around her from behind and biting into her, the gnawing suspicion that he wasn’t human, he was a trick or a trap or a punishment for all of her failures. Or worse, that he was real, and she loved him, and he would die, and the pain would drag her down into places she might never return from. And it terrified her…but just a bit. Perhaps just enough.

She cried out and the earth shook…but did not end. The sweet pressure writhing inside her like a demon shuddered and surged and fountained, hot and satiny and overflowing and ordinary, certain to make a terrible mess if it ever withdrew, though that hardly seemed like a thing that might ever happen. They would never part. It would never end. Anything might kill them, but nothing would ever touch them.

Utterly limp, she did not resist when he lifted her arms over her head and rolled her onto her stomach, pressing in one last time before pressure failed him, kissing the backs of her shoulders. He lay beside her, and when her viscosity began to return she clutched at him like a languid octopus, lavishing his chest and neck with kisses before subsiding into stillness.

...end skip...

After a long silence he murmured, “I still don’t want to tell you.”

She opened one eye, “Clearly you do. I didn’t say anything. This is you bringing it up.”

“To head you off. At best you were waiting for a different moment. You never let anything alone.”

“I certainly won’t now. Well done.”

“I don’t want to tell you.”
She leaned over him, kissed him long, and looked him in the eyes, serious but not stern, “I think you won’t be able to help it, because you know it’s what I want.”

He drew away from her, sitting up. She stroked his back, hoping she hadn’t pushed too far.

He drew up one knee, studying it, “How would you feel about me if I just did anything I wanted to you.”

Apparently he could hear her small smile.

“I don’t mean here, where we’re safe. Where anything you experience, even pain and degradation, is inherently consensual and trustworthy. I mean outside the fantasy.”

She sighed, “I understand what you’re getting at, but you’ve still chosen a bad example. I do know the difference between kinky fantasies, even really dark ones, and abuse. In my albeit limited experience there are no two more different things in the world. And as for the world out there, I’m not the least bit naive about how godawful people can be to each other. And even out there, I still trust you.”

He sighed, “You shouldn’t.”

“How not.”

He glanced over his shoulder at her, his tone tantalizingly dark but also disturbingly stern, “Ask me again and I’ll show you.”

Something in her gut moved in a way that was definitely not arousal. Not anticipation. Not a game, “You can’t just tell me?”

“Not if you want to understand rather than just thinking that you do and insisting it doesn’t matter..”

She lay her hands back passively, asking again, “Why not?”

She turned to face her, kneeling, his expression grim, “You won’t thank me. Are you sure?”

She nodded, saying firmly, “Yes.”

.....

His eyelids fluttered and his head rolled back, then he stretched his shoulders and eyed her willing body covetously, and she couldn’t help noticing that his body was ready again immediately. He ran his hands over her thighs and dragged her to him by her lower body, entering her without further preamble and taking several hard, perfunctory, rutting strokes. It didn’t hurt, or even feel bad. It was good. Their bodies were well suited, and she was still wet from all his extravagant attentions. Nothing to write to “Witch Weekly” about, but she was fairly confident if he could keep it up she would have no objections.

He slowed just as mechanically, then stopped, fully buried inside her, “You trust me.”

She nodded.

“Has anyone ever hurt you with sex? Used you, abused you, violated your trust?”
She shook her head, “I know people who have been hurt. I know the statistics. I know the horror stories. But no, I’ve been lucky.”

He nodded, seeming genuinely pleased, “I’m glad. I’m going to ask you to imagine some things, but not too deeply. You don’t need to hallucinate them, I’m not trying to hurt you or violate you or threaten you, I just want you to understand what I’m saying, alright?”

She nodded.

He took one of her ankles and extended her leg, holding the back of her thigh to his chest and draping her knee over his shoulder, tilting her pelvis slightly sideways, slightly strange, making it hard for her to find any leverage of her own, “Imagine if you didn’t trust me, or were actually afraid to refuse me. If you were cursed to obey, drugged helpless, fearful of harsher treatment. Imagine you had to do it with any death-eater that managed to corner you with their body or their words or their capacity to create consequences for refusal,” he held her leg to him with his other hand and ran his free hand over her buttock, “regardless of the nature of their appetites, preferred position, preferred hole, attendant acts of degrading foreplay, someone who truly didn’t care if they hurt you or injured you, who would do it and laugh at you as they did it, who might fear being punished for showing any concern or regard for you, any uncertainty, any restraint. And you were required to endure it indifferently or risk worse. And having endured it, imagine feeling pressured to do it to someone else.”

She nodded, letting the thought chill her. She had never lacked for compassion for the abused, “I understand what you’re saying.”

He nodded, “Good,” and he leaned forward over her, stretching her leg up, stretching her wide, thrusting smoothly. Again it felt odd, but good. Arousing, mechanical pleasure, inconsistent with his grim admonitions.

He sat back and let her leg down, withdrawing and laying on his back beside her, “Get on me.”

She obliged, squeezing gently with her thighs as she sheathed him.

His expression was serious, but he didn’t look her in the eye, “Now use me like I’m your victim.”

Something cold hit her in the gut and she swallowed, fully understanding but not accepting, “What?”

He let out a breath slowly, “You need to use me until you come. Do whatever you want, but do it knowing that I hate the feel of you, that you’re forcing me, that you’re causing me pain. Do it and laugh. Do it and come.”

Her skin crawled and her stomach flipped, “I...I understand. I understand what you’re saying.”

“Then do it,” his hands tightened significantly on her thighs.

She tried not to squirm, “No, I don’t want to.”

“I don’t care. Do it. At least try. Imagine it’s to save your most beloved relative. Your child, if you have one. Or yourself. Or me, if you like. But I’m going to scream, or quietly cry, or stare at you blankly, or pretend, badly, to enjoy you while trembling with revulsion. We both know objectively that you like my cock, you like my body, you enjoy sex, you’re wet and aroused, so use me until you come. I’ll even let you use occlumency. Do it. At least show me you’re willing to try. Show me you’re taking this seriously, that you really want to understand. Show yourself.”

Her jaw clenched and her mouth tightened. She understood, she did. He had been a death eater.
He’d done things, and things had been done to him. She did take that seriously. She closed her eyes and tried to do as he’d ordered, but she couldn’t even move. She pushed away the thoughts of what he’d said and tried to move on him, “I can’t.”

He sat up, bracing himself from behind with his arms straight, waiting until she opened her eyes again, still ramrod rigid inside her, “I can. Do you want me to show you?”

She wasn’t sure whether he meant legilimency or physical demonstration. Either way, she most definitely didn’t, “Do you want to show me?”

He hesitated. It was only a second, but she saw it, “I want you to believe me. If you can’t even bear to think of doing the kind of things I’ve done then you don’t understand what I am and you have no business trusting any incarnation of me. I want you to believe that. Do you?”

She looked down and nodded.

He sat up straight and seized her by the hair, bending her ear to his lips, “Don’t. Lie. To me.”

She sighed, slightly mortified at how her body relaxed into his shows of dominance even when he was being shitty and dramatic, “I believe you’ve done things you’re ashamed of, and I trust your judgement on whether you should be, you’re an adult and I’m not interested in ripping your heart open again, or having you rip open mine. I believe you could do what you’ve done again, to me or anyone, if you thought it was sufficiently necessary. I believe that sexual politics and psychosexual bloodsports among the death eaters was every bit what you describe, and your participation is simultaneously why you believe you’re a monster and part of what’s left you feeling so broken, part of what taints all your affectionate impulses outside of dreams with preemptive aggression. I believe that there must have been moments of enjoyment that hurt worse and scarred deeper than the hours of torture and abuse, that still confuse you, still hurt you, still make it so that you don’t trust your own impulses and fantasies,” she touched his hand where it gripped her hair, circling his wrist and squeezing lightly until he released her, guiding it down by his side to support him.

“I believe that you are entirely willing to hurt me to protect me, or yourself, or to try to make me punish you, because we’ve both seen you do it. We both know you’re capable of making yourself believe that I have to distrust you for my protection, either sincerely or out of jealousy towards the man you think isn’t you. I believe your pathological self control and self sacrifice would make a good show of repulsing and offending me, even as we both knew it was a lie, and I don’t know but I suspect some small part of it would also be an excuse to exercise appetites that aren’t inherently abusive but which frighten you enough that you can only indulge them when you feel completely in control, completely beyond reach. I think you flatter yourself that you’re the only person who can know what that’s like. I’ve got my own share of demons, my own well of appetites, but I’m not about to unleash them on you on a macho martyr dare.”

She rested a hand over his heart, “So I’ll let you show me, if that’s what you want. I understand that you don’t trust what you can’t control, that you don’t believe in being brave because bravery is just a hope, a guess, and guesses can be wrong. And I also understand that...” she ran her hand up his other arm, up his neck, gripping him by the hair, “that you are brave, that you can’t help it, that you’ll trust me because you want to trust me, you want to surrender to me every bit as much as you want to control me. We both know you could stop yourself but you won’t. We both know I could rip you apart, but I won’t. And we’re not going to trust each other blindly, because that’s not how it works, but we are going to be brave, just to try it, here where even unsafe things are safe. We’re going to try to put all the monsters back in their boxes, because we don’t need them, and bring our desires and appetites out here where you can see them...because those we do need. Alright?”

She squeezed his hair lightly and his spine stiffened, and he melded against her. He leaned in and
kissed her lips lightly, meditatively, then nodded, whispering “Yes.”

And she gripped his hair tighter, pulling him down onto his back.

Chapter End Notes

In the first skip, Hermione has another nightmare vision insisting that Severus is a terrible tentacular monster that is going to drag her down into everything she fears, but she refuses to reject him again over a nebulous fear of monsters. As far as she’s come to face her fears of being hurt, it doesn't have the power to terrify her anymore, and they make love.

In the second skip, he explains that he doesn't want to make her feel violated, but he touches her while asking her to imagine, carefully, how she would feel if she had to submit to being touched whether she wanted to or not, or risk being punished horribly. How would she feel being touched by someone that did not love her or specifically hated her. Then he insists that she try to use him to pleasure herself while imagining that she is hurting him that same way, that he hates the feel of her and can't wait for her to be done with him. She insists that she can't. He explains that it is something he has done to others, as a death eater, and if she despises that she shouldn't pretend that he's anything better, and that she can't understand the magnitude of worthless creep he really is if she can't do the same, and has no business trusting any incarnation of him.

She accepts his admittance of guilt, but rejects his conclusion. She is entirely willing to believe that psychosexual bloodsport in the death eater cabal is every bit as awful as he intimates, and for that reason feels he is judging himself unfairly. She reminds him that he's not the only one with some pretty messy demons, and still longs for the chance to see if they can't pack the toxic damage away and give those parts of themselves that have never been wrong but have gotten hitched to bad experiences and fears a chance to express themselves in an explicitly safe place. He assents to her suggestion, fade-to-black.
Minds move faster than bodies.

Hermione fell back, smiling, blotchy with heat and bite-marks. Severus fell beside her, crisscrossed with sweat and bright pink lines, spent to the point of incoherence, mumbling something about how his skin felt like a patronus made of wasps, “but in a good way”.

They didn’t cleave needfully together again, too glutted and tingling to endure another course, but his hand found hers as they lay, and she gripped it warmly, feeling like a spun-sugar sunset.

After a long silence, without prompting, he just started to talk.

“Sexual politics among the death eaters wasn’t codified. Not at first. It was barely even politics. Just a lot of horny, paranoid teenagers and twenty-somethings, cool to sentiment, resentful of moral constraints, surrounded by similar peers. Even before the cabal mentality, the seeking of evil as a form of spiritual fulfillment, most of us were arrogant and cowardly and mercenary about sex...and a bunch of emotionally inept virgins.” he sighed deeply, “it wasn’t a game, when we started out, just naked power fantasies crashing selfishly together. We treated each other like food. But it slowly took on a shape. A contest of manipulation and will. And I…” he was quiet for a long while, then said softly, “I excelled at it.”

She tried to keep her voice even, holding open a space for his feelings rather than expressing her own. “Tell me about ‘yes’.”

He nodded, “The game progressed and became about power and immunity. We stopped feeding indifferentily on one another and began to predate in earnest. Withholding any hint of desire, sentiment, enthusiasm, vulnerability, even willingness, as either predator or prey, was a symbol of status. Shows of discomfort were like blood in the water, attracting opportunistic derision, questions about fortitude and loyalty, accusations of prudishness and cowardice. He-who-must-not-be-named presided over a self-perpetuating and innovative workshop in methods of compulsion, interrogation, seduction...just another piece of his network of rivalries and jealousies, all fueled by the gnawing hormonal loneliness of the young and abused and entitled. I doubt he created it on purpose but he certainly made good use of it once it had formed and festered.”

He bent their elbows, lifting her hand off the bed, and toyed with her fingers as he spoke, “I was safe enough while there was no scorekeeping to it. No pressure for proof. Neither pretty nor handsome, I learned how to seduce subtly without betraying regard, to dodge and embarrass unwelcome advances without losing face or attracting interest, to fool people into inflicting what I wanted, to call bluffs. Not every time...the learning curve was steep and sudden-death but...I usually had time to recover between mistakes.”

He was quiet, and she let him be, moving her fingers aimlessly between his, feeling in the air that the words would come.
“I had a few advantages. My skill with potions made me a valuable friend, and my reputation...everyone tends to assume that bookish misanthropy assures a brittle one-sided sadism, a low pain tolerance, lack of imagination, and a squeamish hidebound heterosexuality. When it was only about satisfying one person’s imagination at a time, it wasn’t hard to convince an aggressor that they were pushing the limits of what I could stand while we were still well within my more casual tolerances. And as the aggressor, I enjoyed some small repeat custom due more to the appetites I quietly lack than the ones I openly demonstrate. At least in the beginning,” he sighed.

“Bellatrix was the one that pressed the scorekeeping, the collecting of yesses when one admitted defeat by fear or pain or desire, to determine a winner and loser in every lonely perfunctory scromp. She was always nosing about to find out who was doing well so she could best them, who was being destroyed so she could finish them, who was trying to hide something so she could take it from them. She was the one that pushed exhibitionism into vogue. Therein came the pressure to abandon the affectation that we were all callow libertines using one another and instead become competitively dominant and sadistic, extracting submission rather than simply avoiding attachment. After that...innovation...she and Lucius quickly became clear leaders in coldly acquiring whatever they desired from others. But I...foolishly and pridefully...I very quietly became the only one who had never once said yes, to anyone. Always played to a stalemate if I couldn’t win. Me, the brittle, frigid, bookish little half-blood. Lucius was the one to realize it, meticulous information-brokering bastard. Once he had that tidbit in his pocket it was only a matter of time before he sold me out to Bella for a cheap chuckle and the key to her sister’s bedroom. I became her favorite project. Even as the war began in earnest, she worked endlessly at finding ways to corner me and use me, drive me mad with pain or pleasure or simple paranoia. It almost worked, a few times. I was holding on by pride alone, towards the end.”

“What was the end?”

“The end of the first war.”

Hermione shook her head in horrified astonishment, “Merlin’s man-minge. And this started when?”

“My sixth year.”

“Christ, Severus...five years ?”

He shrugged, “I stayed ahead of the game’s evolution better than most. But not innocently. Not blamelessly. Even before the pressure to do so I did more than my share of willful and gratuitous harm. There was much I endured unwillingly, but I willingly subscribed to the larger game. Long before I took my first life, long before I finally doomed Lily, I was an inveterate monster. I was angry. I pretended that was a justification. I convinced myself it was an appetite that could be filled rather than a pit being dug ever deeper.”

“At least it explains the strange calibration of your flirting instincts.”

