Détraquée

by Hystaracal

Summary

"All her growth was the conveying of a corpse of hope."
(From 'The Rainbow', D.H. Lawrence)

It was definitely the worst of times. Follow Hermione as she navigates through the quagmire: saving the world, getting top grades, falling in love, lust, and a whole lot of trouble; and comes out of it hopefully at least partially sane

Notes

Testing.
This is a tentative venture into the intimidating world of fanfiction. Hope it isn't a total trainwreck.

Lets get on with it.
She could see Pansy Parkinson standing a few feet away from the corner of her eye. Sneering. Of course. Defiantly, Hermione Granger pulled back her shoulders, chin up, looking at the empty track in front of her. Platform nine and three quarters was slowly filling up with students and parents, the low hum of conversation gradually escalating to a cacophony.

Hermione had reached early—very early in fact—sending her parents off as soon as she could. She didn’t want them to feel the heated glares and snide comments that they were sure to encounter had they waited with her. The climate in the wizarding world was deteriorating at an alarming pace. The geniality and wonder she had felt when she first embarked on her magical journey was fading into something sinister and unwelcoming.

She took a fortifying breath, as her eyes fluttered shut. *Keep it together.*

She hated this constant feeling of dread now that Voldemort was much more than a distant storm cloud.

Pansy was still lingering at the edge of her vision, joined now by an immaculately coiffed Daphne Greengrass. They were both collectively sneering. Good grief, but Hermione was *tired.* She twisted the end of her frayed Genesis tshirt, one that had belonged to her dad, and she had… “borrowed” and magically shrunk after he made her listen to ‘Foxtrot’ (“Just you wait Hermione, you’re going to lose your mind”).

The thought of her parents made something heavy and unpleasant crawl up her throat. Her eccentric dentist parents who were thrilled to bits with their clever little witchy daughter. Her dad with his fluffy grey hair and tattered jeans; outdoorsy and scruffy, maker of the world’s worst puns, the only dentist in the freaking country who’d make his patients listen to ‘Rock the Casbah’ while he rummaged around in their mouths.

And her mum— who she was meant to be a spitting image of… slight, slender, and extraordinarily generous. Her mum who couldn’t cook for shit; the only person whose scope of literary references was wider than her own.

Mum and dad… *Her* mum and dad… Their lives in peril because of her…

She couldn’t breathe.

She barely registered the Hogwarts Express rolling in amid a cloud of purple smoke, a shrill whistle, a sudden draught….

She was tired, and she couldn’t *breathe* and….

And an arm came and slung itself around her shoulders, as she was squeezed into a tall, hard frame. Hermione started, her head snapped up. Bright blue eyes looked fondly down at her from under strands of ruddy hair.

“Ron!” she felt the tension slip away from her body as she leant into his embrace.

“Hullo, Hermione,” he smiled impishly, seeming unwilling to let go of her, “I swear, you get smaller every time I see you. You’ve bloody gone and shrunk again, haven’t you?” She rolled her eyes at him, not even trying to hold back the smile that unfurled across her face. Ron turned her around and steered her towards his family, an oasis of warmth and ginger hair in a crowd of irrelevant bodies, away from her thoughts and away from stupid Pansy Parkinson.
She went about hugging them one by one—from Ron to Fred (“Well hey there…”) to George (“…beautiful…”) to Ginny (“…fucking Fleur, Hermione, I swear to Merlin I’m going to scream…”) to Molly (“Goodness! You’re too thin, dear…”) to Arthur (“Don’t see your lovely folks around. Pity. Real pity…”), until finally she all but melted into one Harry Potter.
God. She felt so selfish for letting herself drown in her woes back there. Harry had it far worse than she ever would. She pulled away to look up at him, his hair nearly as hopeless as hers, and saw that his splendid green eyes were clear and at ease for once.
“Hermione. Hi.”
“Harry. Hello.”
He grinned at her and she felt her heart swell at the unrestrained happiness of that expression. Because to Harry, Hogwarts was home, the Weasleys and her were family, and in that moment she knew he felt that he was exactly where he wanted to be.
“All good?”
“Juuuust grand, girly.”
But he did that ostentatious, shifty thing with his eyebrows – Harryspeak for “I’ll tell you later” – so she gave him an exaggerated wink in return. “Okay. Got it.”
His grin expanded into a chuckle and Hermione couldn’t stop herself from hugging him again.

On the train ride Hermione heard about Horace Slughorn from Harry, OWL scores from Ron and Harry, the absolute horror/total dreamboat that was Fleur Delacour from Ginny/Ron, and then sat and listened while Harry presented a veritable thesis postulating—nay screamingly declaring—that Draco Malfoy was a Death Eater. Ron and Ginny looked away uncomfortably while that went on. Harry was breathing heavily by the end of it, and the silence that followed was profound.
“Er… I’ve got to go meet Dean…” Ginny blurted and scrambled out of the compartment.
Hermione was tired again.
“Harry,” she ventured, “Malfoy is sixteen years old, and I hardly think that—”
Ron groaned, even as Harry burst out with a “As if age matters when it means having a man inside Hogwarts—”
“He’s hardly a man, Harry—”
“Fucking semantics? Really, Hermione—”
“-could he possibly accomplish with Dumbledore right here and—”
“-plotting something… it’s so obvious, I mean Ron and Ginny saw him threaten Borgin—”
“-and furthermore… oh come ON, he was clearly bluffing! Malfoy has always been full of bravado and… and… shite! Tell him, Ron!”
Harry and Hermione both looked at Ron expectantly. Poor Ron looked agonized, his ears red and his brow puckered.
“Um… well…”

That was when a starry-eyed girl pushed into their compartment to tell Harry that he was being summoned by Professor Slughorn.
Ron crumpled with relief. Hermione looked at him for a moment, her eyebrows arched, and then said, simply: “Why.”
Ron let out a humorless titter, stretched out his arms and shrugged dramatically. “Sometimes Harry gives me a break from being the ever-irrational one.”
Hermione laughed, and lightly shoved at his shoulder. He smiled down at her like he had at the station, the same soft fondness in his eyes as they travelled across her face. She felt her cheeks
warm under his scrutiny, her heartbeat sped up, and her laughter petered out as she met his gaze. She wished he would say something… do something… something big and terribly meaningful, because her stomach was rolling with anticipation. She took in a shaky gulp of air, and that seemed to snap Ron out of well, whatever; he blinked rapidly, laughed nervously, and mumbled something about being hungry and bloody hell where’s the food trolley at.

“Sucks to your ass-mar,” she retorted irritably.

“What?”

She was so very tired.

Harry and Ginny returned with near identical looks of bemusement of their faces. Hermione regarded Professor Slughorn’s desperate social climbing with amusement at first, but it all evaporated when she saw the thinly veiled envy on Ron’s face. Oh hell. This was going to become an issue.
She sighed.

The Great Hall was as glorious as ever: the sky a dusky blue, full of riotous clouds and nary a star, the students sat under a canopy of candles, and the air was thick with the smell of warm food. Harry was still fuming about Professor Snape’s appointment as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Ron was looking intensely focused as he fed himself at an extraordinary speed, and Hermione thought about Futurist paintings depicting motion, about bizarre Japanese cartoons, about William Makepeace Thackeray.