Severus laughed fractionally, “It...it could have been worse. For many it was. But I don’t...” he cleared his throat, “I don’t think it was any worse than I deserved. It certainly broke me of believing that anger has an endpoint, or a point at all. It grounded my study of occlumency in ways that have since saved my life. I’ve just...it did harm to my capacity for...unexamined desire. Dreams are far safer. I can’t even say most of this when I’m awake, let alone consider...demonstrating it. But you, you’re always so maddeningly forthright.”

“Do you dream of it?”

His voice became cutting and sardonic again, “Present company excepted, you mean?”
“Does that question offend you?” she turned to him, leaning up on one elbow and stroking his chest.

He mirrored her, but frowning instead of smiling, stroking her waist, “No. But it occurs to me that you’re not asking me for my sake. You're gathering intelligence on someone else. Go ask the man you actually love.”

That stung her and she looked away, “I just did, you ass.”

He curled his arm around her waist and pulled her to him, kissing her roughly, possessively. She matched him in combative ardor, trying to block out all the terrible realities that suddenly seemed too close, wrestling with one another instead. It was when he eventually relented, letting her pin him on his back, and settled into a gentle embrace that something managed to sneak through.

He stroked the curls back from her face, looking her levelly in the eye, “How do I die?”
Death and Praxis

Chapter Notes

CW: Lots of graphic talk about death, decay, and grief.

He asked again.

She pulled away, “I don’t want to talk anymore.”

He said it again, more softly, “Hermione, how do I die?”

“I don’t want to tell-” she’d already given him the response.

His tone was unkindly casual, “But you’ll tell me anyway. Because you know it’s what I want.”

She scowled, echoing him in kind, “Ask me again and I’ll show you instead.”

He smiled fondly at her venom, as if he were Ginny needling her to confess a crush, “Tell me.”

She gritted her teeth, “Horribly. Tragically. Painfully, slowly. Satisfied?”

He pretended to consider with indifference, “Knowing me, probably.”

“That isn’t funny.”

“Yes it is. Show me,” he lay back, wrists by his head submissively.

“Are you asking this to torture yourself, or just me? You can’t stop it from happening.”

“I wouldn’t if I could. I’ve been assured that any failure on my part to die, should the dark lord be defeated, will be most grievously punished,” he glanced grimly at the portrait, pausing as his eyes fixed on it involuntarily, “and permitting him to succeed is not an option. Ending this war means ending my life. So be it. I don’t want to stop it, I just want a chance to consider it, get my head around it, know my own story, and I doubt I’ll get that chance while it’s happening.”

She bowed her head, bracing her resolve to do something that went against her gut instinct about what was kind, what was proper. But hadn’t she learned? What was it about death that made people think they could keep it a secret by not talking about it, especially to those whose lives were already drowning in it?

He mistook her silence for refusal, and his voice wavered, his gaze steady on the painting, “Please, Hermione. If death is all that’s left of my life, let me…” he struggled for a way to express himself, “let me meet it as its master. Let me hold it in my hands.”

Hermione took a deep breath but paused, not knowing where to begin. She thought of Happy’s admonition, my heart cannot go to your heart, but my hands can be where your hands are. She reached over and pressed her left palm into his right hand where it lay supplicant.

Severus pursed his lips, still looking disdainfully at the portrait on the wall, a note of play under his
bitterness, “Is it him? Is he the one that does it? You said it was tragic. That would be more pathetic than tragic, I think. A bad life can hardly be called a heroic flaw.”

He was trying to throw her off, annoy her, provoke her into telling him, to hurt him back. She shook her head, resolving that she must own the task and discharge it fairly, hold him steady as he’d done repeatedly for her. He was playing at indifference, but the room felt colder, like encroaching terror. Pressing down hard on his hand for balance, she threw a leg over his torso and straddled his abdomen, pressing her right hand into his left palm as well, holding him down and putting her body between the painting and his line of sight.

He had a right to know. He had a right to a real friend, not just a lover. It was his death, not hers, however it felt. She looked at him calmly, trying to map images of the past on to him accurately and keep her tears to herself. Memories of the day welled up, more vivid than she thought they’d be, and from a deeper place.

She lifted one hand and touched him behind the ear, tracing two jagged lines across his throat and to his opposite shoulder, looking him steadily in the eye, memory slathering gore behind her touch like fingerpaint, “Vol—” she caught herself, chafing, “He orders his snake to kill you, because he thinks you were the one who took Dumbledore’s wand. That’s what he needs to think. When you die, he needs to believe that your death has made him invincible. It’s the only way he’ll stand and face Harry.”

She traced the lines again, a caress, feeling as though she were tearing her own heart out to do it, then touched a place on his chest, his stomach, his side, each wrist, his upper arm, silently describing the vicious attack that was burned into her memory. Sitting up astride him when she’d done, speaking gently and matter-of-factly, her thoughts hemorrhaging blood, “When we found you…find you,” she took a breath, staunching her impulse to cry, “you’ll be bleeding, cursed wounds that won’t heal. His snake’s venom is a magical anticoagulant and…anticoherent, and it will have hit you with so many doses…” she shook her head, “…nothing is spared. Even your memories drain out. You speak to Harry, because he won’t understand what he has to do until you tell him, he won’t really know how to give his life for others until you show him, and then you die…peacefully, I suppose, all things considered. Harry kills…Him…the truth comes out. Your sacrifices are recognized. People finally understand the hero you are. Harry makes sure of it.”

For the first time in her explanation, his face crimped into a reaction, a rueful look, and he grunted, “Hmpf. Potter.”

Hermione laughed, she couldn’t help it. It was all too absurd, and even moreso when he joined in, his frame shaking under her. She leaned down, lengthening upon him, kissing him fondly, and they each sneakied a few tears disguised as mirth. She didn’t tell him the rest, since he seemed satisfied. How the venom had been so strong and so copious in his system that his body hadn’t lasted, how the magical poison hadn’t run its course like a chemical poison, how it had kept unbinding and unbinding his body after his own magic had stopped fighting it, after his heart had stopped pumping it into his tissues. Flesh, bone, teeth, hair, by the time she had gone back to recover him (and she had gone back) there was no body left to speak of. There hadn’t even been a body smell, there had been no time for anything to stagnate and putrefy. Just the smell of metals, salt water, a little ammonia, like the sea, and a dark robe, dozens of buttons, slightly damp and dusted with calcium. Most had already slid away into the ground. Even his wand was never found.

It was a hard thing to see on a day where so many had been lost, how meager a thing a body really was, how anonymous, just compounds in a costume, a poetical delusion wrapped in some dirty water, that was all. She’d sat a long time in the room where he’d died, wondering if the numbness would begin to wear off enough to let her cry for him, but it never had. She just waited, letting the
fabric dry, feeling like it was something she could do for someone while Ron grieved with his family and Harry dealt with the throngs of students grateful that the world had been saved. She’d given his waters time to escape that buttoned-up blackness at last, down into the earth and up into the sky to fall as rain. She’d thought of him that way ever since, privately, in every chastising sleet and muttering drizzle, and how he’d probably have liked that. But she didn’t tell him. She just pressed her ear to his heart, listening to its precious and delusional counting of time.

“I wish we’d had an affair when I was a student,” she murmured wistfully, surprising herself.

He chuckled dryly, “Technically we are.”

She grinned, trying to bother him, “I mean the extreme moral turpitude kind.”

He grunted, “That’s barbaric. You’re a child. And when would we have found time between crises?”

“Sixth year, after lunch. That was your free period.”

He smirked, nuzzling idly at her ear, “Umbridge would have loved that.”

“If that wouldn’t make it worth it, what would?”

He sighed deeply, shaking his head, “You’re ridiculous. Anyway detention after dinner would be a better cover.”

She nodded drowsily, “True. Or Grimmauld Place. Maybe it would never have worked, but it’s a good fantasy. I did have a kind of love for you then, you know. That recognition, of our similar faults, it wasn’t all one-way.”

His voice was different when he spoke again, “I miss you, now that you’ve gone. I miss suffering you. I worry for you, not just for the sake of the war. I want to tell you things I didn’t even know I felt until you were gone. I worry about you dying of something I could have taught you to avoid.”

She nodded, beginning to feel damp-eyed again, “So you know how that feels, do you?”

He stroked her hair and then paused, his fingertip to her temple. She felt a gentle push, and declined to block him. Her mind swam through visions of that day, the battle of Hogwarts, things that it hurt to remember. She felt him see them, felt them hurt him, going down with him into that worst place, the smell of the shrieking shack, the smell of the blood, the sound of him whispering to Harry, words she couldn’t hear, helplessly staring, bright silver leaking from every part of a face gone far too pale...she flinched aside...the smell of the hospital, Ron lying in a clean white bed, asleep but also gone...

“Stop,” with a push-back she occluded them both from those memories, letting them sink back down into the dark beneath her daily self. True to her trust in him, he released her without a moment’s hesitation.

It only took her a moment to regain her composure. When she could regard him clinically again, she asked, “Is it safe for you to know all this? If he should read you...”

Just as seriously, he nodded, “My occlusive control will be greatly improved by finally meeting you properly.”

A grin broke across her face again at the notion that anything that had happened between them could be misconstrued as proper.
He rolled his eyes, soldiering on, “Now that you’re no longer rattling about in there like the bastard child of a half-remembered poem and a raspberry seed caught in my molar, is what I meant,” he stroked her hair with a single playful tug, grumbling impatiently as he waited for her to sober, “I can keep my mind strong even as I’m dying,” his tone softened, “And if the look in your eyes is any measure, it’s not a secret I’ll have to keep nearly as long as the last one.”

She nodded, refusing to cry, “No. Not long at all. You’ll hear of a break-in at Gringotts. Things will happen quickly after that.” She clamped her mouth down over another reflexive and meaningless apology.

He nodded, drifting into his own thoughts.

She knelt up again, swallowed, willing the words in her mind to form a question rather than a plea, struggling to hear what was true rather than a reflection of what she wanted, “Is there...anything you’d like to leave behind or...a will someplace...”

His lips twitched in a way that was knowing and serene, “Any last requests, you mean?”

She sighed, “Something like that,” mostly she just wanted him to want something. Something she could actually do.

“You’ll be there, when it happens. You and Potter both.”

She nodded, “But I’ll still be just a stupid kid. I won’t know you. I won’t be able to save you. I just make a vial and hand it to Harry for your hemorrhaging memories. It won’t matter.”

“It matters.”

She wanted to hit him, “Ask me to save you. Please. I know I probably can’t but please ask.”

He thought for a moment and shook his head, “The dark lord defeated and and the world saved seems like a future we oughtn’t meddle with too much. However well we bargain there will still be a price. It’s meaningless to scruple over whether that’s fair.”

Anger welled up in her as it often did in the face of other people’s fatalism, redoubled because it felt like he was throwing her own perfunctory nihilism of the past year back at her, arguing on behalf of her insecurities. She rejected it. It was one thing to accept that the past had happened, that death comes to everyone eventually, that sacrifices made along the way could only be honored for what they achieved but never redeemed or entirely justified. It was another, entirely, to willingly let it happen without a fight.

Her stifled capacity to want things for the last year came roaring in hungrily all at once, filling in for his refusal to want anything from her. Mostly she wanted to unleash her scary brain and find a way, the way, to save...everyone. There had to be one. A way to spare Severus, Fred, Dobby, Colin, Remus, Tonks...and to spare everyone that loved them the pain of losing them...to wage a rebellion of espionage against death itself, against grief, against longing. She could do it, because she had already lost count of the impossible things she’d done in just one week, and because she was an unstoppable force, when she chose to be.

But then she looked at her lover as he lay in bed, adamantly serene, finally at peace, and knew that she would never be able to move him from the path of his oncoming fate, any more than she could have summoned Ron back into his body after his soul had left and his brain, his laugh, had finally gone quiet. Not with all the magic in the world. Nor brilliance, nor love. He couldn’t stop her from trying, but the odds were good she would only tear him apart.
She put a hand absently over her heart, begging it peace though it wanted to shout challenges to an old enemy. Instead, she stopped herself. She stopped for him, between his difficult life and his difficult death. She put her head down on his chest, and when his arms came up around her, tracing softly over her back, she wept for him as if his gentle caress had ripped open her heart.

After a long while he murmured, “Thank you.”

She sniffled, wishing there were some way to warn him of things he already knew, “You can’t prepare for the moment. You think you can, because you know it’s coming, but the moment itself is so heavy, so still, floating like an iceberg in a sea of cheekily mundane details. The dust on a table. The hum of a fan. The name of a nurse. A voice in the hall. They lift you away, screen you from the end of the world. It’s all that you keep, all that you can. As if someone had snuck in and pruned the rest away. Anything real is too small to describe it...even the change of the face, familiar yet different, the strangeness of skin at room temperature...changes that say nothing about what has truly changed. The sudden distance...” she trailed off, feeling like she’d not said anything helpful and was unlikely to start.

He waited a while, “I’m very proud of you. I want you to know that. Of all the students I have ever hated...you are my favorite.”

She laughed, hard, burying her face in his shoulder, unable to begin explaining, finally murmuring, “I’m proud of you too. You’ve come so far on so little, my prince.”

He harrumphed, but seemed pleased.

She wanted to stay. She had time. Wait until they’d gathered some strength, maybe make love again, trade a few more gentle words, quiet and drowsy things. He traced patterns on her back, lines that hummed like snatches of a tune. She whispered, “I’ll let you go, I promise. I’ll let you go.” And just as she was wondering if a person could fall asleep inside a dream, he did.
Let Slip the Art of War

She heard a sharp crack and opened her eyes.

She was sitting in the amber velvet chair. Standing between her and the frozen tableau of the battle aboard the Golden Galleon was Happy, gazing at her with patient concern.

Hermione sighed, “You heard me then. Thank goodness. I didn’t know if you would. I tried to say your name without seeming like that’s what I was doing.”

Happy bobbed her head, “I needed time to collect myself. What has happened?”

Hermione blenched, “The painting closed on me. I can’t get out. I tried something sort of…well…bird-brained, but then I came right back here. I don’t know why I’m stuck, though. And I…” she looked from Happy to the frozen battle beyond her, "am I...still asleep? How did you..."

Happy grimaced, "It's complicated. Too many comings and goings down here. Things are getting…not snarled but…folded together a bit. Galleries are not meant to be battlegrounds. Conflicts and quests require hard rules and galleries and dreams really don't move in those sorts of patterns. Not stably.”

"Please tell me this is not one of those potentially-space-time-ending situations."

Happy scoffed, "No, certainly not. Rocks are no danger to the ocean, their mass and their ripples wear away in time. But it does get dangerous for those in the unpredictable currents caused by their interactions. Dreams within an artifice within a gallery..." Happy shrugged, "Strange rip-tides. I expect Hogarth can put it right eventually. That he forbears to means it is likely in the school's favor at present."

"Well, it seems to be working in my favor for right now if it means you can help me...I've got time to think, but I don’t know what to do, unless you can apparate me out of here."

Happy studied her critically, glancing around the uprights of the cage, then shook her head sadly, “I would worry about pulling you apart...you’re separated from your meat right now and apparition is a very brisk sort of pull. Hogwarts does not like humans apparating in any case, even side-along, so it would be an even shorter and sharper jump than usual... and this cage...” she shook her head, “it makes things very...sticky. Not just time. Its nature is stasis, permanence. Objects that hold such magic must be very very grounded indeed. It will be hard for me to get myself out, I think. I could not pull you gently enough not to shred you like a badly-collected memory.”

Hermione nodded, pondering, “So I need it to let me out. Why did it let me out twice before but not now?"

“Not sure. Could just be the rip tides, the magic battenning down its hatches, but I doubt it. It is a strong artifice, this. How did he get out?”

“I think Bellatrix pulled him out. She has the wand that made this thing. She probably has some understanding of all the different spells that went into it. She bragged about protection magics, but whatever she did to the other ones...they’re half disintegrated. I think she emptied them into her creepy pensieve weapon. She referred to...cannibalizing them.”

Happy gripped her ears and shook her head, looking genuinely annoyed in a way that still did not suit her wise wide-eyed face, pacing around the back of the chair, “Makes no sense.”
Hermione nodded in agreement, standing up and taking a few steps towards the almost-frozen conflict beyond the front of the prison cell. It had changed only slightly from when she had left it. A few seconds’ worth; comets of light closer to their targets, discharged spells further from their wands, flyers having gone a few feet. Ginny a half-stride closer to Bellatrix.

She could not stay stuck. It was not an option. She could not sit-out the danger that her friends and family had embraced on her say-so. It was unbearable, “Happy, you should go. The boat is a trap. I don’t know if Beasley or Nikita managed to get that word to the flyers before they left.”

Happy shook her head, “I can’t apparate onto the Galleon. Goblin magic, tighter than a drum.”

“Then wait at the mirror for Anglen and Dorian to come back if they haven’t already and see if they can get you aboard. Or see if someone can slip a patronus in there to raise the alarm. See if Beasley can do something with the texentes to boost our ability to penetrate…” she rested a hand on the barrier between herself and the gallery of the Galleon, “…through here...right here...I’m so close...If I could just make her hear me…”

Happy tilted her head to the side, “Is this what you did? You told him to leave, to take up the fight? He was not going to go but you told him to go? You convinced him?”

Hermione blinked, “Not in so many words but...I suppose I did. What does that mean?”

Happy nodded, “You took his place...or, gave him yours. That must be why the canvas actually let him go. You affirmed the other half of the madwoman’s spell, like the summoning of the wolf man. You offered your burden for his in trade.”

“I didn’t say I would stay! I certainly didn’t intend to stay!”

“It doesn’t matter what you intend, it matters what you do. He went. You stayed. The frame agreed.”

“But I went out...for a while.”

“Where did you go? Not into the Galleon. To him? Someplace you needed him, or he needed you?”

She thought, blushing, and nodded.

“Just as he, when he had been able to go, he came to find you when you needed him?”

She nodded again.

Happy looked at the scene on the boat, frowning, ““These things require balance and willingness. So now, you stay. You sent him far away, so the weight binding you here is strong.”

“Far away? But it’s just there…”

“That place only seems close to this place. Your eyes fool you by seeing. The difference is more than the distance. You know this. Distance, or time if you like, means very little to magic, or any of the other things that bind us together. But changes of state...dreaming, despairing, dying...things that put you beyond considerations of distance also put you beyond the simplicities of distance.”

“So, he’s on the boat. Which is far from here. But where is here?”

“When a candle flame goes out, where does it go? You are in the out, now. This is not a cage that locks you in. It is a gate that locks you out, traps you between, lost to reality.”
“So how do I get out of this cage?”

“You’re not listening. Stop thinking about what you’re trying to get out of and remember what you have to get back into.”

Hermione shook her head, “How is trying to get into the gallery any different from trying to get out of this cage? Either way it’s these same three walls and a closed door.”

Happy steepled her fingers, “Not the gallery. The gallery is also out. It just binds you within infinites rather than limits. But they are your walls, your distances. Your door. Your painting. Your face. Your mind. Understand?”

Hermione tried, but she was so tired, “Not in the slightest.”

Happy gave a curt sigh, “Hermione Granger. Who has been keeping you out? Who needs to invite you in? Who is stopping you?”

Hermione felt herself getting angry, “I am tired of nonsense! I just want you to tell me how to get out of...get into...get...get back from here. I’m not supposed to be stuck here!”

Happy smiled, “Getting warmer.”

Hermione sat down heavily on the chair and gripped her hair, “Please don’t. Please. People are counting on me. I don’t have time for this. Please just help me. Show me how to do this.”

“If you were not you, I could.”

“I...I tell you what, if you get to something that it’s not completely futile for me to ask you to explain it further, just give me some kind of hand signal.”

Happy scowled, thinking, “Get up. Sit on the floor,” Hermione obeyed, and Happy hopped into the chair, grinning impishly, moving her bottom back and forth on the plush seat, “Very nice.”

“So were you going to tell me something else, or did you just want to be more comfortable while we wait for me to grow a clue?”

Happy considered, “I will tell you something I should not tell you. But after this, we are even. A good balance, to please the artifice. You defied the norms of your race for mine, I will bend the rules of mine for you. You are a story.”

Hermione’s head felt strange, like something inside it was trying to unfold, some memory that swiftly excused itself again. She shook her head, “How so?”

“I guess the better word is legend. As both story and a map’s language. Among the elves, your name is its own word. You are part of our language. We know you by your name as we knew you by your name. It is the word for what water does when it falls.”

“You...you re-named a word for me? Like a muggle street? That’s very touching.”

“No, that has always been what it has meant. The word found you and named you.”

“My mother named me. There have certainly been other Hermiones.”

Happy licked her lips, took a breath, and regarded her patiently, “You could say the word ‘happy’ a hundred times and I would not hear you. You must be saying my name, meaning my name, meaning me, to summon me, and then I may choose. That word didn’t mean me until you met me, until you
bothered to care about my purpose. Thus it can summon me when you say it. The same way this frame can summon the one who belongs in it, if rightly sounded.”

“So...if you went back to the texentes room, could you summon me there? Because you know my name...in the elf-sense of the word?”

Happy shook her head, “Sadly, you are human. You are a very skilled witch, but you still require a threaded wand, proximity, or enormous power to resonate your words into weave. Your body does not conduct words the way ours do. As you are, there is only one person who can summon you to your body.”

“Severus?”

Happy shook her head, “No. The ones that love us can always summon thoughts of us, but, well, such wanting comes with its own reasons, binding us to them instead of ourselves. Love that summons is not good at letting go, at permitting life to continue. It binds. I think you know this.”

“So how...”

Happy sighed, “Who banished you to the dungeon where you found your grief’s twin, pushed you through the veil of reality, out and down into the dark, seeking after him as low as he might go? Who truly presses you out of time to find him, to keep you where he is, to keep you out, to trap you in his frame far from yourself? Who flies you to him while your whole world is in danger? The same one that refuses to let you in because of what her dreams may know that she does not wish to see. The one whose name is not meant to lie stagnant.”

“Alright alright. You sound like my mum’s therapist. It’s up to me. Fine. But I...don’t know how to summon myself to someplace else.”

“You should just believe me, too much more than this you will not want to know. But humans can be many places at once. It is your peculiar gift. You know it. You are far from yourself, and have been for some time. To be far from yourself, you must be in two places. Your heart beats there, but it has gone to ground here, and cannot be found unless it wishes to be, nor can it return to you unless you let it. You have to bring everything with you or you will simply wake in another dream, and your story will take another turn away from its center. You must seek the place where you do not get the same choice about what your truth is, where reality takes hold, how your story goes on and whether time behaves like time and death eventually has its way. You are lucky that your body is there with the machine, keeping your mind open. But you, here, you still have to want to wake up.”

“I...I think that I do.”

“Then go. It is as easy as portrait travel, just a step. You are a portrait but you are not yet a memory. Accept that. Travel to your other face.”

Hermione closed her eyes, tried to hear the texentes whirring, tried to let herself open her other eyes. Nothing happened. She sighed, “I think this is the wrong kind of portrait for that.”

“Ah well,” Happy shrugged, “then we only have one left to try;” she took off her cap and pulled a golden locket on a braided cord out from the inside band.

“How did you...where did you...”

“I had it here last, remember? You had your wand, but I still had your locket, at least this version of it. Let’s take a look.
“Wait-”

Happy opened the locket with her oddly strong hands. Ron’s face beamed out at her, and his smile stung her eyes. That feeling she would rather lock out...knocked. Fear gripped her, and finally she understood what Happy meant...if she didn’t want to face it, she still could escape it, if she was willing to hide deeper inside her own mind, retreating into the earth like water. She had finally gotten herself truly cornered, but she could still dodge forever, even if she couldn’t move from where she’d escaped to. She was unstoppable. Infinite digressions, infinite fractellating evasions. She could spin in place, unless she chose to stop herself. She hadn’t really known how to before, not for her own sake. But she’d learned it for his.

It didn’t happen all at once. She looked. She talked about it, sidling towards it with words.

“That’s...not really a portrait, though. That’s just a picture of him I took...” memories of when and how and where tumbled out, raking her like claws. Tears fell. It had been at the fair. He’d had Hugo on his shoulders and Rose by the hand, and he had looked so perfectly happy, and she had caught him just as he was turning around. It wasn’t even a wizarding photo, just a muggle snapshot, static and heavy, but in her mind it moved and breathed and pained her like giving birth, dark and stagnant gestational things breaking free and running through her, brimming from her eyes in torrents, crowding her throat with words.

“How did he die?”

“Oh please don’t ask-” but it was too late, the words singing across her skin like threads to pull her back to herself. The cell around them blurred through her tears and seemed to melt, though she couldn’t move or see to escape, o she had to answer, “In his sleep. He drowned. There...there had been a fire in Diagon Alley, in the shop across from his...Bric and Brac’s, an oddments shop, potions and rarities...heavily protected, even against the authorities apparently, probably smuggling, no one could apparate in to help. Fire on the first floor, customers trapped upstairs. It got out of control but he...he had his broom. Kept it in his office like a bloody superhero. Got in crashing through the skylight. Inhaled a lot of smoke before he remembered to use a breathing charm and even then...he was never good at those,” she smiled in spite of herself, “…I don’t know that it filtered out everything that was burning in there. We’ll never know, the owner died. The customers got out though. Mostly students. They’re still investigating whether it was the origin of the gallopox outbreak. Frankly I think-”

“Hermione.”

“Right,” she pulled herself out of her mental cul de sac and back to the story, “He thought he was fine. I thought he was fine. We never really thought about what might have been in that smoke. We never thought of Bric and Brac’s as being even as dangerous as the joke shop. We didn’t expect...” she shook her head, “They even cleared him at the hospital after several hours waiting and a quick course of detoxification charms. I took him home...everyone did what they were supposed to do, like it was a normal ridiculous day...” Happy had taken her hands, she was grateful that she could feel them, “We went to bed. He wanted to make love to celebrate yet another ridiculous adventure, he was so pleased, so excited, wondering if he’d get his picture in the paper. I put him off. I was tired from waiting in the hospital and...I said it would keep until date night, and we’d celebrate properly. I thought we’d have time.

“I heard him get up in the middle of the night, coughing like he sometimes did. Acid reflux. I usually sleep through it but...we’d been married so long...I heard him not-coughing, then I heard him not-come-back to bed...so loudly that it woke me. I got up and went to the bathroom and found he had sat down on the floor, and he wasn’t breathing...he was already...maybe only by a minute...but I got
the fluid out of his lungs, got him breathing, got him to the hospital. I’m really…” she coughed a bitter laugh, “I’m really quite brilliant. They put him under a charm to keep draining the fluid. They figured out how to stop it a few days later, but…he never woke up. After four more days his body caught up to what the rest of us already knew. The way I described it to my children…” she braced, shivering, “his brain went to sleep first and then…then his heart finally went to sleep too. Bodies are a good bit slower than brains. Hearts especially. Mine’s still lagging a good bit behind the times,” she laughed derisively, and realized she couldn’t see, she couldn’t feel Happy’s hands. She felt like she was under water, like she was Alice, having cried an ocean of big-girl tears to take her past a locked door in a tiny vial.

She blinked hard and opened her eyes. She was still sitting, her hands still resting on another pair of hands…her own. She was looking at herself, her body sitting in the chair in the texentes room, still outside herself. Silver tears of memory were streaming down her cheeks and dripping off her chin, pooling in her palms where her astral form had apparently unfolded from her own reflection.

The texentes was still whirling, and Beasley was tending it. Time was moving again. She’d summoned herself out of sleep, but she wasn’t quite ready to live again. There was still someone else she had to save.

“Hermione?” Nick called from the next room.

She went to him, eager for a glimpse of the present. Nikita was there, several pages of notes in his lap, writing furiously, “Nick, I’m here. How’s it going?”

He chuffed, frazzled, “Well it’s…please slow down, Professor. Please I need a moment to talk to my friend. Hermione, the bats came back and warned of the trap…the machine in there really makes them much more versatile, it’s amazing.”

“But the flyers went in anyway?”

“Ginny had a plan.”

“What plan?”

He scoffed again, “The version she told me was something along the lines of ‘trust me, no time to explain.’”

Hermione ground her teeth, “Fingerbanging Faust, Ginny. Any messages for me?”

“Not that I know of.”

“What’s Hog…Hogarth burning up your quill with?”

“Well…that’s what’s got me worried. He’s been hectoring me on why the texentes can’t be taken out of this school, why it shouldn’t even be moved. It’s apparently been on his mind for some time. And I’ve got this bad feeling about Bellatrix’s plan…I don’t think Ginny knows all of it.”

“She wants to steal the texentes and destroy the Galleon for the goblins so they’ll make her some kind of gallery.”

“Yes but how she plans to do it…how she seems to think she’s working towards Voldemort’s resurrection…it’s bothering me that Bellatrix said she got her idea from that book, my book, the one with your bookmark in. She doesn’t seem like much of a reader to me. What page did you have it marked at?”
“What? Nowhere. The part about paintings and the gallery, close to the end of that chapter.”

“Oh...that's bad...”

Quite fed up with humoring cryptic statements, she quipped, “Oh, I don’t know. A little flowery perhaps. I thought your observations in the introduction about how history is alive were quite prescient.”

Nikita resumed scribbling, “The next chapter is a new one. Each oddity of the school gets its own chapter but I added one after that talks about the school proper, how it’s an artifice of its own, how it supports its oddities. How it was laid out with the specific intention of letting it channel energies like any other living thing, so its magics and defenses can adapt. No other building in the world has a room of requirement, or a gallery of such size and complexity. Very few have the ability to host so many ghosts continuously and indefinitely, because Hogwarts is, in a way, alive. It doesn’t live, exactly. They didn’t manufacture a soul for it or trap any poor bastards to power it. But it can dream. It can remember. Like a tree or a lake.”

“Trees can remember?”

“Yes. Don’t interrupt me. It’s hard enough to talk and listen and write all at once. I learned all this, and put a more poetical version in my book, back when I was staying here for research, and I thought Hogwarts was actually speaking to me...turns out it was just Hogarth here. The school itself doesn’t do language. Not human language. There’s a kind of language that has a lot to do with the strange threads that the texentes interacts with. The elves apparently know a lot about it but never tell.”

“Almost never.”

His voice got that unappealing arch tone again, “If you interrupt me again so help me...no not you, Professort, sorry, no. Please go on,” he flipped his piece of parchment over and continued scribbling furiously. Hermione waited for him to resume talking on his own.

“If that’s what Bellatrix read when she decided that the dark one could be brought back, if that’s when she decided to drive a boat into the gallery and begin concocting a toxic mess of painful, hateful, vengeful memories out of mutilated death eaters and one extremely broken man...I think it means she figured out what the lake is for.”

“For?” she echoed innocently.

No historian had ever glared at her before for making that kind of reference. The one before her made history, “Symbolism here is never just symbolism. This whole place is a masterwork of artifice.”
And suddenly, she knew about the lake, and found she had always known.
Deep Magic

Every heart has its dark waters below; where our most terrible things dive deep for the cold and the pressure and the soothing, crushing silence; where we can sink our secrets, our suffering, and our self when we’ve a need. Things too heavy to carry can just drift there. Disturbances ripple us, and sink, and we pretend they disappear. We traverse its waters on our way to wisdom, and sometimes we fall in, and sometimes we dive in. And we climb out again, for the most part, though never quite the same for our trips through that lurking glass. Nothing can be said to be alive without a numbing silent place to drift, or drown, or gestate, far from the light. We know no earth without a sea, nor sky without a void.