She pushed her half-eaten plate away, and looked about her listlessly. Ginny was sitting next to Dean who had one arm looped around her, as he valiantly attempted to cut his steak with one hand. Seamus was attempting to flirt with Parvati. Parvati was attempting to dissolve into thin air to escape Seamus. Lavender was giggling at her friend’s predicament.

“Bored, eh?” came a whisper from her left.
She huffed a laugh and turned to look at Neville. “Just… tired.”
He smiled ruefully at her. His once round face had matured and narrowed, but it retained that quintessentially Neville look of hesitance and innocence.
“Did you read the latest piece in The New Journal of Herbology about the possibility of using Asphodel to slow down the growth cancerous tumors?”
She gratefully, delightedly, jumped into that conversation.
Long live Longbottom.

Hermione trudged towards the huge doors of the Great Hall, anxious to reach her bed and sleep. Her eyes felt hot, her head felt heavy. She was positively done.
So of course she had to come face to face with Draco Malfoy right before the threshold. His mouth twisted with distaste the moment he saw her. Theodore Nott stood a little behind him, looking generally uninterested in any and every thing.
Hermione was entirely in favour of avoiding confrontation, so she thought it prudent to stop walking and let the egomaniac pass first.
But then-
“Out of the way, mudblood.”
Oh lord.
Her exhaustion and exasperation mingled languidly. She looked at him for a moment, and then bowed her head. Her arms performed a series of graceful ports de bras, one arching by her side, the other gesturing to the door. Her leg drew an elegant circle on the floor before dipping behind her, and then she sank slowly, utterly into a devastatingly theatrical curtsey.
Silence. The throng of students around them had all fallen mum. Head still bent, she looked up at Malfoy through her eyelashes. He looked dumbstruck. Flabbergasted. His eyes were wide, lips frozen in a half-sneer. Hermione very nearly lost her balance in the face of his comical astonishment. It didn’t help one bit that behind him, Nott’s eyes were suddenly alive with glee, as he bit down on his lip.
Behind her somebody snorted loudly. Then there was a giggle. Soon, the laughter was thunderous and all around. Hermione continued to watch Malfoy even as a small, crooked smile broke across her face. That seemed to snap him out of his stupor, and he stormed out of the hall, but not before muttering, “Stupid uppity bitch.”
Nott beamed at her. Huh.

For the second time that day, she felt an arm snake around her shoulders. Harry pulled her along, laughing.
“You strange creature,” he gasped into her hair.
“That. Was. Brilliant!” Ginny danced around to her other side, and then there was Ron guffawing (“Did you see his face?!”), and Dean and Seamus and Luna and Neville and Justin and Ernie… they encircled her, faces shining with mirth and friendship, and Hermione’s weariness momentarily made way for contentment.
Hermione sat in her favourite corner of the Hogwarts library attempting to make sense of the day. It was late in the evening. The sun was just short of dipping below the horizon, and a tawny, pinkish light was filtering through the large window under which she was curled up in a fat and lumpy armchair, robes discarded, legs tucked under her bum, surrounded by open books that she just couldn’t focus on.

“Professor” Slughorn was a buffoon. A pompous, ingratiating, frivolous fop who completely lacked the air of a convincing intellectuality.

He’d fawned over anyone he considered as having some social standing, much to the bitter dismay of Ron… and Draco Malfoy. Ha. Ron and Malfoy on the same side in any situation meant that the universe was truly bonkers. But then again… she’d never known two other people with such blatant chips on their shoulders…

She shook that thought off.

A disgruntled Ron always pissed the hell out of her, Amortentia revelations be damned. She was annoyed enough without thinking about his bull-headed petulance.

No. Tonight she was going to be annoyed with Harry.

He’d always been a lazy scholar, and it had been alright when his marks reflected that. But now… Now he had that damned annotated textbook, and with Slughorn… with Slughorn… Slughorn creaming his pants every time he was around… ugh.

It wasn’t fair. She wasn’t jealous, and she didn’t begrudge him winning the Felix Felicis at all. If anyone needed luck, it was Harry. But she was angry. It was a principle thing.

Hermione sighed softly, and pulled her hair out of the sloppy bun at the back of her head. The thick and heavy mass tumbled down, and she massaged her scalp, before turning back to her books and parchment.

She worked peacefully for ten minutes.

“Well, don’t you make a pretty picture.”

Theodore Nott was leaning against the shelf in front of her, with a half-grin on his narrow face. It took Hermione an entire minute to reconcile the statement with the source of it. An entire minute after which she eloquently said, “huh?”

Nott flashed a full shit-eating grin at her. “Good evening, Hermione.”

He said it like a sharp but pleasant assertion. His voice was deep and Hermione winced as she thought of Hannibal Lector casually sitting in a cage.

“What do you want, Nott?”

“I just wanted to congratulate you. Last night was spectacular. It’s so rare to see Draco at a loss for words, you know.”

“…”

“And now you’re speechless. This is really turning out to be a great term at old Hogwarts.”

“Oh yes. Everything is just grand,” Hermione intoned, dryly.

Nott laughed. “Well, you’re a snarky little thing, aren’t you?”

“What do you want, Nott?” she repeated firmly.

“I think we’re past using last names, Hermione…”

She blinked at him. “Are you mad?” she asked quite seriously.

Nott just laughed at her again, looking delighted. “What are you working on?”

“…Er, ancient runes essay…” she mumbled uncertainly.

“Excellent!” he quipped, “Just what I needed to get started on,” he said as he began pulling books out of his bag and placing them on the table next to her.

“What are you doing?”
“Ancient runes essay, Hermione! Didn’t I just say?”
With that he sat on the armchair across from her, and began scribbling on a piece of parchment.
Hermione watched him for a few seconds. God, why couldn’t things make sense for a little while?
Nott looked up at her and winked, before returning to his work.
_Ah well._ She thought, and turned back to her essay. _Goo goo g’joob._

Homework assignments were more important than unraveling Gordian Notts.

Hermione had thought potions lessons could only get better after they didn’t involve Snape. By the
end of the week, Harry had been coronated by Slughorn. Hermione’s bitterness was
insuppressible. At least this time, Ron seemed to share her sentiments.
She was just beginning to work her way into a gloriously unhinged rant, when Harry said he was
going for his first private lesson with Professor Dumbledore. And just like that, her anger
evaporated.

It was exasperating really, how she found it impossible to stay mad at Harry.

She watched him leave the common room, her heart heavy, and then leaned her head against the
back of the sofa, shutting her eyes.

“It doesn’t matter, you know.”
She frowned, her eyes still closed.
Ron continued: “I mean… Harry beating you. It’s just marks and all. Doesn’t mean shit. You
know… that is to say… it’s meaningless, yeah…?” he was fumbling. “What I _mean_ is… you’re
still the most brilliant person in the world. Nothing can change that.”
Hermione turned her head and looked at Ron. He was staring down at his hands, his face red. She
felt warmed to the core of her soul. Her pulse stuttered. She couldn’t seem to say a word.
Instead she tenderly took his large hand in hers and squeezed it. When he looked at her, her smile
was full and wide. She could feel her eyes welling up. It was almost too much.

And _this_ was why she was so lost when it came to Ron Weasley. For all the grief he gave her,
wrecking her blood pressure levels, he also made her feel elated in ways she never thought
possible.
He was smiling back at her now. Her stomach twisted. She dropped her head on his shoulder, his
hand still clasped in hers, and they sat looking into the common room fire.