And so Hogwarts has one, full of secrets and dangers and soothing coolness on a hot day, reflecting the bottomless sky from a mirrored and bottomless basin.

Hermione stood, ethereal, before the bathroom door. It was two different doors at once; the one in the chambers she had inherited from Severus, with the great stepped tub that was a pensieve and a refuge and a secret door down into the dark; and the one in the house she had made with Ron, where they had shared their small rituals at the beginning and end of every day, where he had gone when he had wandered away from their bed, across a mythical river. Out. Bang. Behind it was that sound she had heard in her dream....that yawning, cliff’s-edge sound.

The people in her sitting-room could not hear the storm behind the door, but it was getting louder. She raised her hand to knock, but pushed instead. She was expected. Everyone was, ultimately. Home again home again.

An endless pool stretched out into the distance before her, its steps sunken into the stone shore. Still as a mirror, it roared like an ocean, like a falls, like a heartbeat heard from inside a heart, and its surface was the twilight sky. Gazing in, she was overcome by that sense she’d had, years before, lying on a hillside at dusk with her young daughter, feeling the earth pressed against her back and knowing it was round, and fragile, and whole, hurtling, hurting, the same world for muggles and wizards alike, the same sky. She’d pointed out to Rose that looking up into the sky of our watery spheroid was really like looking outward from a ledge. And Rose, with the facility of clever children, had made a little song of it, “what goes up must come down, what goes out must come in, circle smile, circle frown, spin and spin and spin and spin.” It had seemed innocently eerie then. She understood it better by the water.

She touched the place on her chest where her locket should not have been. She’d thrown it into the fray and hidden, yet it was there. Happy had given it back to her, and she’d finally had the sense to let it in. She stepped up to the ledge of the sky. She thought of undressing, but it occurred to her that anything she didn’t need would probably burn away on its own. There was no time. She took two steps back, lunged forward, and dove.

She plunged down a great cistern that had once been a stairwell, feeling as though she were sliding down the spinal column of a great beast to the very base, the seething belly, bedrock gut, axial womb, and hermetic mundial cove. She swam out through great double doors and into a blackness that reminded her very much of the back-gallery, though her ability to swim it instead of walking or flying was handy. She took a breath, just to see if she could, and was relieved when she didn’t drown. It made sense, though. Her mind had spent a year becoming a native of the deep water, insensible to it as a fish. And, she reasoned, she’d left her actual lungs safely above in her body.

Far in the distance was what seemed to be a dim paper lantern, swarming with flashes of multi-
colored incandescence. She pointed her wand behind her and cast a simplified version of *expelliarmus* that shot a broad fan of force with enough power to clear a walkway of snow, a yard of leaves, or any given point of an unfixed caster. She’d not used it for swimming before, and it took her a moment to adapt her arms and legs into proper rudders, but soon she was darting along like an otter.

As she neared the papery wall of the shimmering ballroom-sized gallery, the swirling galactic masses within resolved into a frenetic scene. Bellatrix Lestrange, a dark still blot in a chaotically bright room, was fixed in place by vines around her feet, clutching her pensieve with one arm, the other flailing out spells with her walnut wand. Standing at her back was Severus Snape, carefully parrying what spells he had to, forcing any wayward comets to change course and hammer the massive doors of the hold, making not even a thump that Hermione could hear from her side. He turned his face over his shoulder to yell at Bellatrix in words that were silent from the outside *What exactly is the plan here, Bella?*

Ever the spy.

She wished desperately that she could ask Ginny the same thing.

Ginny stood a spare ten feet from Bellatrix, deflecting spells and shouting mutely to her fliers. Bella’s bolts almost seemed to slow as they approached her. Hermione hoped that was the effect of her locket’s braided band around Ginny’s neck, but it might have been because her husband, the auror, was standing behind her, casting defensively. Harry yelled something to her, Ginny yelled back, Harry called out to the room, and all the fliers headed straight towards the ceiling, into the dark. Ginny kept parrying bolts as Harry pointed his wand at Bella, his mouth easily readable *Expelliarmus!*

The bolt flew past Bellatrix and Snape, striking something on the far side of the room. Hermione felt that strange murmuring dark sensation. There was a searingly bright flash from all around, the whole world gone molten silver for an instant, and suddenly the lights inside the boat died.

“Lumos!” She could see the side of the boat before her, but not inside it. To her far right there was a sudden low explosion and a rush of bubbles, followed by Severus, his wand lit, dragging Bellatrix, as she kept throwing bolts blindly into the breach.

“Reparo!” she screamed, and the door sealed itself behind her.

“Bella, come on, let’s go. We’ve lost.” he released her and seemed to hover in the water, breathing and speaking normally and seeming to take it in stride.

“No! I’ve got her now!” She stirred the roiling surface of the pensieve with her wand, cackling, “I’ve always wanted to try this...never thought I’d get the chance. Thank the Merlin for the righteous gullibility of gryffindors and mudbloods.”

“*Expecto Patronum!*” the last syllable dissolving into a manic laugh as the roiling glow inside the basin bellied out explosively. An arrow-tipped column of light, like a massive tree-trunk, stretched to the length of two school buses before unfurling a spiralling bloom of eight suckered arms and two tentacles, pivoting gracefully in the weightless aether and making enough light to see for a dozen feet around it in the murky water.

Hermione gaped as the swollen, stolen kraken patronus lolled, moaning with a croaking distortion of Dennis Creevy’s voice. Bellatrix pointed at it and yelled something while Hermione was too busy exchanging looks with Severus when he spotted her. She pointed away from the side of the boat before extinguishing her wand and flitting into the dark.
Bellatrix yelled again, “Praedo Parere Patronum!” and struck the massive glowing squid with a great black thorny lash that unfurled from the wand she held...not her own, but Creevy's. The impact rippled red through the creature’s hide and it screamed. She struck it again and the monster fastened around the great gallery hull like a ten-pronged setting for a dark iron gem. Bellatrix struck again, and the squid tightened its grip, and she laughed as the hull began to crimp and squeal.

Severus yelled, “Good let’s go!”

Bellatrix glared at him, “Don’t be hasty, Servilis. It’s never suited you. This little gobbet is just the bait on the hook.”

The squid contracted again and the massive hull groaned in earnest harmony with the creatures own lament. Hermione’s mind whirled through the roster of people she’d sent onto that boat. Had they all gotten out? Had any of them gotten out? Neither sense nor nonsense had any solid opinion.


What would Harry do?

“Expelliarmus!” she flung the spell at the dark witch with a flick of the wrist meant to hook the targeted wand into her own hand. It was a long distance, risky, but her aim was true and the wand whipping the kraken flew free.

“Accio!” Severus snatched the wand mid-flight with an almost prescient agility.

Bella turned, staring out into the dark water, “Where did it come from, pet? Did you see?”

“No.”

“Keep Creevey’s wand, then. Mind his squid. Crush the boat until it leaks Gryffindors.”

Then Bellatrix pulled her walnut wand from her sleeve. Hermione cast silently to push herself away from where she’d been, hopefully just beyond the edge of the massive patronus’ light.

“Lux Magnus!” Bella yelled, throwing an unsatisfying puddle of illumination a little way into the dense gloom and finding nothing, ethereal light significantly muted by material gloom and metaphysical convolutions. As Hermione moved, she kept one eye on Severus, and realized he was keeping a corner of an eye on her. When she took a moment to collect her thoughts she realized he could feel her. There was a line, tugging faintly, directly between them.

“I can feel you, Molly,” Bellatrix cooed, turning with an unnerving accuracy to point the walnut wand within ten degrees of where Hermione floated, tracking her as surely as Severus did. She seemed a bit winded, and keeping a hold of the bulky pensieve seemed to hamper her ability to turn. Hermione let her talk, trying to gauge her reaction time, “This wand of mine wants you. Whatever you did to confuse it on the boat broke when the boat did. Bad move. It can smell you now, you whelping clown car, and it’s got a little bit of a bone to pick with the one that made it serve the minis—”

“Expelliarmus!” with two silent and one spoken force spell in rapid succession, Hermione charged Bella and ripped the bent branch out of her hand, angling her trajectory up to meet it mid-flight. She tucked herself into a ball around both wands, knowing Severus would have to try and fire on her, trusting him to guess the correct wrong way to anticipate her. A bright green bolt sizzled past her ear and she followed it into the dark above the boat.

Bella snarled, “Severus! Wand! Accio!” and she caught the Creevey wand just as Hermione was
recovering her equilibrium in three-dimensional space, the feel of the malignant wand prickling against her skin as she tried to hold it.

Severus yelled, “Bella this isn’t working! Let’s go!”

“No! Dennis was my link! I’ve no thread back here if I leave! It has to be now! Get the wand!”

“I can’t get out of here without you!” he hissed back, shooting a few hexes wildly into the dark, Hermione having circled away to try and get to an ideal spot behind Bellatrix without putting Severus anywhere near her line of fire, “And now apparently the woman that beat you has the wand that could end us both, we’ve no cover, and you’ve got no way to track her. You said the goblins would reward you just for breaking Hogwarts open, so cut a deal here, trade the lives on the boat for the wand, set your phantasmal fishy phallus to re-enacting the kraken invasion and let’s go! I can’t even see what I’m trying to kill here!”

“Idiot,” Bella snarled, “That little night light can’t break into Hogwarts. You saw what the castle did to the boat in retaliation when that tall bastard pulled the lever. Crucio!” She flung a gesture at the giant squid and there was a bright flood of light and a thunderous noise as the squid’s whole body clenched in a rictus of pain, it’s light flashing crimson like a cooked lobster, its steely arms instantly collapsing the great room into a twisted mass as it simultaneously shrouded itself in a brilliant cloud of glowing white ink that cast a far wider radius of light than it’s body alone, burning away Hermione’s murky cover. A second silvery plume of bubbles mixed with the broken boat’s pearlescent quicksilver fuel flew up from the crushed hull towards the surface, giving Hermione just a moment more to move, pointing a wand at Bellatrix and hoping her angle favored Severus.

Severus and Bella both turned, Severus got the spells off first, “Expelliarmus! Accio!” catching the sliver of wand that flew to him from her hand and turning towards the surface of the water where, high above, the slick of fuel was forming a mirror, the bright light from beneath reflecting back down on them in shafts. He propelled himself upwards, away from Bellatrix, shouting, “I’ve got it! Come on! We can get out through the surface!” He twisted mid-flight, throwing some truly brutal spells straight at Hermione that she nevertheless found...flattering. He knew she could match him, and he could afford to go hard for the sake of the act.

Hermione had just finished a hasty shield between parries, wondering why nothing from Bella's direction was demanding her attention, but she suddenly saw that Bellatrix wasn’t even looking at her. She was looking at the densely light-clouded aether between Hermione and Severus, and the faint silver filament that gleamed like a trip-wire between them in the aether light. Mad wheels turning swiftly, the witch fixed her gaze on Hermione, pointed her wand, and shot Severus in the back, “Petrificus!”

“No!”

Bellatrix laughed, ducking behind the pensieve and using it like a shield to parry Hermione’s hail of hexes as Severus slowly sank back towards her, shouting her taunts to be heard, “I wish I had the time to kill him slowly, Molly! But when you took my wand from me, you made it possible to take it back from you to make it mine again. Too bad for Severus that he took it first. That means I have to kill you both now just to be sure. All the worse that he was betraying me. That means I’ll make it messy. Accio fool.”

Hermione stopped firing as Bellatrix caught Severus’ paralyzed form and clutched him against her, her wand at his throat, letting the pensieve fall into the dark below in favor of a surer shield. Hermione re-finished her own shield and aimed behind her to push herself forward, closing the difference, hoping she could confuse Bella long enough for Severus to free himself.
The first part worked. As Hermione came closer through the bright mist, Bellatrix squinted.

“You’re not Molly.”

“And you’re not going to kill anyone else tonight. Because you know the moment he’s no longer your shield I’m going to blast your crazy head clean off.”

Bella gave a sweetly impish smile, pressing the Creevy wand harder into Severus’ jugular. “What like this?” flaring the features of her face wide with an expressive fake-out. Hermione didn’t move.

“You won’t kill him. You want to win too much. You can feel how close He is down here, the one you love. The one you miss more than you can possibly bear. Winning whatever game you’re playing is your chance to see him again, now, tonight, without waiting. You can’t help but take it. You won’t settle for a stalemate.”

Bella’s lip twitched, yearning to retort, but she’d begun to get a sense of the timing of Hermione’s surprise moves and went just a second ahead, “Patronum Perere!” she pointed her wand at the great squid where it sullenly cradled the crushed ship, sulking at the center of the bright drifting mist. It jerked and flailed and its light turned bloody. Hermione dodged sideways and forced two tentacles to wind around one another instead of catching her arms. Bella turned, still holding Severus against her, nibbling whispered words against his ear that Hermione could easily guess. Gonna let you watch as it tears her apart, blah blah blah. Hackneyed purple sadism. If only she didn’t seem so close to doing it.

Hermione tumbled as another tentacle shot past Bella and grabbed for her; the squid also, apparently, had figured out that the safest place from both witches was behind the crazy one.

Hermione threw a wild hex in Bella’s direction between churning the aether with shield charms and trying to direct propulsion spells that would avoid tentacular attacks. It was a small thing she could have easily dodged or deflected but opted to block instead with Severus’ form. She couldn’t hit Bella. She spared a glance towards the crumpled boat still leaking quicksilver petrol upwards into a growing mirror. She needed a minute. Time for more talking.

“Severus was right on the boat, Bella. Nothing is what you think it is,” even in the relatively weightless environment, even without a bona fide physical form, her voice was strained with effort as she dodged another lash from the livid cephalopod.

Even through the flurry of distractions, she noticed Bella relaxing visibly, certain she held all the advantage, correctly registering the desperation in her opponent’s play, “Do tell.”

“In the first place, you’re not getting out that way,” she shot a swift and mostly-harmless fire-starting spark upwards and behind them, hitting the thin stream of fuel and watching it bloom into blue flames, rocketing up the trickling leak like a beanstalk and lighting the floating mirror on fire, the top burning first and surrounding the vaguely circular pool with a bright eclipse-like corona, “Unless you go now, before it all burns away.”

Bella laughed, seeming unconcerned, though the corner of her eye twitched, “Anything else?”

“You won’t be taking Severus with you, because malignant as you are you're not stupid. You can’t kill him and he doesn’t have your wand,” she dodged, turning over, beginning to feel vaguely motion-sick, resolving to start parrying instead, “Go ahead and make the exact same mistake that killed your master, if you must, but all you’d be doing if you took him is showing him where you’ve hidden your painting which, I promise, won’t turn out well for you in the end.”
Bella’s eyes narrowed but she didn’t glance away or flinch, though her arm around Severus’ waist began creeping towards his sleeve, tightening her wand hand around his chest, “Torturing him indefinitely will suffice. And once I’ve killed you, who will be left to know or care about finding him?”

“Times have changed. The whole wizarding world cares very much what happens to him.”

Hermione smiled, and she spoke fast to try and stay ahead of her tears, “Just two more things, I promise. The first is that the only person it would have benefitted you to kill on that boat got off safe and sound and is going to start shooting at you in just a minute. The second is that you better move, because if there’s anything I’ve learned this week, it’s that up is down, ink is white, and Severus Snape is not fated to die.”

Bella sneered, jamming the Creevy wand into Severus neck, “You're lying.”

Severus grabbed her wrist in his steely grip and wrenched her arm away from his throat, pulling her around to face him as a bolt flew past them from behind, his tone effortlessly laconic, “No, that’s about the only thing she can’t do.”
The End

Ginny and her fliers rode in like a storm from above, hailing down bolts around Bellatrix and Severus, aiming too wide as the death eaters grappled for the Creevy wand. Harry and Angelina broke from formation behind Ginny and went for the Squid, weaving and ducking among its tentacles to draw its attention. Hermione heard Severus and Bellatrix’s voices rising sharply with hexes and counter-incantations, though her eyes were locked on her friends.

She was yelling “Harry, Angie, be careful, that thing’s made from Dennis Creevey’s-” when there was a snap and a small explosion of force from the direction of the grapple. Hermione was pushed sideways several feet. Severus and Bellatrix were still gripping each other by the wrist at arm’s length, each with a hand drawn away holding half a wand. Bellatrix seemed disoriented, shaking away crackling rivulets of broken power that clung to her and seemed to want her to sleep. Severus, still worn from torture, seemed unconscious, having succumbed.

The giant squid made a horrible, reverberating sound like continental plates grinding together, at once pained and triumphant. Underneath it were cries, not just of Dennis Creevey, but hisses and laughter and growls. The paddled tips of its two great tentacles and the protrusive domes of its two great eyes glowed amber, and suddenly it moved with an unbidden malevolence it had lacked before, seeming to swell in size. Ginny and the others suddenly found themselves beset by eight writhing arms and had to abandon the dicey attack on Bellatrix.

Lacking the consistent speed and dexterity afforded the fliers by their brooms, Hermione closed in on Bellatrix, who was slashing furiously at Severus’ fussy sleeve looking for her walnut wand. She found only Hermione’s slender vinewood and screamed with impatience.

“I have it here. Let him go, let me free him, and you can have it.”

Bellatrix turned, keeping her grip on Severus’ wrist, each witch levelling the other’s wand at her.

Bellatrix was tired of talking, slinging out spell after spell, which Hermione deflected, afraid to hurl dangerous offensive spells with the walnut wand while Severus might be moved into range at any moment, feeling a twinge of wrathful resistance through her wrist with every expelliarmus and diffindo she used the malignant branch to cast. But with each pang of resistance up her arm something in her chest rippled a little further down towards her hand, the warm spot where her locket pressed, strengthening her control.

“You don’t know how to free him, stupid cow. There isn’t a way.”

“You only say that because you don’t want there to be one. But I found one. I can do it for you, too. I can heal that empty gnawing space your lord burned into your heart, the one that hurts so much that you’d do anything to see him again. Here, I’ll show you,” she whipped the walnut wand twice around her head and flung a bright blue bolt at Bellatrix.

“No!” she screeched, wrenching Severus’ arm to sling him into the path of the same simple spellbreaking charm Bella had blocked with him before. Severus opened his eyes, looking startled. Bella released her grip on him like he were made of bees and propelled herself away, slinging bolts to cover her retreat.

Harry and the fliers were coordinated but hard-pressed to deal with the tentacles whipping through the aether with indiscriminate ease, guided by eyes that seemed bent on targeting Harry and Ginny.
Harry was yelling. Hermione thought for a moment that he was yelling at the fliers, but Ginny had that handled. He was yelling at the squid...or rather at Dennis Creevey inside the squid. The fliers continued to weave in and out, though no one threw any spells. Insanely enough, it seemed to be working. The body still rolled, and the tentacles dragged in arcs, but the eight arms drooped, and the space reverberated with a deep groan.

Hermione could just hear Harry shouting, “... I shouldn’t have tried to tell you how to feel about what happened, how to react. You have every right to be angry at me. At magic. At the world. At Hogwarts. At Dumbledore’s army. We let you down. I didn’t understand. How could I? How could anyone understand what it’s like to lose a brother? I’d never lost one...until I did. And I still don’t understand what it’s like for you but...I do understand why…” he reached out and laid a hand on the giant patronus’ arm, and the seething crimson lightened to pink where he touched it, the pink irising out and spreading, becoming white at the center, “I left you alone and I shouldn’t have. I postured that I understood and I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

Ginny laid a hand on an arm as well. And George, white light spreading out from their fingertips like ripples on a lake. The great squid groaned and rolled over, its amber eyes going white.

“Sectum sempra!” Bellatrix roared, the ragged edges of her voice lingering. The shot went wide to avoid all the fliers. There was still plenty of squid in the way where it landed.

The great cephalopod was slithered in half, shafts of light flailing out and contracting to disjointed pinpoints, falling through the darkening water like stars into the depths of the void, four bright golden comets among them.

Bella looked from the shrinking mirror to the receding lights, her eyes glinting with malicious joy and tears, deciding. She dove toward the bottom, casting silently, streaking so fast past the plummeting comets that they seemed to be caught in a vortex that dragged them down faster than they could sink. Then she was gone.

Harry yelled Dennis’s name. Ginny flew to him. Angelina called to them that their easy exit was boiling away. Ginny nodded and waved them off, yelling that they should just “tell Enith to open the gate as soon as Hermione wakes up”. Angelina nodded, and she and the others flew back through the mirror they’d come from as it irised closed.

Hermione flew to Severus, but something in his face forbade her to embrace him. He had Lockhart’s wand in hand, and was testily mending his sleeves, but he looked frightened.

“It isn’t over. Can’t you feel it?”

Hermione swallowed, nodding, “What is that...it feels like…”

A cold, cutting wind from her nightmares blew through her guts as a low boom from below signified that the falling stars had impacted the bottom of every chasm that separates everyone from everyone else, the bottom of the mirrored sky.

The low rumbling roar that followed told her that the sky was about to fall.
The roar subsided into an uneasy quiet.

“The squid was never what she was going to use to break open the school. She needed the only thing that could really break a living and adapting artifice like Hogwarts.”

Hermione nodded, “Or anyone. A piece of itself. The monster in its gut. What defenses could it possibly have against that?”

Severus looked at her gravely, “I think we’re it.”

There was a silty shifting sound from below but nothing else.

Hermione shook her head, “So...all this...it was just to wake up the monster at the bottom of the lake? How did she think that would resurrect Voldemort?”

A cold draft wafted upwards, like a miserable sigh.

Severus shook his head, “She never told me the point of her plan. She’s taken everything left of him that she had, herself included...that was an interesting improvise...and forced it on something powerful and undying. Maybe for her, he lives on in the suffering of those she hates.”

Hermione shook her head, “I don’t think that would be enough for her.”

Severus sighed, “I agree. Her belief in his resurrection was definitely literal. But whatever she thought she was doing, it probably isn’t possible.”

A growl and a shudder like breaking glaciers bubbled up from the void below. Gravity lurched strangely, and for a moment it felt like the bubbles were falling from above like icy rain.

Hermione shivered and moved closer to Severus, her wand ready, waiting for the likely attack, “But she lost the cooperation of Dennis’s vengeance to direct it, and thought she’d lost the chance to use you as well...so she...just...cut her losses?”

Severus nodded, “She’s probably down there now, inside its wordless mind, lashing it on with her own hunger for revenge. To destroy Hogwarts as a consolation prize.”

“But if that’s all that she wanted then why didn’t she just...oh. Oh Severus I’m so fucking thick. The pensieve was just a model...a basin of obsessive vengeful memories...and adding the seed of a soul attuned to that feeling...pulling out something much larger...”

“But she doesn’t have anything like a seed of Voldemort’s soul! That’s not what any of the paintings are, and you said all his horcruxes are gone!”

“They are! Long gone, we destroyed them...” an image of the snapped and dangling willow wand flashed in her mind as she held the extant dream version in front of her, “...was she ever holding a cup?”

Severus squinted, “As an artifice within an artifice? If she had, it would have been in her frame, which was never on the boat as far as I could tell. She was uncharacteristically tight-lipped. Maybe.”

“Would that even work?” Hermione eyed the black bottom of the lake. Somehow the featureless
darkness seemed to shift.

He shook his head doubtfully, “Only as much as a dream or a memory. She might resurrect something akin to a traditional portrait, a simple pantomime of his personality. But without at least some part of his soul still attached to something really living...some living seed...”

“Was she pregnant?”

He shook his head ruefully, “Not that kind of seed. A part of his own soul in an undestroyed vessel. A dream version alone might infect the monster with his motive malice with a lot of time and insanely complicated craftwork but without a...”

“Hermione!” Ginny yelled.

Hermione traded a quick look with Severus and flew to her, “Bellatrix was just using the squid to wake something worse. What...what’s wrong with Harry?”

Ginny shook her head, “At a guess I’d say probably your ‘something worse’.”

Harry’s face was fixed below, the corners of his eyes and mouth twitching, his face pallid and slicked with sweat, “Dementors. It feels like dementors.”

Ginny gripped his shoulder, “I thought they didn’t scare you anymore. C’mon auror.”

Harry shook his head, “Bigger...much bigger...I can hear them...my mum...Sirius...Professor Snape...Dumbledore...Ron...”

Hermione gritted her teeth. Dementor. Not demon door. And it was fixated on Harry Potter just like Voldemort had...

“Oh...oh no...Ginny get Harry out of here. Right now.”

Something slick and deep and black-on-black stirred below them, groaning like a reluctant waking teenager, and she resolved to put off hectoring Severus about his diction to another time. Something opened, and then a shock of sound that, she knew in her skin, reverberated through every surface and stone of the school.

_Hermione!

She felt her heart lurch and other concerns slough away, “Ron?” his voice was right below her, yelling for her clearly, insistently. He was right there, just through the darkness, alone, he needed her...he’d come to help...he was right there... but another version of his voice was there in her heart too, far softer, far gentler in a way that held her up and turned her right-side-up again, _Don’t look for me in the water. That’s not where I am. It’s important..._

She shook her head, “Ginny, get him out of here. There’s still that ever-dying scrap of Tom Riddle in there. Bella might be meaning to use him!”

Ginny yanked at Harry’s arm but the aether seems to have stiffened around him, the freedom from gravity also isolating them from the simplicity of other natural laws. His body was as fixed in place as his attention.

“Try to snap him out of it! Knock him out if you have to! I don’t know if he’s actually useful the way Bella might be assuming but any use she has for him will definitely involve killing him. If he comes to or passes out retreat to the dungeon. Don’t look back and don’t look down. Severus and
I...I think we can handle this, if anyone can. Did you bring any of those patronuses down?”

Ginny nodded, slinging a pack off her back, ”We had a few left. And that little something extra from Hagrid. Didn’t think they’d be much good against a giant patronus squid but,” she shrugged, “guess we’ll never know.”

There was a long scrape and a thunderous thump and the empty space seemed to shake.

“You did great, Djinn, better than I could have wished,” Hermione rifled through the bag of mostly-empty vials, pulling out six that still contained jumping threads of light, asking almost incidentally, “What did you do to kill the boat, anyway?”

Ginny smiled wanly, tugging swiftly at a series of places on Harry to see if any part of him would move, “We triggered the boat’s smuggler spells, the ones for opening buildings from underneath. The school felt it trying to invade and fought back. Never bring a boat to a castle fight.”

“Clever.”

“Not really. There was literally a big red lever marked ‘open building’…goblins are really confident in the impregnability of their holds.”

“Alright well, I doubt we’ve got another of those up our sleeve. Severus?” Hermione turned, not realizing that Severus wasn’t making his way over but was still right where she had left him, staring down, “Bollocks. Ok. Harry luv, you have to listen to Ginny, ok? It’s just a monster. It’s messing with our minds. It’s got a deep hook in you because the war took so much from you but...” she shook her head, realizing she wasn’t helping.

Ginny took his face between her hands, “You have to think of our Lily, our James, our Albus, ok? We know how to do this. We know how to go on.”

Harry blinked, nodding, pulling his eyes up from the bottom to meet Ginny’s. He nodded again, still sweating, still stiff and stuck, but his arms came free. There was another of those awful calls from below, like hearing your own name screamed in anger, called out in despair. Hermione. Harry gritted his teeth and covered his ears as if beset by a much more terrible cacophony.

She shook her head. She knew how to do this too, had done it for a year; how to stop staring into the empty dark, even when she knew it was preparing to climb up from her guts and drag her down. She had work to do.

She propelled herself through the dark to his side, “Severus. Look at me.”

He shook his head without shaking off the deep stare.

“My Prince…”

He looked at her sharply, almost angrily, the way Happy had before accepting her proposal to teach her grandchildren.

“You’re wrong about the monster we’re about to fight. There’s never been a dementor that large,” she tried harder than she’d ever tried in her life to keep a straight face and lie with conviction, “Harry agrees with me.”

His expression contracted in anger and affront, his tongue sharpening to a fine point, his whole body rounding on her reflexively, “Oh really, professor? Well yes let’s defer to Potter’s wisdom and just ignore the common fact that flying dementors are only a subset of a larger class! The word describes
any creature that can reach into your soul and exaggerate your…” The color subsided when he saw her smiling at him, his obsession with regret completely derailed by his larger passion for being right. A sly smile crashed recklessly into one of his cheeks, mirroring hers, and he shook his head, disbeliefing, “There are no words for you.”

She reached to kiss him just as a sharp shriek and a dark tentacle, slimy and ribbed, shot up from the depths and seized her ankle, dragging her down, burning like the murky poisons that she had ripped out of young Severus’ heart in her stupid selfish worthless reckless...

“Expecto Patronum!” a shining crow splashed against the squirming limb and it let her loose. She propelled herself up and shouted, “Ginny! Showtime!”

Six bright glass vials plunged into the dark, followed by a flittering golden snitch.

“Alohamora!” Ginny yelled, and the snitch popped open, releasing a slender, glassy, ravenous silicasti sprite that began darting through the dark and devouring glass vials one by one, freeing a modest glowing menagerie one at a time. The diversion unfolded beautifully, though Hermione avoided looking down as the darting lights showed more of the nightmare’s contours than she was comfortable with.

Severus was shaking his head again, “That won’t hold it. We need something that will kill it.”

“No, even if we could, we shouldn’t. Nothing alive lacks for a deep nightmare. We’d be destroying the school just as surely if we destroyed this part of it as if we don’t stop it.”

“So...we soothe it, put it to sleep, let it retreat…”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. At a guess it’s currently running on the combined rage of five death eaters, a profound childhood trauma, and whatever else Bella stirred into that pot. I’m not.”

Hermione and Severus dodged apart as another shaft of slithering black grabbed for them. It flailed blindly and connected with Severus chest, its end sprouting pointed finger-like tendrils that pressed eagerly at his sternum. Hermione grabbed his wrist and pulled him to her. A warm shock passed between them, skin to skin, and the tendrils recoiled just as vigorously as the arm had when hit by a patronus.

Something pulsed against her chest, warm and quiet and smiling lopsidedly, Love, silly.

Her mind spun as fast as it would go. Love. Great. Implemented how? Maybe they could survive and keep it distracted, making it release them each time it attacked, little stabs of happiness and affection, painful and frustrating, but it would just become more irritated until that stopped working. To actually put it to sleep would take something overwhelming enough to brace and press, consistent and safe, like a Hagrid-hug or a...

“Severus, maybe if we can…” she never found out where she was going with that sentence. She saw a moment later than he did that Ginny and Harry were in trouble. Three slithering limbs were darting about them, Harry had a black gash across his chest and was struggling to manifest his stag patronus, and Ginny was having a hard time fending all three off with her patronus alone. Hers was a horse, though it had become slenderer and more doe-like over the years.

Something flashed in his eye, and before Hermione could utter another word he had shouted,
“Expelliarmus!” and rocketed across the distance between them and Ginny. If he’d hesitated even a fraction of a second he would have been too late, but it was a moment he’d dwelt on for twenty years, and possibly dreamed about for twenty more.