Hermione felt that it had nothing on the smouldering embers inside of her.
She didn’t realise she had been muttering out loud until Neville and Harry began sniggering on both sides of her.

She blushed and stared determinedly at the clump of verdure in front of her.

“Huffy Hermione’s head hangs in humiliation,” said Harry.

“Humiliated Hermione hisses hysterically at humorous Harry,” said Neville.

“Harrowed Hermione hazardously hexes two humungous heedless halfwits,” she countered.

“Oooooooh!” they chanted in unison.

Hermione swallowed her giggle and elbowed their ribs simultaneously.

Professor McGonagall swept into the greenhouse. She looked strained in a way Hermione hadn’t seen in a long time. She walked over to Professor Sprout and said something into her ear that caused the latter to gasp in horror and drop her watering can.

Professor McGonagall looked exceedingly unimpressed at the exhibition. She turned around and called out, “Miss Abbott. Could you please pack up your things and come with me?”

Hannah looked confused, but complied. Her eyes darted to Professor Sprout, whose face was flushed and distraught, and her own expression morphed to fear.

“What... what’s going on?”

“Just come along, Miss Abbott,” Professor McGonagall said in an uncharacteristically gentle tone.

When the two had exited, Professor Sprout let out a sob.

“Professor...?” Ernie Macmillan asked, hesitantly.

“Oh Merlin. That poor girl,” Professor Sprout wailed. Everybody looked about uncomfortably as she took a fortifying breath. “Her mother... she’s been murdered.”

Later that night, Hermione broke away from the common room, and went for a solitary walk. She had felt Harry’s eyes on her all day, and they were full of pain and sympathy. She couldn’t handle that anymore.

She walked up to the astronomy tower in a daze. All her worst nightmares, the bleak consequences of her life, choices, and situation were churning like a whirlpool in her head. Grasping the railing, looking out into the night, she took in a lungful of cold air.

Hannah’s muggle mother had been murdered by Death Eaters, presumably for having the gall to sully the lineage of one of the sacred twenty-eight.

Did they dance around her broken body? Did they cackle with glee as they spilt her dirty, common blood? Hermione shuddered once, and never stopped.

If Hannah’s mother was a target, her own mother was a prize. Filthy muggle mother of filthy mudblood Hermione Granger, best friend of the chosen one. They’d make a damn carnival out of it.

Fuck. Oh fuck.

She didn’t know what to do. The terror and helplessness had paralysed her mind.
A gust of wind... Another shudder...
And Hermione hunched her shoulders and cried. Her head dipped until it was resting against her white knuckles gripping at the railing. She cried without restraint, the force of her dread was crushing her.

When her sobs subsided, she couldn’t tell how long they had overwhelmed her for. Seconds? Hours? The night looked the same; the moon was still nestled poetically between two branches of the whomping willow.
Then she heard a soft rustle behind her. Startled, she spun around, and there was nothing there. Still she felt a bit uneasy, as her eyes scanned the length and breadth of the tower.

Nothing.
She backed out of the tower, eyes narrowed and darting from side to side.

Her eyes were swollen the next morning.
“Wow, Hermione, you look awful!”
It was too early for Lavender Brown to be a thing.
“Hmm,” she said, twisting her hair into a knot at her nape.
“You should do something about that. You’re around Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley all day; isn’t that enough incentive to want to look your best, like, all the time?”
Hermione looked at Lavender then. She was well polished as always, smiling condescendingly at her.
“Well, I’ll see you around!” she sang as she swept out of their dorm.

Hermione waited for her footsteps to recede before casting a soft glamour over her eyes.
There. That ought to appease Ronald Weasley.

She was scowling as she went down for breakfast.

Right. So she may have gushed over Harry’s attributes a bit too much to get a rise out of Ron. She was pleased, and at the same time peeved by how easy it was to instigate his insecurities. She supposed she was being more than a little unfair, considering the quidditch trials were that morning, and Ron was overtly jittery.
Since she had endured that, AND Harry’s determination to keep his ghastly potion’s book, AND a debilitating perusal of the Daily Profit over breakfast, Hermione felt murderous when Lavender gave Ron a coquettish smile as they made their way out onto the quidditch pitch. The come-hither
smile altered into a sly grin aimed directly at Hermione once Ron had looked away.

Hermione stomped off towards the stands without a word.

She watched impassively as the trials commenced. Quidditch was... alright, she supposed. She’d grown up pretending to take Hampstead FC seriously, for her dad. Quidditch was a lot easier to get sucked into.

A large, blond bloke came and sat three seats away from her. He looked about as put off as she felt. Feeling her eyes on him, he glanced at her... looked away... and snapped his head right back. With a smarmy sort of smirk and without a preamble, he said, “Cormac McLaggen, keeper.”

“Hello. I’m Hermione Gra-“

“Granger. Yeah, I know. Everybody knows who you are, doll.”

They both turned to the pitch at the sound of Harry’s frustrated yelling as he announced his final (“yes that’s fucking final!”) decision regarding the chasers.

“Ha. That Potter is such a pushover. I’d have hexed those little cunts. Ha ha ha. Oh and look... all his chasers are birds! Not bad lookin’ ones too. Oho. That Ginny Weasley’s a total slag, I hear. So your boy Potter’s that sort, eh? Why didn’t you try out, doll? You’re well prettier than that lot,” McLaggen grinned cockily at her. She glared back furiously.

“Feisty! Tell you what, Granger... let me finish this trial shite – it’s going to be a fucking breeze for me – and then I’ll take you out this weekend, yeah? Show you a good time. Eh, doll?”

“No, thank you,” she gritted out.

“No, thank you,” she gritted out.

“No, thank you,” she gritted out.


He wouldn’t stop. Hermione thought the only person this persistently obnoxious was Draco Malfoy.

Oh, and Zacharias Smith.

By the time he finally left for his try-out, Hermione’s temples were throbbing. Jesus fuck.

She watched the loathsome chauvinist save four goals in a row with acute displeasure, and something in her snapped. Before she fully registered what she had done, McLaggen was grimacing at his supposed mistake.

When Ron grinned at her after his triumph, his eyes were bluer than the Mediterranean Sea.

When Ron scowled at her after Slughorn invited her to his “little soiree”, she couldn’t care less about the colour of his stupid little eyes.

When they shifted to watch Lavender playing with locks of her silken hair, Hermione just didn’t have it in her to feel dispirited.

Harry was passionately engaged in constructing his ‘Draco Malfoy is a Death Eater’ hypothesis.

She was actually looking forwarding to attending the party just to escape those two nutters.
Hermione decided that wine was one of mankind’s greatest inventions.

She was on her third glass, feeling lighter than she had in a long time. McLaggen and Slughorn were wrapped up in a frivolous conversation about holiday destinations. Hermione had tuned out long ago.

Across from her Blaise Zabini was sullenly murdering his potatoes. Neville, having the misfortune of sitting next to him, was visible tense. Hermione caught his eye, and gave him a lazy smile.

“Neville is going to wet himself,” Hermione whispered to Ginny, who was seated next to her, and on her fourth glass of wine.

Ginny chuckled breathlessly. “And then Zabini will have to look more disgusted than he already does, and that I really would love to see...”