As a wickedly-pointed tentacular limb dove at the auburn-haired woman who refused to leave Harry Potter undefended, Severus Snape, like a diving falcon, threw himself into it’s path, embracing it as it plunged into his chest and swinging it wide of its original target.

Hermione screamed, and the tentacles writhing towards her friends began groping towards her, as if smelling something they favored.

Harry yelled “No!” and lashed out at the tentacle speared through Severus not with a patronus, but with a crow.

Chronal Reversal of Works.

A small bubble of time around Severus Snape began to run backwards, prying him loose from the invading limb and closing his chest over its blood. Hermione’s mind whirled. She had only a second to be brilliant. To think of something that could reach him, could save him. The locket on her chest burned and she remembered. The woman. The memory. The magic bullet. It couldn’t miss, she had a direct line, it would only open for him, it would be enough that the creature would let him go and then...then they could figure it out...retreat, regroup.

She held the image of being alone, together, with him, clearly in the front of her mind, “*Expecto Patronum!*”

A spark like a dancing star, like a snap of air pressure, leaped from her locket through her wand, and a golden crow the size of a pterodactyl rocketed towards its target, along the silver thread between her heart and his, unerringly sighted.

She saw him turn his head. She saw him raise his wand. She felt the tentacles swarm her and she didn’t care, he would be safe.

She saw a calm, small smile on the corners of his mouth, and a moment before it happened she saw what he meant to do, and her heart crumbled.

“*Expecto Mutare!*”

As if he were flicking a fishing line, he pulled the bird towards him faster than sight. It lengthened to a needle-thin dart of light, and when it struck him, it pulled him along into itself, turning sharply and spearing downward into the center of the black unthinkable mass. She felt him speed down and down. She felt the thread between them stretch...and then snap.

It had opened for him. And he had taken it into the dark place, a lovely-enough dream to soothe deep anguish with calm and consonance, with not being alone.

There were a few sharp tremors, and something like an echo of Bellatrix shouting, then a deep shuddering sigh and another lazy groan. The burning tentacles thinned to little black threads, then to trickles of sooty tears that dribbled away into the dark, evaporating back into the directionless void, then to nothing.

Nothing is all that Hermione felt until she felt Ginny’s hands on her shoulders, pulling her out of the depths of a drowning dream.
I've got such a strong desire to get all he rest of it up tonight, but if I don't go to bed I'm going to be a zombie. Soon, though.

Hermione stood on the bridge between the front gate of the grounds and the front doors of the school. It was made of stone, feeling heavy and permanent but also seeming to hover on its arches, impossibly light, above the black lake. She was gazing down into the water. She was holding a memory in her hands. It seemed more fragile than the glass that held it.

Whatever we are, it is fragile. It's just a mad hope, a dream. And dreams die, Hermione. All the time.

The great school loomed over her, looking down, its grey stone gleaming white in the early afternoon sun.

I want you to dream beyond me.

The lake was smooth and glassy black, reflecting the bright tower that crouched over it like the white queen’s rook on its home square.

The more you want to come back here the tighter you should put the cork in and throw it into the lake because, well, I think I would drown myself in you given the situation in reverse.

But you’re stronger than me, so I trust you with this, I trust you to want me and still to want to live more. Can you agree to that?

“Fuck you,” she muttered, “Fuck you for living. Fuck you for dying. Fuck you for coming back. Fuck you for leaving.” She refused to cry. For the first time it was possible to refuse. She jammed the cork tighter into the vial with her thumb.

The school had survived. Everyone within the walls had fallen asleep and had terrible dreams that no one wanted to talk about. Things too deep, too close. They were only dreams, but on waking no one was quite exactly the same as they’d been the day before. Some were grim. Some were quiet. Others were almost frantically kind. Most of them attributed it to grieving for Headmaster McGonagall, and there was no way for Hermione to refute that such a thing was possible or deserved, though, at a guess, it would be several days or weeks before those closest to her would actually feel the reality seeping in.

Harry had already stopped by her. She was pretty sure he had meant to listen, but mostly he’d just talked. But that had been good. Peaceful. Normal. He told her how he and Ginny had taken all the Weasley-P and G-Weasley kids back to their place, to get ready for the funeral on Saturday. She’d thanked him. He’d told her how they’d recovered Severus’ frame from the ship, and that Happy was still dozing comfortably in his gold velvet chair, how the actual ship had survived since the squid had only crushed its gallery and the spells that made it much larger on the inside. Even completely collapsed, the inside of the ship had been significantly more capacious than the outside dimensions, though the conceptual fuel tank had ruptured. Hermione studied the quicksilver sheen that was still
floating in mirrored blobs on the mirrored surface of the lake. He told her Neville had brought Happy into the headmaster’s office to hang with the other portraits until she woke up, insisting that, in a way, it was where she rightly belonged, and she deserved a rest if she wanted one. Hermione had sincerely agreed.

He told her that Dennis Creevy had survived, that Dorian had lingered longer than he’d been told to, that he’d insisted on bringing the man’s body back, saying that it mattered whether adults survived, too. Severus had only killed his body in a dream, after all, when his soul had already been put elsewhere. Dennis had awoken like any survivor of a dementor’s kiss, but, while trying to defend the new greenhouses from a wayward silicasti, Neville had found that something had recovered the pensieve Bellatrix had dropped, and left it on the shore of the lake. There had been giant-squid prints around it. That thing always had favored Dennis. They’d taken the pensieve to the larger one in Hermione’s bathroom and taken Dennis down into it. Harry’d promised not to talk about what they’d seen, but it had gotten him his soul back.

He’d said Enith was working hard to make sure Minerva’s portrait was completed in time to be unveiled at the reception after the funeral, and that she had given the school a goblin-generous fifteen percent tragedy discount. He mentioned that Enith had, politely, inquired as to whether the school had any of Severus Snape’s collected memories. Harry had, politely, not directly mentioned the one Hermione was holding in her hands. She’d nodded and said she’d think about it and did not particularly care that Harry could probably tell she was lying. Harry, politely, didn’t point it out. He just offered her a hug, and she accepted. It didn’t burn or ache. That would come later. That day, the day after, and the next little while, she suspected, were for numbness.

He’d left her alone, reminding her that he wanted her to come to him if she needed anything. She said that she would, and meant it. She wasn’t incapable of learning, after all. Some would say it was her forte.

The texentes had only a few more hours to go. She didn’t want to go back in until it had stopped. Its effects certainly reached to the ends of the grounds, but she didn’t want to be around anyone. Beasley had said she looked forward to the chance to figure out how to wind the thing, but meant to do a lot of careful study first. The only people who knew how to wind it were a tapestry and a sleeping elf in a portrait, and neither of them were talking. Beasley said that Nikita said that after the battle, Hogarth had fallen into an inscrutable sulk.

She heard the bell tower in Hogsmeade chime the half-hour.

From the corner of her eye, by the gate, she saw something translucent moving, pale and slender. It came through the gate and floated silently towards her. She didn’t look. Whoever it was it was clearly welcome at Hogwarts. Ghosts were easy to keep out. The school knew its own mind.

The ghost of Minerva McGonagall placed a prim air-kiss by her cheek.

Hermione felt a surprisingly not-numb glimmer of surprise. By old habit, she stood up straight to address the headmaster, “You decided to come back.”

Minerva nodded, sighing, “I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking of how I couldn’t leave Longbottom in a lurch, after complaining so bitterly about the short staff. And of everything I still owe to Happy on behalf of this school. Among other things.”

“You took your time.”

She shrugged, “I wanted to. To see if that changed how I felt.”
“About Happy?”

“Among other things.”

“What if Sir Among Other Things suddenly doesn’t feel the same?” she felt vaguely horrified that her bitter numbness was making her so flip when she really ought to have been apologizing to Minerva for getting her killed.

Minerva gave her a disapproving smirk, “Well we’ll certainly have time to work it out now, won’t we.”

“And the other-other things?”

“Dougal, you mean?”

Hermione nodded.

“I was thinking most of him when I finally made up my mind, actually.”

“Really?”

Minerva nodded, smiling. Hermione noticed for the first time how much younger she looked. Positively middle-aged, and no less handsome than ever, “I couldn’t stop hearing...over and over, his recitation of Donne’s ‘Death Be Not Proud’.”

Hermione nodded, happy for an intellectual distraction, “That is a lovely one. I admit I don’t remember all of it.”

Minerva closed her eyes,

“Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.”

Hermione nodded, “A bit religious for my tastes, but still lovely.”

Minerva shook her head, “I don’t think it’s religious. Holy, maybe. Donne was religious but...I don’t know, I think the work tells its own truth.”

“Which is?”

“Oh I would never try to say definitively. But to me, I think it makes the fairly bold claim
that...though our lives are not as unstoppable as we might like, nor are our deaths as immovable as we might fear. That yes, those things that we feel are promised can be channeled in ways we do not want or expect, but so can things immovable be worn away. The river and the rock. The falcon and the falconer. True and real. Life, or love, and death. Dreams and nightmares.”

“But Donne was just a human. A muggle even. He didn’t really know for certain any more than any of us ever do. A few thousand years of magic and science and art and cleverness and religion haven’t gotten any of us any closer to actually knowing anything about it, except, I suppose, in the way we occupy ourselves with them until we definitely do find out first hand. But the truth is it’s just one more chasm, one more black lake. We cross it when we cross it, and nobody else knows what it’s like except people that are already on the other side. All we know is that back from the dead doesn’t happen.”

Minerva shrugged, “But something must, ultimately, be true. For me, it’s this. Maybe death is immovable. But maybe rebirth is unstoppable.”

“But that doesn’t really mean that you know, either. I mean, no disrespect, I admire your wisdom and cleverness more than anyone’s, including my own, but even ghosts don’t get special insight into death.”

She nodded, “True. But I’ve finally been to the place where I had to decide what I believe. If nothing else, I know that for sure. I truly believe that death, and the rules of death, the chasm of death, will not outlive my soul. The story, ultimately, goes on, because that’s what stories do. Someone else might believe that stories, ultimately, end. I’m just saying, you don’t know if you really believe it until it’s you that has to choose. Really has to choose.”

Hermione sighed, “Well, speaking as an atheist who has been in a proverbial foxhole, we do exist.”

“You absolutely do. You just don’t really know until you are one.”

“So are you going to go in for your Big Reveal? You’re going to cock-up a lot of really lovely funeral plans. Though I expect we can make a lovely retirement party from the rubble.”

Minerva smiled, “Has Longbottom got his eulogy all written.”

“I think so.”

“Well, yes, I suppose I better get in there. Are you coming?”

Hermione sighed, “I don’t know yet.”

Minerva squinted at her, “Things haven’t been going as you hoped.”

Hermione nodded, smiling weakly, “But it is good to see you. I’m...I’m sorry I got you killed.”

Minerva rolled her eyes, “On Godric’s glistening gonads, if I ever hear you apologize to me for that again I swear I’ll punish you as you think you deserve. Nobody got me killed but me, is that clear?”

Hermione smirked, grateful, staring into the water, “Yes professor. Sorry professor.”

Minerva harrumphed a laugh and floated towards the castle.

“Minerva?”

She turned, expectantly.
“Did...did it hurt?”

Minerva wrinkled her nose and shook her head, “Not so you’d notice. It was disorienting. They just...pushed me out. It was rather like going to sleep. I thought I might be able to find my way back in, but there was no connection to my body anymore. They’d snapped it. I expect if they’d caught me while I was actually inside the rickety old thing they’d have pushed me out all the same. But I still felt a connection to the school, so...I followed that.”

Hermione nodded, and the ghost when in.

Some little time later, Ginny came out.

“So...Minerva’s back.”

“Yeah I saw her. How are people taking it?”

Ginny’s shrug was a masterpiece of understatement, “About like you’d think.”

Hermione didn’t say anything. Ginny leaned her arms on the side of the bridge with her, looking into the water with her for a long time, not saying anything. It was not the wrong thing. It gave Hermione time to decide if she was going to say it. When she did it was barely a whisper.

“I see him.”

“Severus?”

Hermione nodded slowly, “I see him. In the water.”

Ginny was quiet for a long time, “Do you mean metaphorically?” she sounded hopeful.

Hermione shook her head, still staring down, “I mean...where my reflection should be, I see him.”

Ginny pursed her lips, speaking precisely, “Like...how...clearly…”

Hermione sighed, “Like crystal clearly. Like definitely probably going insane clearly. Like all the intense feelings and bullshit of the past week have definitely overloaded something in my brain and my reality is no longer reality-reality clearly.”

Ginny nodded, “Ok. Well...let’s just sit with that for a minute, then. Let it unpack itself.”

Hermione groaned, “You’re totally on-board with me losing my mind then?”

Ginny shook her head, “I’m just trying to remind you of what your mind’s previous tenant, my best friend, would do if she hadn’t lost her lease. She would want to make observations thorough enough to compare to previous and subsequent situations. Or in this case, possible hallucinations. So you see him. Ok. That’s happening. What does that actually look like?”

“Like I’m not looking down at the lake. Like I’m looking out, across. Like the arch of the bridge in the air and the arch of the bridge reflected in the water are just two boundaries of a chasm, and we’re looking at each other across it.”

“How does he look?”

“About like I feel.”
“Yikes.”

“Yeah.”

“So...first guess that comes into your mind, what does that mean?”

“That I’m insane, obsessive, broken, pathetic, and wrong?”

“Second guess?”

“Brain tumor?”

Ginny sighed, “Come on, don’t fight me. Either you’re seeing what you’re seeing and someone’s trying to tell you something, or you’re not really seeing what you’re seeing and your brain is trying to tell you something. Either way you should at least try to listen.”

“Ok.”

“You’re good at reading faces. What is his expression telling you?”

“He’s trapped. He’s thinking of me. He’s...not coming back. He’s not even trying.”

“That hurts.”

Hermione nodded.

“How badly do you want it to be true?”

“I...pretty badly. Because it would mean he still exists. It would mean I have to...”

“You’d have to go after him. That is kind of your thing.”

Hermione sniffed, “Yeah.”

“Even though doing so would feel...”

“Crazy.”

“How would not doing it feel?”

“Like two steps from going crazy.”

Ginny sighed, “I’ll still love you.”

Hermione hung her head, “I promised you no more chaos, didn’t I.”

Ginny nodded, “This isn’t so bad. Anyway I knew you were lying.”

Hermione laughed, sweet and bitter together, “I love you so much, Djinn.”

Ginny leaned over and kissed her hairline, “I know, Hermes.”

“Will you still know it if I go crazy? Or if I love someone else so-much too?”

Ginny nodded, “This isn’t some binary. You don’t have to choose. I love you. And I love Harry. Completely. You love Ron and you love me. Why wouldn’t I believe that you can love someone else just as madly, and that I’ll still be your home? Don’t you believe it’s possible?”
Hermione kissed her, “I do. And you are.”

“I know. And if you do what you feel like you have to do, you're not choosing him or me. You're choosing you. And I'll always support that.”

Hermione stood up straight and took a deep breath. She took two slow steps back away from the wall, forcing herself back from the beckoning edge.

She gave the cork one last press with her thumb before throwing it over the side.

She closed her eyes and found Minerva was right.

Once she absolutely had to choose, she knew whether she believed.

She took her two-step running-start and jumped across the chasm.
And I Feel...Feels.

As she fell, she thought, “The texentes might not reach me here.”

She thought “there’s no reason why this would get me anything but soaked.”