“I don’t know. He looks like he’s already reached super-saturation point. I don’t think it’s possible to look more disgusted...”

Zabini looked up from his spud-massacre then. Right at them.

“Oh Merlin!” Ginny squealed, “That’s it! THAT’S PEAK DISGUST.”

Hermione bit down on her lip and dug her toes into the soles of her shoes to keep from laughing out loud.
Apparently, saying that you thought testing out unknown handwritten spells on your friends was irresponsible and *stupid* made you an inexorable stick-in-the-mud. Harry and Ron left for Hogsmeade, uncaring that she refused to go along.

Hermione strolled along an empty passage, stopping before a tall window. The weather outside was abominable. She imagined the boys stuck in the middle of a sleety street, iced over from head to toe, their skin a bright bright blue. Then their limbs began to fall off.

She was doomed to feel exhausted forever. What would it take for Harry to just listen to her? For Ron to stop taking her for granted?

*My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains my senses, as though of....*

“Hermione Granger.”

Why did disembodied voices and noises insist on jarring her out of pensive moods?

It was Padma Patil this time, who scarcely ever spoke to her. Hermione’s immediate curiosity took a bit of the edge off her irritation.

“Yes?”

She looked grave as she asked, “Can you tell me how I have suddenly gone from having the third highest score in potions, to the *fourth*? And more importantly, how the hell is HARRY POTTER sitting in the top slot?”

“Ah.”

Hermione’s uncertainty lasted for barely half a moment before she said, “Harry’s been working really hard lately.”

Yup. Loyalty to Potter above everything; no matter how badly she wanted to throw both him and his book into a vat of rancid flobberworm mucus.

“Oh please,” said Padma, “*Working really hard?* Enough to turn into a genius overnight? And why is his *hard work* only showing results in one class?”

Hermione shrugged helplessly.

“Listen, Hermione. I know this is all to do with Slughorn’s favouritism. I get that Harry’s your best friend, but this ISN’T FAIR – ” She stood up straight, and locked her hands behind her back – “I have a proposition for you.”

Padma looked like she was standing in a boardroom before a dozen ruthless business tycoons, rather than in a dingy corridor with her frumpy classmate.

“Go on...” Hermione ventured.

“We pool our resources for the term end project. We’ll prepare two impeccably researched papers with flawlessly brewed potions, submit one each, get back our pride and position, and call it a day.”

She spoke in a brisk and offhand manner. Hermione smiled, and extended her hand out wordlessly. Padma grasped it with her own.

“Library? After dinner?”

“Affirmative.”
Then she rose straight up into the air like a fucking archangel, and started screaming like she was in agony. Ron, Leanne, and I pulled her down, but she still wouldn’t stop screaming... I ran; found Hagrid... got to McGonagall... They’ve taken her to Mungo’s... ” Harry’s entire body was thrumming with agitation. He was speaking way too fast.

“It was bloody terrifying,” Ron clarified, helpfully.

Hermione felt sick.

“An opal necklace, you say?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Harry rushed out, “The one on display at Borgin and Burkes. Now we have to figure out how Malfoy managed to get it past Filch’s sensors.”

Ron’s gaze shifted to the ceiling in exasperation. But he held his tongue in an uncharacteristic show of restraint.

Hermione didn’t feel quite as self-possessed at that point.

“Good grief. Harry.”

“Oh get over yourself, Hermione!” He lashed out at her, glaring with unsettling acrimony, “You don’t always know everything, alright? I’m right. I KNOW I’M RIGHT. It has to be him. We heard him asking that slimeball in the shop to put it on hold!”

“You don’t know that he was talking about the necklace!”

“Where is all this faith in bloody buggering Draco Malfoy coming from?”

“It isn’t faith in him, Harry! It’s faith in his inability to pull something like this off...”

“Yeah, because it was such a smooth operation. Not a colossal fuck up AT ALL-”

Ron tried to play pacifist- “Er, Harry, mate...”

“No. Ron, no. Shut up. Why don’t you see it? You know exactly what a sick and twisted fucker Malfoy is. And you saw him show his dark mark to Borgin!”

“Well, we didn’t actually see that...”

“Oh, fuck OFF. Fine. You know what... FINE. I’ll be vindicated soon enough!” He looked at Hermione then. His face was still a mask of severe hostility. He pointed at her, “Don’t think I’ll be above telling you I told you so when shit hits the fan. I’ll be saying it for the rest of your life.”

With that, he stormed off to his dormitory, before Hermione could bite back by telling him how she hadn’t said “I told you so” to him regarding the debacle in the Ministry last year.

Which she wouldn’t have actually said. Of course not.

Ron and Hermione couldn’t look at each other in the ringing silence Harry left in his wake.

“I’m going to the library,” she said shakily.

“Now?!”

“Yes. Now.”

“Hermione...”

She left. She needed more than anything to get away from Ron’s uncertain cerulean gaze. He would have sat with her, had she stayed. But they would both have known that he would rather have gone up to placate Harry.

Ron found it much easier to say unpleasant things about her than his other best friend.

Right now, she needed to be surrounded by books and quietude. Padma would be there. Brisk and pragmatic Padma would help her lose herself in cerebral pursuits.

She let her mind drift to the nebulous idea that she had been toying with before she found out about Katie’s ordeal. She thought about anaesthesia and ketamine, how they might be combined with certain elements of the revive potion to render a person temporarily immune to pain.

Maybe it could decrease the severity of the cruciatus curse...?
Hermione inhaled deeply once she had walked into her safe haven. She spotted the back of Padma’s head sequestered in quiet corner. She’d braided her long, glossy black hair; the thick dark rope contrasted startlingly against the bright white of her shirt.

“Hi, Padma. Let’s get started.”

Hermione decided to venture down alone for breakfast the next morning. She was about halfway across the common room when she felt someone fist the back of her cloak to stop her. She spun around, and there stood Harry Potter with his face twisted in discomfort. He was looking at a distant corner over the top of her head, unable to meet her eyes. His mouth opened. Then closed. He rolled his eyes at himself, before finally looking down at her.

By this point Hermione was smiling helplessly.

*Curse you, Harry Potter.*

He gazed at her plaintively; a little stricken, a little pleading.

Hermione sighed heavily... and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist.

“I don’t deserve this, you know...” he muttered quietly, as he hugged her back.

*Curse you, you poor love-starved, awful, wonderful boy.*

That evening Hermione surveyed the common room dolefully, distractedly.

Harry had just left for another lesson with Professor Dumbledore. He’d been entertainingly disgruntled for the past hour, as he’d watched Ginny and Dean curled up by the fireplace, giggling at Arnold the pygmy puff. She should have known Ginny would put her advice to practice so excellently.

They were still coiled together, looking warm and happy.

She glanced at Ron, who was sitting on the floor, leaning against an arm of the sofa, so he wouldn’t have to look at Ginny and Dean. He’d decided that the sight of Lavender Brown painting her nails was a far more pleasant one.

Hermione shot up and stalked towards the portrait hole.

“Where-“

“Professor Slughorn’s...”

A scathing snort. “Of course.”