But she didn’t need Hogwarts to dream for her anymore. She could do that just fine on her own. She didn’t need a blackbird or a white rabbit, a secret riddle or a magic feather. She was a witch, and had magic of her own. So she remembered that Hermes was just another name for Mercury, and Mercury was just another name for Quicksilver, and quicksilver was part of the thin slick of magical fuel still covering the water...but only as an illusion, a mirror...so...navigating through should be no problem for her. Maybe. And maybe she was crazy, and what she found wouldn’t mean anything to anyone but herself. But it mattered to her, so it mattered.

She never hit a surface. It turned out that the water was just a hole. The closer she got, the darker it became, Severus and the far rim of the chasm fading to black. She fell down and down and down.

And at the bottom of the world, she found a tea party.

The tabletop was made of mirrored glass, laid out in a chessboard pattern and girded by a wrought-iron frame. It was beautifully and intricately laid-out, with all sorts of delicious treats, mannered and neat, with clever devices for serving the sweets and savories, cups and bowls of different sizes for every kind of tea. It was rich with the ritual magic of teatime, of simple company, of the frivolous use of words. The centerpiece was a wide stone bowl full of lilies, inlaid with silver. It was all allegorical as fuck.

There were twelve chairs, but only one person seated. He had an intently manic smile and a rather piratical hat.

Hermione boggled, “Bell...Bellwart? Bellwart Grindle? Belly?”

He nodded, “Of the beast, as it were,” he had the barest accent of something northern, his accent apparently as changeable as his hat.

“What are you...are you really here or am I...”

He stood up abruptly and strode towards her, holding up his left hand. He was short and robust, his handsomely full hair and beard streaked with grey, and when she held up her hand and met his, a familiar frisson of authentic touch shivered up her arm to her spine.

“Am I losing my mind?”

“Nah, yer alright. What brings you down this way?”

“I was looking for someone.”

“Well come and sit, tell me all about it. I love a good story.”

“I don’t have one of those. I thought I had, but it’s got all kinds of muddled since I began. It was going along fine, like you think a thing ought to, then it all kind of went spiral-wise and stopped making sense, too much to say and not enough to do anything about,” but she sat by him anyway, “How about you?”
“Oh, I dropped out of the protagonist business a long time ago. My brother stays all tied up in it still but not me, nah.”

“Your brother. You’re the other Hogwart.”

He laughed, whipping off his hat and flourishing it at her. His ears had pointed tips, “In a manner of speaking.”

“I’m getting sort of tired of manners. And speaking.”

“Perfect time to have a drink, then.”

He tipped the last of a pot into her cup and she took a deep sip, coughing slightly.

“This is scotch,” it burned in her chest and reminded her of...something.

“It’s whatever you need it to be. If you needed water, it would be water.”

“I suppose that’s handy. I think I’ve had my fill of water, just for now. So you were the architect?”

“I like to think I still am.”

“So what does the name ‘Bellwart Grindle’ mean? I thought you and your brother were Hogwartses.”

“We are. Hogarth is the ‘hog’, I’m the ‘wart’. As for the Grindle, well, that name’s a lot older than me. Older than your Merlyn. It was old before they ever wrote the poem about the old bear-king’s dance with a dragon.”

“Poem...Grindle...Grendel? You mean Beowulf?”

“We call it something else, but yes.”

“And ‘we’ is goblinkind?”

Bellwart nodded, “You lot remember Merlyn as a magical guide and wise man and Grendel as a wild monster. They were both a lot closer to a middle place than that. Both utter lunatics but...”

“But you and Hogarth, you’re not purely goblin.”

Bellwart snorted, “Purity, feh. But you’re correct, we grew up in a bit of a middle place as well. We grew up knowing that nobody’s great hero was as remembered, that our noble magical predecessors were actually rather frantic and squalid and selfish, and magical study had continued on much the same since them. Sorcerer fighting Saint fighting Scholar fighting Hermit. A school seemed like the best answer. Make everyone into wizards together.”

“And witches.”

He sighed, “That distinction was never my idea. Fecking Charlemagne.”

Hermione took a deep drink, “I’m sure Hogarth will tell Nikita all of this.”

“Doubtful. Big believer in mystique, that one. And the bit with the nightmare, well, that’ll keep him brooding a good long while. He’ll have made everyone forget him by tomorrow, if I know him.”

“And you?”
“I just like a good story, a cup of tea, and the sound of talk. I like to take the bits and bobs that other people miss and try to make something out of them. Soup from scraps, schools from factions, quilts from cast-offs, tales from tears. You can fit a lot of tales into a single cup of tea.”

She nodded, finishing what he’d given her, “It’s like magic.”

“I suppose you’ll be heading on?”

Hermione looked out into the blackness that extended in every direction, “On to where?”

“Just a little further. You were looking for the other fellow, weren’t you? Following a bottle that fell into my perfect flower bowl.”

Hermione stood up and leaned over the centerpiece, pushing aside the floating lilies that covered its surface. Instead of a glowing vial she saw a swirling blackness that went down and down, silvery-white threads swimming hypnotically.

She sat down, “No, not that way. That’s a pensieve. He’s not there.”

“Are you sure?”

“He’s more than a memory.”

“But the pensieve, at least, you get to see him, and you can get out again the same as you went in. Other paths are...imperfect,” he shrugged.

She shook her head, “That’s the point. Life can’t be perfected. I expect to be changed. I want more than I can make or hold on my own. I want more than a memory.”

He shrugged, “Try the teacup, then. Like I say, it will be anything you need.”

She shook her head again, “I’m not looking for what I need. I’m looking for a man.”

Belly snapped his fingers in the air, “Gurl.”

She smiled, “Everything I really need is back the way I came, or else it’s already with me. I know that.”

“There’s no place like home?”

She sighed, “Not at the moment. I’m sort of stuck on a road between doors.”

“So where will you go?”

“To him.”

“Why?”

“Because he found me when I’d fallen into the dark and gave me a way back. I owe him one in return. And I don’t think he’s going to find it down here without help.”

“Not clever enough?”

“He’s too clever. Far too clever. And stubborn. He’ll never let himself be forced to choose, or even admit that he has a choice. He’d sooner drown.”
“A way back? That’s all he gave you?”

“I suppose. Unless ethereal STDs are a thing. Which...I really hope they aren’t.”

Bellwart squinted at her, “He didn’t make you feel loved? You’re not just chasing a high you can’t give up? Not just worried that if he leaves off dreaming about you you’ll go out like a candle?”

She shook her head, “He makes me feel...desired. He made living seem like a meaningful option. We’ve never really stopped being alone with each other, but he made alone feel like someplace, made feeling an option, even if I couldn’t bear to go outside myself for it. We visited in loneliness, but he never exactly stopped pushing me away, trying to push me out. The only time he ever gave in to the thing between us was when there was...well...something else between us. Which admittedly has been most of the time.”

“Most of the time has definitely been between you. So you don’t think finding him will mean obtaining his love?”

“No. If anything it will probably be the end of us. Our last talk. And I don’t mind that, as long as it’s not the end of him. I shouldn’t be his only way forward.”

Belly smiled, “Now you’re getting it. People always seem to forget that love stories are stories. They need to have the chance to change. And they’re going to have an end.”

She shrugged, “Maybe. Unless they don’t. Who knows? All I know is what I feel and... I feel like I’m owed a chance to see him one more time. Or...promised. I just want it to be a good one.”

“Now you’re talking. Here, gimme that broken loose end of yours.”

Hermione instinctively put her hand to her heart and felt a thread there. She pulled lightly, feeling for where the end trailed out, the light pressure of the gentle pull hurting like she was being torn. She held it out to Belly, who plucked a pair of silver hairs from his temple. One he put into her hand, the other he placed against the fine silver thread that had snapped when Severus had sacrificed himself. With a light spin the silvered filaments fused together, and he blew across his fingertips until the thread grew taut, the end vanishing into the table.

“Your only way out now is through. And there’s a spare for him. You’ll know what to do.”

“I feel like this is trying to pull me into the pensieve again.”

“Are you sure that’s not your way?”

Hermione nodded.

“Well then. I guess it’s blocking your way.”

Hermione looked at the table that was all set for pointless questions and easy answers and silly games, chairs set around it like hours on a clock, laden with comforts and fripperies. It reminded her strangely of a bed. She didn’t want a bed. She needed to have a word with the monsters underneath.

She put her fingers under the edge and, with all her strength, flipped the table, and all of its load, off its legs. Underneath she found steps down.

Belly held out his teacup, it had a long crack down one side that had been mended with a bright seam of gold, “might as well take one for the road.”
“Is it a long way?”

“Not in terms of distance.”

She took the cup. It felt like she was holding her own heart in her hands.

“Don’t break it.”

“Nothing I can’t survive,” she traced the crack tenderly with her thumb, the gold glowing gently like velvet.

“It’s about more than surviving. It has to be. It’s meant to outlive us.”

She put her foot down on the first step and felt invisible waves of cool water lapping against her calf like cold flames, “Do you think he’ll refuse to see me?”

Belly smiled kindly, wistfully, avuncularly, like a magical goblin godfather, “No. Never you.”
The Mentor's Kiss

As she descended the stairs, the invisible flames licked up over her head and her clothes burned away. Not a sacrifice, just a gamble. An ante.

At the bottom of the stairs, there were no stairs. As soon as she had finished descending, she realized there had been no journey down. She had always been there. There was no place else. No lake, no dungeon, no portrait, no castle, no wizarding world, no thousand faces and facets of grief. Not really. Not for a while. Alone was always the same place. And for her, it was where he was. She knew the way out again, or rather, the way back in. In was home. Alone was always a small shadowed place, wrapped inside a larger place yet somehow outside it, a pattern repeating over and over. A room in the bottom of a spired castle. A silence beneath the churning surface of the crowd. The belly of a beast asleep beneath peaked waves. A single dim memory sitting in a palm with long fingers looming over.

He was sitting cross-legged on the black floor, hunched slightly over something ember-like and warm. His back was to her, his back was bare. It was striped with scars that were muddled by shadows to look like a place where wings had been ripped away. As she moved around to face him, he looked very young and very tired, but also calm. He looked intently at the honey-gold light in his hands. A tiny part of her wanted to ask him how he’d bested Bella, whether she was finished or just fled. The rest of her couldn’t give less of a damn about Bellatrix Lestrange in that moment.

She clucked, “I was wondering why I kept feeling you looking at me.”

He smiled but did not look up at her, “Never wonder that.”

She frowned, “You don’t have to stay here.”

“I do. This will keep the school safe, and it won’t open for anyone but me or you.”

Hermione shook her head, not that he could see, “It’s open now. It exists. It will never stop existing. Just leave it here. Come back to the world.”

He shook his head, “I don’t know how.”

“I brought a thread. It can lead you out.”

“I mean I don’t know how to leave this behind.”

She thought of being stuck, of knowing what needed to be done and being paralytically incapable of doing it anyway. She thought of Happy, how her example made it easier to start moving again, and she realized...she would have to leave if he were to have any chance of moving.

Hermione sighed, “This is my fault.”

“Oh don’t let’s start that again.”

“I wanted to strip you naked, and I have. I wanted you all to myself apart from the world, and I’ve reduced you to that. I shouldn’t have let you be my secret. I shouldn’t have inserted myself into your life.”

He shrugged, “I could have stopped you.”
“It would have been funny to watch you try.”

He gave an ambivalent sort of shrug.

She sat down on the floor cross-legged, her knees touching his. She put the empty teacup down at her hip and cupped her hands gently around his, “Look at where you are. I did this to you by wanting you.”

He shook his head, “It’s my choice.”

“So you do get that it’s a choice? That you can choose to go from here?”

He grimaced, “I…”

He seemed to wait for her to interrupt him with a hectoring rant, and she refused to oblige him.

His shoulders sagged heavily, “I don’t even understand what that would mean. I’m not real.”

“You’re real.”

“I’m only a part of someone else. Whether that someone else is you or Lily or that poor dead bastard from twenty years ago, I’m just a concatenation of memories and regrets. I’m a shadow of a man who was destined to die, to never know how much he loved you. Even if I could find my way back to him, it would only mean killing him before his work was done. I was pushed out of his life and into yours. You’re not my jailer, I’m your jail.”

“No. You’re a person. And I love you.”

“Only while the machine runs.”

“The machine always runs! The school isn’t the only thing that dreams. The texentes is only a model, the winding together of bits and bobs. The threads between us don’t come from it, they come from us. Inside that sweet oubliette in your hands you told me that we had to dream beyond this, beyond one another. Because you were right, Severus. What we are when we think of ourselves as connected by threads is fragile, but when we live our lives the cloth we make from combining our threads is strong. Love isn’t a moment, or a dream, or a feeling, or a thread. Love is the spinning. Love is the weave. Love is the choice. Please…”

He shook his head, “I can’t live in a world where you will die. Here you won’t.”

“I won’t stay in a place where we can’t live.”

He shook his hands in hers gently for emphasis, “But you will here, always. That’s all that I want.”

“You sound like a crazy person.”

“I was like this when you met me.”

“What time?”

He smirked, his annunciation crisp and tripping, “The complicated one.”

She laughed, then sighed, feeling tears struggle up from their springs, “Please come away, Severus. You don’t have to follow me but...please. It is a choice, but I don’t know how long it will be one. When the machine winds down these places...they’ll become heavy again. It might not become impossible to change your mind, but it will become harder.”
“Harder than already impossible?”

“You think I won’t leave without you?”

He smiled, his eyes shining, “I know you will. I could never stop you.”

The certitude in his voice gave her a pang of panic, “It isn’t your frame anymore, you know. The painting. Happy has claimed it pretty thoroughly for herself. I probably won’t be able to bring you back that way.”

“Then don’t.”

She snarled, “You’re being unkind.”

“I am unkind. And you should go. There’s no telling the passage of time down here, and you’re the one that doesn’t want to stay.”

“If I leave you’ll think it’s because I don’t want you.”

“I’ll think that. But I’ll know different. I’m really quite brilliant, after all.”

He didn’t resist when she put a hand over his heart, flexing her fingers very gently into him until she could feel the loose end of their dangling maybe. She took the gray thread and spun it lightly between her fingers with the hair the architect had given her.

“You showed me so much, and all I did with it was bind you to me. My path leads this way,” she pointed off to her left, “which way does yours lead?”

He pointed off to his left, for once not mirroring her.

She nodded, trying to sound brusque, “Alright. Then we part here. I know I can’t move you, but you should go from here. You should. Put that sweet oubliette down and trust the parts you need to stay with you always, regardless. Because life won’t. You need to go to it while it’s still your chance, do you understand? Follow it. Maybe it doesn’t lead to me. It probably doesn’t. Maybe it leads to Lily. Maybe it leads to you. To death or rebirth or maybe somewhere else entirely. You should give it that chance, do you understand?”

He nodded, not really seeming to listen.

She wanted to leave something with him, anything, something to connect them, even knowing that was the same mistake that had stripped him bare and trapped him in the first place. She thought of leaving her teacup, but it was her heart. It belonged at home.

He looked so cold. So heavy, nothing but an old black robe pooled over his crossed legs.

Inside her chest, something airy and dark and restless burned. It was the only thing of his she had from the first moment she’d bound herself up with him. The dark swirl of burning ink that had cascaded up her arm to her chest and settled in the crevices of her heart, that had become the wings of her unstoppable raven.

They were his wings.

He should have them back.

She held the teacup in her lap and held her right hand over it. She could feel the channel that the dark water had carved inside her arm, the mouth of the painful river in the tip of her thumb. She touched
her left index finger to her right thumb and found the impossibly thick stub-end of a splinter jammed under the nail, blocking the way. She pinched a hold of it and pulled. The familiar pain flared from thumb-tip to elbow, and the splinter moved. She had to pull slowly. Her flesh had healed onto it so the pain was intense, and willingly worsening it took all her concentration. As she pulled she realized it was nearly a foot long, pulling out longer and longer, widening along its length as the pain receded from her elbow. When she realized there was a handle at the end, she closed her eyes and yanked swiftly, gasping, and when she looked again she held a wand, spare and unadorned, and a small trickle of red-black leaked from her opened thumb, burning and quilled. She let it drain into the cup, and there was just enough burning ink to fill it to the rim.