Padma wouldn’t be getting together with her that evening. She had told her distractedly after their Arithmancy class that she had to attend a meeting of her ‘Nocturnal Numerology’ club. The Ravenclaws had clubs for everything, apparently. Hermione wondered idly, as she strolled down the passage leading to the dungeons, what her life would have been like, had she been sorted
into that house. Undoubtedly, she’d have been a part of as many study groups as possible. She thought jealously about the learning, the conversations, the scintillating exchange of ideas that she had missed out on.

The year before, Terry Boot had told her on numerous occasions that she belonged in their (his) house. He’d said it while running his hands through his shaggy brown hair.

Hm.

What if she were to take her own advice? What if she went out with Terry Boot? What if she drank butterbeer sitting across from him, held his hand, let him run that same hand through her unruly locks... let him cup her face, and kiss her mouth?

Would Ron be entertainingly disgruntled? Could she count on him to be spurred into action, and to god damn at long last get his act together?

Ha. She stopped walking abruptly.

She knew that would never happen. If the Krum episode taught her anything, it was that jealousy made Ron an ugly person. He would mistreat her atrociously until she’d ditch her suitor, and then he’d expect everything to go back to status quo seamlessly. The frustration she felt at the pit of her stomach surged through her and tore out of her throat:

“Gah!”

“Easy there, Hermione.”
“...Nott?!”
Him again?
“Theo, Hermione. I told you to call me Theo.”
She just looked at him.
“Go on. Call me Theo.”
They stared at each other, as they leant against opposite walls of the narrow corridor. He lowered his head and fixed a sharp look upon her.
“Say it,” he crooned in a faux-threatening tone.
Hermione couldn’t help but smirk.
“Theo.”

He faked a shudder. “Ooooh. My name on your lips sets me on fire.”
She arched an eyebrow at him. He smiled.

He was exceedingly slender and narrow. Hermione imagined that his hips where as slim as her own, though he stood at least a head taller. Light brown hair, blue eyes that were about three shades darker than Ron’s; she had to admit that he was striking.

“So what?” she asked him with affected amiability.
Nott—er, Theo—shrugged indolently.
“I was headed to the library. I would love it if you’d join me for a dazzlingly intellectual tête-à-tête.”
His smile was guileless and full. What even was Theo Nott? A Wildean dandy come to life?

“Okay.”
WHAT?! Oh dear, she was smiling back.

“Ah, Theo... There you are! I was just...”

Yes! Why not! Throw Draco Malfoy into the mix too! Good one, providence!

Hermione was feeling a tad deranged.

Malfoy stopped short when he spotted her.
“What the fuck?” He looked dumbfounded.

Hermione realised that she rather liked being the cause of his unsettlement. Theo was thinking along the same lines –
“You’ve done it again, Hermione! You’ve gone and stunned the unflappable Malfoy. See, this is why I like you so much…”

“Okay, seriously. What the fuck? Theo, if you’re having some kind of perverted liaison with a mudblood, you should know that - ”

“Shut your mouth, Draco. That is not how one speaks in civilised company.”

Malfoy looked aghast.

Theo grinned at Hermione after taking in his expression. “Oh this is fun. I can see why you keep doing it.”

And Hermione- god help her- Hermione giggled.

Malfoy’s head snapped sharply towards her. All traces of astonishment wiped clean from his face, he regarded her with abject antipathy. In the torchlight, his nearly translucent eyes seemed to be burning with fire and brimstone.

“I’ll see you in the common room, Theo.”

His tone conveyed much more than his words. He spoke them at Hermione; slow, loaded, and guttural.

It was a threat, an insult, and a challenge.

Theo whistled softly once Malfoy had stormed off.

“Intense, isn’t he?” he said, admiringly.

“Quite.” Hermione’s admiration was more obviously sardonic.

“Well. Looks like our illicit rendezvous among ancient tomes is off.”

“Another night then. I’ll be better prepared. I’ll even wear nice underwear.”

OH GOD.

Oh fucking god. What on earth possessed her to say that?

Theo looked positively radiant.

“Oh, Hermione. I do look forward to it.”

And with a wink and a smile, he left.

Barely an hour ago, she had been envisioning a life where she’d be a part of high-calibre research clubs. Now she realised she had inadvertently become a part of something called the Slug club. She didn’t know which inspired soul had come up with the moniker, but Slughorn was charmed.

“Cormack, my boy,” he was slurring slightly, “You must remind me to introduce you and your wonderful uncle to the Turkish ambassador someday! He has some fascinating new business ventures involving flying carpets, and a modification that makes them considerably less illegal…”

McLaggen was smirking stupidly.

Ginny was flapping around Gwenog Jones like a flamingo in heat.

Well. She had a goblet full of wine. It was time to measure out her life with it.
Ron had blushed and fussed around her all day. She had thought the way she’d indirectly asked him to Slughorn’s Christmas party while he was in the middle of an unholy snit had been an absolute trainwreck; but then Ron had moved past his agitation and begun treating her with a kind of flattering consideration that left Hermione grinning like a loon.
Harry had been alternating between rolling his eyes, stifling a smirk, and looking like he wished he was somewhere far far away from the both of them.

She was still grinning like a loon that night when she left to meet Padma in the library.

Hermione was happy. So very happy.
So what if Ron could be an arse sometimes? She didn’t care about the past few days. Didn’t care if Monday’s blue. Tuesday’s grey and Wednesday too. Thursday I don’t care about you... it’s Friday, I’m in love.

She was humming when Padma found her in their designated corner. The Ravenclaw girl just raised an eyebrow at her that clearly implied, ‘I’m not going to ask, but do shut up.’
Hermione grinned at her. Like a loon.

They worked well together. It was invigorating, researching with someone who could keep up with her thought process. They were like a well-oiled machine, passing books, notes, and ideas across the table.
Hours later, Padma gasped.
“Oh! Hermione! It’s nearly 2 am!”
“What? Oh my... How did Madam Pince not throw us out?”
“No idea,” a bemused Padma said as she packed up her belongings.

Once they’d crept out into the corridor, Hermione whispered, “Will you be alright? With Filch, I mean...”
“Don’t worry about it,” Padma murmured back with a smug smile, “You Gryffindors aren’t the only ones skilled at rule breaking.”
They parted after exchanging a friendly nod.

Hermione was on the fifth floor when she spotted light shining out through the gaps surrounding the door of the music room, and the silhouette of a girl sitting on the floor outside it.
Curious, she made her way to the figure.
“Luna?” she whispered, squatting down next to her.
Luna was wearing a fuzzy bright purple robe over light blue pajamas that were dotted with what looked like a disastrous amalgamation of a crocodile and a wombat.
“Shh,” she said in her mellow voice, “Listen.”
She handed Hermione the end of an extendable ear, which ran on to slip under the crack of the door. Hermione put the flesh coloured string to her ear, and was suddenly blown away by the beautiful tinkling of piano keys.

It was Bach’s prelude.
Hermione’s breath caught in her throat as the poignant melody of the piece washed over her.
Whoever it was playing the piece was doing it justice. Eyes shut, Hermione let the music wrap around her like a glowing aura. The moment was brief but transcendent, and she felt *heavy* with emotion.

Luna gripped her wrist and squeezed; an all-too-knowing smile on her face. “Who... who *is* that?” Hermione asked her breathlessly.

“Someone who would *not* be happy to see you, Hermione.”

Both girls started at the voice that came from behind them.

Theodore Nott:
*Noun;* The personification of an unexpected muscle spasm.

She groaned. “Why are you *everywhere*?”

“*Moi*?!?” he said, affronted, “Well *excuse me*! I was just coming to check on my temperamental best friend – he’s prone to poetic bouts of night-time brooding... you know, scowling at the stars from the astronomy tower, sighing *deeply* while staring at the moonlight dance on the rippling waves of the lake, or like now, moping over the baby grand in there – “ he gestured to the music room with his chin, before continuing, “That sort of thing. And who do I find crouched outside? You, Hermione. You. Why are you *everywhere*?”

He smiled sweetly at her, rambling on, “I think you’ve put a tracking charm on me. I don’t blame you. But trust me, sweetheart, you don’t have to resort to such desperate tactics. I’ll happily meet you anytime, anywhere. And incidentally...”

“Dried wormwood in vinegar,” Luna cut him off.

Theo looked at her like he had only just noticed her presence.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Dried wormwood in vinegar. Let it sit overnight, and then strain the infusion and pour it into your ears.”

“Now why would I do that?” Theo’s eyes flickered to Hermione in confusion.

“You obviously have the most dreadful infestation of Blathergouts. They’re like brain parasites that cause people to prattle on endlessly and often ridiculously. I’m sure it’s been quite traumatic for you.”

Hermione slapped her palm over her mouth to contain her laughter. Theo looked aghast.

“I’m sorry... *what*?”

“Oh yes. They sometimes interfere with a person’s basic comprehension, too. You poor thing.”

With that, Luna wandered off, quickly swallowed by the shadows in the dimly lit hallway.

The expression on Theo’s face wasn’t making it easy for Hermione to choke back her laughter.

“They’re not real, yeah? Blatherwhazzits?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Theo. Luna certainly described your symptoms most accurately.”

“Ha. Ha.”

He sneered at her, but it promptly morphed into a smile, one which Hermione returned almost shyly.

Then his words from earlier registered.

“Hold on,” she frowned, “Best friend... is that *Malfoy* in there?”

Hermione was astonished as Theo beamed and nodded.

“Surprised?” he ventured.

“I... well... yes...” she stammered, “He plays wonderfully.”
Theo shrugged, “He had to have some redeeming qualities. Statistically, I mean.”
“Right. Of course.” Hermione was blinking rather rapidly.

“Hey. Hermione.”
She jumped slightly when she realised how close he had gotten. He was looking down at her kindly; his voice was like a caress.
“Yes?”
“I think you should leave before he comes out.”
“Yes. Yeah. Good idea. Indeed.”
She was tremendously flustered, and suddenly all she could think about was the stupid underwear comment she had blurted out the last time they had run into each other. She cringed internally.

“Goodnight, Hermione.”
“Yeah. Goodnight.”

She was still cringing when she woke up the next morning.

At breakfast, she made it a point to sit with her back to the Slytherin table, lest she make eye-contact with Theo, or have the chance to examine Malfoy, who suddenly had all this depth he had no business possessing.
The Gryffindor quidditch team, now including Dean, was huddled around Harry. Hermione anticipated a spot of tension arising in the face of this new dynamic.
The squad went off for practice. Left on her own, Hermione ambulated down the viaduct courtyard, thinking about taking advantage of the sunny day and getting a few peaceful hours of reading done by the lake.
Thoughts flashed and disappeared speedily in her head like a disjointed flip book. She was vaguely aware of the group of Hufflepuffs in front of her- Ernie, Susan, Megan, and Roger, among others.

Ernie was in his natural pontificating pose.
“...and British muggles were paragons of civilisation! Most muggles were a bit savage, see; and the brave men of Dear Old Blighty took it upon themselves to reform and enlighten the heathens. They conquered most of the world, and formed the British Empire, which is said to be the greatest the muggle world had ever seen.”

At Hermione’s derisive snort, they all spun around to face her.
“Wherever did you hear that, Ernie?” she asked in a befuddled manner.
“Muggle studies lesson. Rather fascinating, muggle history; quite as riveting as our own.”
“Ernie,” she said forcefully, “Everything you said is rubbish. A heap of jingoism and propaganda. The British empire was atrocious, devastating its colonies economically and socially...”
“That is not at all what it says in our books,” muttered Susan, frowning.
“And moreover, other kingdoms and empires were not savage. They were abounding with culture
and learning, and just because they didn’t align with the British post-Christianity dogma, they were awfully subjugated,” Hermione finished shrilly.
Ernie looked very unsure: “But the Brits were... honourable men...”
“Pfff. So are they all, all honourable men,” she recited contemptuously.

She pulled out her beloved copy of *Hogwarts, A History*, once she had settled comfortably on a grassy patch by the lake. From between its pages, she pulled out a creased and slightly worn piece of parchment.

‘A COMPREHENSIVE TO-DO LIST IN SERVICE OF HERMIONE GRANGER’ S AGENDA TO BETTER THE WITCHING AND WIZARDING WORLD.’
She smiled down fondly at the words she had carefully printed as an ambitious and over-zealous eleven year old.

1. Introduce the magical community to muggle music.
2. Find a way to successfully integrate muggle technology with magic (first cause- electricity).
3. Encourage the incorporation of muggle medicinal practices in magical healing.
4. Demolish the appalling and deep-rooted social evil of pureblood ideology by enforcing strict legislation that outlaws ANY and ALL forms of discrimination.
5. Launch anti-prejudice camps to undo centuries of prejudice and indoctrination.
6. Convince the magical community that regency era societal norms are grossly outdated.
7. Prepare a robust memorandum that clearly outlines the rights of misunderstood magical creatures.
8. Establish a sanctioned union for House Elves, and make the magical community aware of the concept of labour rights.
9. **Introduce anti-slander laws.** Free press above all, no matter how vile the publication.
10. Ensure that centres of education remain entirely independent and untouched by bureaucratic influence.

Yes, some might say she was preposterously, laughably over-ambitious.

Picking up her black gel pen (yes, *pen*) she added,
11. **THOROUGHLY revise, redraft, and revamp the Muggle Studies curriculum across all magical institutions of learning.**

There.

Hermione put away her list and her book, shed her robes, loosened her tie, and lay down on the soft grass.
The sky was a lovely shade of light azure littered with fluffy white clouds. The warm air was being balanced perfectly by frequent rushes of cool breeze. Hermione looked up at the broad leafy canopy that covered the top half of her vision. It was a network of emerald and gold flashes as gusts of wind rustled by.
She closed her eyes, absorbing the sound. There was something enticing about it – something mystical and calming, something deliberate and soothing – a rain stick in the hands of a Shaman in a trance.

Hermione tossed her arms above her head, and then arched her back off the ground, pressing her feet into the soil until she felt the all-too satisfying burn of her spine being utterly stretched.
She collapsed after a few seconds, letting out a contented sigh. Blinking dreamily, she watched the clouds drift across the arc of blue above, looking like giant floating cities with elaborate domes and spires; heavy and solid... but really just clusters of vapour, glorified air, *full of sound and fury,* **signifying nothing.**

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Ever since she was of schooling age, Hermione had had to contend with the scorn of her peers. She was used to it by this point; a healthy mix of arrogance, indifference, and sangfroid kept her from crumbling under the weight of their disregard.