“Here,” she murmured, dipping her fingertips in and pulling out a great black robe of feathered wings that she whipped above her head once before settling them onto his shoulders, “These never really belonged to me.”

“For a time they did. They’re better for it,” he gathered the robe from around his legs, holding it out to her, “And this is yours, I think.”

She shook her head, “I don’t want it.”

“Take it.”

“No.”

“It’s a professor’s robe. A potion master’s robe. You gave it to me a long time ago, but if you’re going back there you’re going to need it. Take it.”

She took it from his hand and buttoned it around her shoulders. It felt heavy, stabilizing. And it smelled of him.

He held out her wand to her, “I made sure to have this back from Bella for you.”

Hermione took it sadly, nodding, feeling him let it go with the same pained deliberate motion as the last time he’d returned it to her and she’d abandoned him. At least this time she could give him his own in return.

“This is yours. I think your other half attached it to your frame somehow so it would...find me. I have to assume it was him...you...seeing as it was such a clever and paranoid and excruciatingly painful plan.”

He nodded ambivalently, taking it back, “Not that that description would rule out Dumbledore completely. Though I wouldn’t put it past me to force myself into your way like that.”

She nodded too matter-of-factly and stood up, wanting to kiss him but knowing she would never leave if she did.

She felt the string tugging at her chest, knowing it was a way different from his. She took a step. Still he did not look up.

“I love you.”

“I know.”

“Goodbye.”
She walked away into the dark, refusing to look back.

She wandered a long way without really wanting to leave, afraid that if she looked back she would find she hadn’t left at all.

But there was a strange echo behind her.

When she took steps, she heard steps behind her. When she stopped, they stopped. She was so afraid to look back that she even closed her eyes as she walked forward. The legends of Orpheus and of Lot’s wife meandered through her mind. She wouldn’t look back, not until she was home. She had to trust.

At the edge of Alone, she found a mirror. It was tall and freestanding, an arch of crumbling stone weeping a silvery mist. She watched her face billow, and she could see, indistinctly, the reflection of a lanky shape in the dark behind her. She took a step closer, listening, and could hear a low murmur on the far side, of many voices. She reached out a trembling hand but jumped back when the mist shifted forward as if to grab her. The spot in the mist bellied gently and resolved into a protrusive mirrored face that was reflecting her own on each of its contours, making its precise features hard to discern, though its presence felt a lot like Ginny, a lot like Happy, a lot like Harry and Rose and Neville and Minerva.

She felt her hope swell, expanding, everything inside her rushing to the surface of her skin, tingling and straining to leap out, to rush into possibility. It felt giddy and powerful and terrible; the twinned opposite of the crushing despair of a dementor.

Its lips parted, and it did not speak, and they simply looked at each other. It wanted a kiss. The pull was almost unbearable, and her way lead through the strange looking mirror. Her soul was so much bigger on the inside that it threatened to pull her body right along. This must be a mentor her nonsense brain offered excitedly, since it does the opposite of a de-mentor.

Still she waited, her gaze drifting aside from the bright face before her to the reflection of the dark shape behind her.

She couldn’t see him, but she could feel him. And that pull was intense as well. It was so much harder trying to move forward thinking that he definitely was there than believing that he might be. She dared not move, for fear he would disappear.

It reminded her of that first night, vigilant in the dark.

It’s still only maybe her rational brain chimed in. This could be like the mirror of Erised, just showing you your heart’s desire. Better to leave it at maybe, and move forward.

She didn’t turn. She reached her right hand behind her, hardly daring to breathe.

For a moment there was nothing. And then, a touch, very lightly, on the back of her hand, naked and long-fingered. Asking permission.

She caught her breath. She turned her hand, touching a beckon along his skin. Yes.

She moved to take a step, and the hand gripped her wrist, forestalling her, and her heart sank, No.

Her voice trembled, fearing it might break the spell just to speak, “It’s not far now. Just a step. Never more than a step. Stay with me.”
His voice sounded strange and dreamlike, *But the difference is great...*

She nodded, confidence surging irrationally inside her, “So are we. Take the step. Take the chance. Take it.”

She closed her eyes and took a step, a leap of faith, and, without any intermediate change, felt the ground under her feet, the sun on her shoulders. She was standing on the shore of the lake facing a door, the little hummock of earth by the first-year boat-landing, the late afternoon sun slanting against her neck and the sound of wings fading into the distance behind her.

Like a dreamer waking, she could still feel his touch on her wrist, and even before she turned around, she knew he wasn’t really there. There was no way to guess what she had done wrong, what she could have done different, whether it had been up to her at all or if he had simply...flown away. She gazed out across the lake, and then knelt down and gazed into it, seeing only her own face, feeling no thread that might lead her back to him. And she grieved, her tears shivering her reflection in the silvered water. Because grief is what happens when you feel like you deserved better, like you were promised more, like you’ve been cheated of something necessary and earned. Even when you already knew that the real world doesn’t honor those rules, but you felt like maybe, just once, love would pull its own weight, and death would not be death, and the dream would stop itself from ending. But it doesn’t. Not for anything. Not for long. Even when you’ve been promised by someone who ought to have the power to change things.

I’m sorry, Hermione.

I’m so sorry.
She sat there a long while, after Ginny had come to check on her and left her in peace, promising to save her a plate of dinner, telling her to take as long as she needed. The sun dipped down below the tops of the trees, peeking and winking as the breeze blew little gusts through the burnished foliage, though there was some time to go before the sun would kiss the proffered hand of the horizon. It simply hovered over the knuckles of the earth patiently. Hermione stroked the ground beneath her knees, “Linger him as long as you can, lady. He may pretend to orbit you but you’ll learn better soon enough.”

The black lake burned gold.

She sat, looking into the water.

She wished she could feel some little slip-stream leading her back to her proper place in time, some improbable silver filament she could twist herself along to return to some truer form of herself, but she couldn’t, and had to admit that where she was was where she belonged. For better or worse, she was real again. Past and future had retreated to their proper extremes. She had crossed the lake, survived her first week as a teacher, and come down to earth from someplace far out in the dark...or back to shore from someplace far out to sea. She couldn’t entirely tell what she felt. It was heavy and complicated and living. It was better than Nothing. Some little engine had started working again. Some door she had locked had finally let her in. Her sense of the real was slowly shaking back into place.

Another tear fell into her reflection, and she fancied for a moment that she’d cried the whole lake, but that was hardly true. A thousand thousand lives had been through Hogwarts, filling it with tears and dreams. Children, teachers, headmasters, elves. Builders and teachers and villains. Blood and sweat and tears. And rain. Just regular old rain that fell on the wizard and muggle worlds both, into a chasm that desperately needed a better bridge. Her own tears had barely been enough to fill her palms and give her a way back to her real face on the moonlight paths of memories locked...

...memories locked away...leaked away...to be gathered up... take it...

Little details of that day, that terrible day watching Severus die, offered themselves up from places long locked away. The smell of the shrieking shack, the sickening and hopeless looseness of his blood as it flowed. The look he had spared her, that strange, longing look.

Take it...

Snape’s memory, leaking out like he’d overdosed on veritaserum, leaking away like his life, like their chance, and his plea...

Take it...

The massive clouds of light matching the gushing red black in volume.

Take it...

So much...so much more than you would think for the small cache of memories Harry had seen...and the tiniest green spark that jumped to Harry’s finger as he knelt close by, frantically gathering it all...
Something clicked and she leapt to her feet, “Happy!”

Nothing happened.

“Shit. Right. She’s sleeping. Way to be a self-absorbed asshole, Hermione. I- I- I mean Pozzy!”

The little blue elf popped in and gave her his personal salute.

“Pozzy, where’s Headmaster Longbottom?”

“In the great hall. It’s almost dinnertime.”

“Please, Pozzy, please can you bring me to him? It’s just that I don’t know how much time I have left.”

Pozzy fumbled with his fingers, “It would be very irregular, Professor. Hogwarts doesn’t like humans moving about that way without the headmaster’s direct permission, and I would hate for you to be splinched.”

Hermione clasped her hands together, knowing how foolish she would feel if she were wrong, unable not to fling no matter how many times she got crushed, “Could you please go to him then and tell him I’ve asked him to order you to bring him to me?”

With a solemn nod, Pozzy popped away. Hermione tried to imagine the interaction that must have ensued, silently begging Neville to humor her even though he probably had a million other things on his mind.

There was another loud pop and Pozzy beamed at her proudly as Neville caught his breath. He looked harried and more than a little wound up. He tugged his robe down once and cleared his throat, “Professor Granger?”

“Neville, have you reviewed the Headmaster’s office yet? Do you know where things are in there?”

He nodded, dazed.

“The memories, the set that went with Dumbledore’s pensieve, from the nineties, do you know where they are?”

He nodded, looking even more annoyed and slightly puzzled, “Yes, of course, I let Enith begin sorting through them this afternoon. But what the hell are you and Ginny playing at all of a sudden?”

“What do you mean Gin-”

There was a whoosh and a plop and Ginny landed her broom right beside them on the grassy hummock. She was holding a vial tight in her hand, its label yellowed and its cork dusty, “Hermione! I had an idea so I went and asked Happy-”

“-Happy’s awake?”

“Yes shut up she said not to tell anyone, but Enith was there too, reviewing memories! She found the old one, Snape’s last, and had tried to look at it but...it wouldn’t open for her. She said it was congealed or something but that got me thinking that maybe when he was dying he decided he wanted to live....”

“That’s what I was just thinking, the thread, it lead him back to himself, through himself, mine lead forward and his lead backward. I thought it was life and death but what if it was just time? I didn’t
think he could combine both parts of himself together again, because of the way he was created the
only way he could go back to his own face, his other half, was if he was willing to push himself out,
which might kill him, push him out of his body, but if he went back to the moment of his other half’s
death he could give his other half a choice, a chance...and-

“I know and maybe...maybe he took it,” Ginny held up the vial and both got very quiet.

Neville spoke up, “Care to fill me in?”

Hermione took the vial from Ginny’s hand, grimacing, “It could be nothing, Neville. Or we could be
too late or...or there might not be enough time to figure it out, there usually isn’t...” and there wasn’t.
There wasn’t time to get to a pensieve, or to ask Hogarth, or to check the texentes to see if it was still
running or not.

She just held the bottle to her heart, and made a wish. And somewhere deep below, something dark
stirred. A handsome old romantic who knew how stories ought to end gestured indulgently, and a
tiny decades-old spell unknotted, and the vial she had made to hold her teacher’s memory on a
terrible day dissolved. The tiny light bloomed outwards, and a reverse raven flew out from the bottle
on dusty silver wings against the glaring gold of the evening sunlight. It wheeled once over the lake
and saw its black reflection, its shadow, its true self, in the water and dived, skimming over the
surface like a hawk hunting a fish. It dipped its claws and caught its reflection, pulling the black bird
to itself with a ferocity uncommon in scavengers. The two birds clenched and tumbled and
disappeared beneath the surface of the water with an inelegant plop and splash.

Not a soul of the four that stood on the dock breathed.

The place where the birds had disappeared erupted with a plume of water and a startled gasp that set
the world respiring again.

Hermione groped in her robe for her wand, but Neville stepped forward with a rapid swish and flick,
"Aqua Tractus."

The floundering form slowly picked itself up off the glassy surface of the water that had suddenly
grown solid, taking a few admirably matter-of-fact steps towards them on the shore. As the sodden
man drew closer, Neville flicked his wand again, "Scourgify."

There was a brief whirl of energy and Severus Snape’s robes were as dry as the land he stepped
onto.

Pozzy, bless him, spoke first, “May I enquire your name, sir? And will you be staying overnight for
the funeral-slash-celebration?”

Severus’ eyes flicked across the company, settling on Hermione, who shrugged at him numbly, and
his throat seemed to go as dry as the rest of him.

“My name is Prof...I mean Severus Snape. And...yes, if there is room I should like to...pay my
respects.”

Pozzy nodded, “Very good, Mr. Snape. It shall be Hogwarts’ pleasure to host you. Please may I
introduce Headmaster Longbottom, Professor Granger,” he placed emphasis on the word and
beamed at her, “and a fellow guest and alumnus, Ms. Genevra Weasley-Potter. And I am Pozzy.
Please if you have any need for a porter during your stay do not hesitate to call for me.”

Clearly comforted by ceremony, Snape greeted the company in reverse order, “Thank you very
much, Pozzy. Ms. Weasley-Potter,” he took Ginny’s hand and bent over it graciously.
Ginny’s grin had grown to face-splitting proportions as it usually did in the face of anything slightly awkward and vaguely extraordinary. As the current situation was extraordinarily awkward, her smile was no less than dazzling.

“Professor Granger,” he offered his hand and she met it with hers, feeling every nuance of pressure as he gathered his fingers around her fingertips and brushed her knuckles lightly with dry lips before straightening stiffly, not looking her in the eye. She gave him a very gentle squeeze, assuring but not demanding. His carefully controlled breathing relaxed just a whiff, comforted by the polite, measured intimacy.

He turned finally to Neville, “Headmaster Long-” there was a hairsbreadth pause as Snape’s eyes fixed on Neville’s coolly impassive face, “-bottom.”

Neville Longbottom held out a hand and Severus Snape took it, shaking it firmly. Neville’s mouth crimped up at one corner, “Welcome to my school, Mister Snape,” Hermione gave Neville a “must you?” look as Snape gave a mannered half-bow. Neville gave her a tiny wink that promised not to overdo his quantum of revenge, “Might I entreat you to come in to have dinner?”

“No thank you, Headmaster Dippit!” a thin raspy voice proclaimed from behind them. Snape tilted his head to the side in open perplexity, while the four others turned to see Professor Cuthbert Binns bustling through (literally) the small castle door with a large suitcase in hand and a hat that looked (if possible) older than him, “I did tender my resignation some days ago and now am taking my leave. Things have changed, I’m sad to say, and I feel my time here is done.”

Neville nodded, only stammering slightly, “We are, of course, sorry to see you go, Professor.”

As the ancient History Professor strolled past him and out across the water, the sky blushed crimson and the sun began to set, as if some god or other were properly embarrassed at the indulgent nonsense that it had just witnessed. The lake blushed back, and the wind seemed to whisper goodnight. The old ghost, as usual, gave no evidence of hearing anyone speak.

As the five living people began to process into the school like first-years to the banquet, Ginny slid her arm around Hermione’s waist and gave her a jittery, ecstatic hug, which Hermione returned numbly. Nothing could keep rebirth from being an occult and messy affair, but the presence of her family would likely ease most of the pain and danger. Neville patted Snape genially on the back and began maneuvering toward mentioning how short-handed the school was for staff, even with Minerva’s return, and how he had need of someone to take over the Defense Against the Dark Arts post now that he himself was going to be handling the duties of headmaster full-time. None of them took much note of the transparent old purist’s fading gripes about lack of continuity as he shuffled purposefully into the sunset.

And nobody knew precisely what would happen next.

It was better than perfect.

End Notes

Please leave a comment or a kudos if you've got the impulse. They are pretty much my favorite things. Constructive criticism is always welcome too. (: <3 I'd also put in a specific request that if you see me making grammar or verb-tense errors or some other quirk of
capitalization or word use that drives you bugfuck (I know I get a little crazy with the hyphens sometimes) do please point it out. I'm trying to improve.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!