But all that composure went to shit when Ron was involved. So when he *completely out of the blue* starts lashing out at her *relentlessly,* she folds and stalks off to bed without a backward glance.

In the dormitory, Parvati was brushing her beautiful sleek tresses, while Lavender was draped decorously on the window seat flipping through some mindless magazine. Hermione flopped down on her bed and pressed the heels of her palms onto her eyes that felt precariously hot.

“*This sounds fun,*” Lavender spoke up, “*According to Greta Phyllis,* love expert, *it’s helpful to make a checklist of qualities that you’re looking for in a man, so that it becomes easier to pick out who you should be with.*”

“*Obviously,*” Parvati replied, “*I made my list years ago. What do you think, Hermione?*”

Hermione pulled up her torso and rested on her elbows to look across at the idle twits. “I don’t know. That makes sense only if you assume that there are masses of men striving to be with you.”

“Oh Hermione,” said Lavender, waspishly, “*I’m sure some* boys like you.” Parvati giggled fervently.

“*Come on,*” she said after she had recovered, “*tell us what you’re looking for!*”

“*Who says I’m looking for anything? I’ve too much on my plate as it is.*”

“*Pish Posh,*” Lavender scoffed, “*Try not to sound like an old maid for once. I for one want a man with a sense of humour. It’s soooo important to laugh, you know? He has to be handsome of course* – (“*of course*” broke in Hermione disdainfully, and Parvati ardently) – *and tall. I do like them tall. Perhaps... with... red hair...”*

Lavender looked challengingly at Hermione, whose blood boiled. She curled her hands into fists and bit down on her tongue.

Parvati gushed, “That’s such a good list, Lav! Make him tall, dark, and handsome for me. And I’d like for him to have proper respect for the refined art of Divination...”

Hermione wondered how this creature was related to someone as smart and practical as Padma. Though their features were near-identical, they were shrouded by an air so completely different from each other, that Hermione would’ve been able to tell them apart in seconds.

“*Your turn, Hermione; go on, humour us.*”
Hermione sighed, and fell back down on her bed. When she spoke, her voice was small. She suddenly felt defeated enough to search within herself and expose something true and vulnerable to these awful, air-headed girls who shamelessly laughed at her all the time.

“I suppose the most important thing is intellectual compatibility. I’d want him to be as motivated and proficient as I am, so that my thoughts are complimented and challenged. I’d want him to be ruthless in the pursuit of knowledge, but compassionate in the face of adversity. I’d want him to be driven and relentless, but then to chuck it all for a moment of tranquillity... only to... arise and unbuild it again. I’d want him to spare me no favours, but to stun me with kindness. I’d want him to bite back every time I’d attack, but then to say something ridiculous and flush out all the vitriol. Yes... it is important to laugh. He’d laugh. We’d laugh. He’d have wickedly funny insights into things that he’d whisper in my ear like it’s a secret between the two of us.”

“By Godric!” Lavender tittered, “You really let it all out.”
Parvati was giggling again, “I hate to break it to you Hermione, but you’re probably going to be alone forever.”
“Honestly! That’s not a list. I don’t even know what that was. You’re going to have to build your own man!”
They laughingly moved on to another article.

Hermione let the drapes around her bed fall, and curled up against a pillow. She hadn’t expected anything more sophisticated from those two, but she felt more at ease than she had when she stormed into the dorm.
Whatever else her ludicrous bit of word-vomit meant, it was clear that the person she had described was not Ron.

And yet... Yet.

It had to be Ron.
They were in dank and chilly cave, with only a torch to illuminate the yawning darkness around them. Their steps were cautious and wary; a monotonous and unsettling hum disturbed the airwaves around them.
Indie had a tight grip on her elbow, muttering something about her being the cause of his inevitably early demise. Hermione rolled her eyes but grudgingly allowed it.

Or perhaps not all that grudgingly.

Ten minutes (and six and a half whispered arguments) later, they arrived in a roomy vault of some sort. It was completely closed in, save for a thin shaft of light that speared through a gap in the ceiling, and fell directly on a pedestal in the centre. They approached it... slowly.
A red sandstone tablet – roughly the size of a tea tray – sat with compelling authority on the plinth. It was engraved from corner to corner with strange and archaic looking symbols that glimmered slightly like they were once coated in gold.
Indie squinted at them, tipping back this fedora carelessly.
“What’s this then? Ancient Celtic ideography?”
“Leave it to me, Doctor Jones,” Hermione said in a subtly coquettish manner.
Indie smirked at her, his fingers trailing down the length of her arm...

“...Ancient runes again...?”

Hermione was unceremoniously sucked out of the vault, and she zoomed through dimensions in a dizzying manner, until she was spat out into a straight-backed wooden chair in the Hogwarts library.

Her dashing, roguish, adventurer/archaeologist companion was replaced by a too-skinny Slytherin in boring, baggy black robes.
She blinked at Theo resentfully. He raised his eyebrows.
“What?” he asked defensively.
“Nothing,” she shook her head, “You broke my train of thought, is all.”

Pansy Parkinson came strolling along and stopped next to Theo. She scowled deeply, scrunching her upturned nose in an unflattering manner.
“Let’s go to the other end of the Library, Theo,” she spat, “It smells like mudblood here.”
“Shut up, Pansy,” Theo snapped, while Hermione glowered.
“Are you defending her?!”
She glared at Theo, eyes widened in alarm. Then she adapted her usual snooty countenance, and said loftily, “I understand that the pathetic mudblood needs all the help she can get, considering
how both her gormless friends, and her mangy muggle parents are going to be dead very soon..."

Hermione scrapped her chair back thunderously, and was on her feet in a flash. Pansy whipped her wand out.

“Do your worst, you dirty bitch...”

“Pansy, put your wand down,” Theo barked, and he pulled at her sleeve furiously.
She lashed out at him, “Are you SERIOUSLY -“

“I’m defending you, actually,” he said, heatedly, “Do you really think getting into a duel with Hermione Granger is going to end well for you?”

That’s when Malfoy emerged from between the bookshelves, looking uncharacteristically dishevelled and drawn. He surveyed the scene unemotionally for a few seconds, before settling his hand on Pansy’s back.

“Leave it, Pans,” he said frostily.
Pansy was still resolutely mid-flap. “What is going on... I don’t even...”

“Pans. Pansy. Come on.”
Malfoy seemed equally determined to remain impassive. Or perhaps he was too tired to muster any rage. There were deep shadows under his eyes, and his usual pallor had taken on a sickly grey tinge.

He drew Pansy away with his palm firmly placed between her shoulder blades. Just before he turned to leave, he looked at Theo with some restrained tension evident in his posture.

His tone, however, was as deadpanned as ever- “Leave it to you to choose the most dramatic way to make a statement.”

And then they were gone. Both Theo and Hermione took a moment to reacquaint themselves with regular breathing.
She sat back down heavily, and he followed, settling down on the chair next to her.

She felt her fury leak out from her pores, systematically being replaced by her old friend, fatigue. Theo was atypically quiet; Hermione had expected him to recover his usual blaséness almost instantly, and was waiting for him to pelt her with quips.

Three minutes later, he still hadn’t spoken. He was frowning down at her copy of Magical Hieroglyphs and Logograms, but it was clear he wasn’t really seeing it at all.

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His monologue ended abruptly. Hermione stared at the thin line of dust caked on the edge of the table. She tried to find something to say, but failed. She wasn’t even sure whether she should be angry or comforting.

It appeared that Theo had still more to declare. When he spoke next, he sounded more sure and eloquent than before—

“But you turned out to be so much more than the bland and banal goody-two-shoes you were supposed to be. You’re enigmatic and smart and so bloody interesting, that I found myself wanting your friendship as much as your vote of confidence. Spending time with you became less about laying the groundwork for my... er, emancipation, and more about just spending time with you.

“You’re my friend, Hermione. And I’m your friend,” he reached out and grabbed her hand that was resting on the table, “I am, alright? I’m your friend.”

He had spoken so ardently and beseechingly. Hermione could feel his gaze intent upon her, but now it was she who couldn’t meet his eyes. She was a little frightened by the intensity she knew she would find there.

Instead, she flipped the hand within his grasp over so that she could clasp her fingers around his.

“I stunned your father in the Department of Mysteries last year.”

1... 2... 3... 4... 5...

“Did you really?”

“Yes.”

“My hero.”

Later that night, she lay in her bed with her feet propped up perpendicularly against the headboard. Good for blood circulation, her mum had told her.

Sleep was evading her, too wary of the dreams that would follow such a heavy day. A heavy day, in the wake of other heavy days, making way for what will surely be heavier days... all reminders of what was imminent and inescapable: War.

To her, the notion of war had been a distant abstraction; nothing that would ever be a part of her immediate reality; ancient wars reconstructed in history books... modern war sagas on the telly... live footage from Sierra Leone... the horror and savagery was too sickening to even attempt to place herself within.

Sometimes she couldn’t believe her life. She remembered the day Professor McGonagall had suddenly turned into a cat in the middle of her living room, and her parents had been too astounded to say more than a couple of winded ‘yeses’ for the duration of the prim old witch’s visit.

“Blimey. There’s a snow covered forest in my wardrobe, isn’t there?” her dad had said later.
She sometimes liked to imagine what their lives must have been like as 17 year olds. Mum would have been buried in books most of the time, wearing lurid floral shirts, and writing anti-war poetry in a hand sown notebook with pictures of Wilfred Owen and Lorca on the cover.

Dad was a cool cat guitarist in a rock band trying to break into the British Invasion scene. He never made it of course- his band’s biggest gigs were late night slots in grimy pubs across London, where the crowd kept demanding they cover The Beatles.

Her mum and dad were both studying dentistry in Bristol, but only met in their second year, at a Labour party rally. They were your typical conflict era revolutionary youth, and though Hermione didn’t like to think about it, they were deeply entrenched in the ‘sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll’ of it all.

And here she was.
She wore billowing floor length robes, and a pointy hat. She wrote on parchment with a quill, under the light of a candle. She studied about Merlin, goblins, chimeras, and alchemy. She lived in a medieval castle that had a monster infested lake and a shadowy forest full of enchanted creatures. She was going to fight a war against a malevolent, sadistic, freshly-resurrected wizard-fiend.

*Mother of Godric.*

She picked up her wand, and immediately felt currents of magic surge through her body. She transfigured her hairclip into an hourglass, just because, and then had it float up into the air and spin like a dervish. Two mini sandstorms erupted in its glass bulbs – frantic, fevered, and fervent.

Hermione’s next run in with Theo occurred the following morning when she was walking to Charms with Neville and Seamus after breakfast.
(She no longer broke bread with her usual group, now that Harry and Ginny were obsessed with their upcoming match against Slytherin, and Ron was still adamant on impersonating a snarling Nundu.)

Seamus was in the middle of a hilarious description of the nocturnal snore-symphony he had to endure every night – while Neville, the baritone, blushed profusely – when Theo zoomed into existence out of nowhere, like a time-travelling DeLorean.
He gripped Hermione’s shoulders, standing before her with wildness and desperation in his eyes. He looked fraught and unhinged - “You have to help me, Hermione.”

“What’s happened? Are you – No, Seamus, it’s alright; put your wand away – Right, Theo... What’s the matter?”

“LOVEGOOD,” he wheezed.

Hermione’s face reflected enough bewilderment for him to deign to explain further.

“She’s driving me mad, Hermione. MAD. First it was the Blathergouts, and then the Nargles and the Plimpies and Troozits and Fumpkins and this and that and squiggly fuckknowswhazzits that are supposed to be eating my organs, or laying eggs under my skin, or creating a discombobulating fog around my head. Last night after you left the library, she was somehow just there, and she dragged me out to the lake and had me sit there till fucking midnight, fishing around for Dabberblimps.
What the fuck are Dabberblimps?! I don’t know. I don’t know what they look like, but she told me to roll my trousers and muck about in the lake at night in fucking December... And I did it! I’m obviously a complete basketcase because she said that cold water will help repel the somthingswithan’H’ that live between my toes, AND I BELIEVED HER.”

Seamus and Neville were roaring with laughter.

“Er – I know she’s a bit...”

“Impossible. Not a bit! She’s entirely fucked up and impossible.”

Theo was so genuinely stricken that Hermione broke. She was laughing fully in a matter of milliseconds.

“You can’t be laughing,” he was appalled. And then – “Oh Circe’s tit, here she comes!”

And just like that he was gone, charging down the hallway. Sure enough, Luna drifted by moments later, and after saying a pleasant hello to them, continued to chase after the traumatised Slytherin.

“Did that really just happen!?” Seamus cackled.

“So...” Neville said, red-faced and grinning, “You and Nott... you’re....?”

“Friends,” she smiled, “He’s my friend.”

Hermione had most of the day free of lessons, so after another wonderfully productive afternoon spent in the library with Padma, she sauntered out into the grounds to balance out the hours of sedentary preoccupation.

The Gryffindor quidditch team was in the middle of an extremely charged practice session. There seemed to be some big scene going on up in the air, with Demelza crying, Harry and Ginny screaming at Ron, while Peakes glared.

Eh.

She walked around the quidditch stands, rather than across, remembering that time last week when McLaggen had caught hold of her there. She really loved the stinging hex sometimes.

Before she knew it, she found herself at Hagrid’s cabin. The man himself was outside with Buckbeak, tossing an assortment of rodents at the hippogriff.

“Dinnertime is it?” she said in lieu of a greeting.

“Hullo, Hermione!” Hagrid’s smile shone through his curtains of bristly hair. Dropping the sack of dead animals (to her great relief) he walked over to her and squeezed her shoulder in what she was sure he believed was a gentle manner.

“I’m jus’ going ter have a chat with Grawp,” he told her, “Want ter come along?”

And so she spent her evening with a giant and a half-giant, giggling over broken sentences and bumbling gestures of affection.
“Grawpy still has a crush on yeh,” Hagrid chortled as they walked back.
“He’s very sweet. Obviously every bit a smooth operator as his brother. How’s Madam Maxime doing, by the way?”
Hagrid’s cheeks turned scarlet, and he said “Fine,” gruffly.
Hermione smiled at his bashfulness, slipping her hand into the crook of his elbow.

The woods were lovely, dark, and deep; and all she promised to do later was sleep.
Sitting opposite Neville, Hermione was ladling steaming hot stew onto her plate. The ceiling of the
great hall reflected an incredibly dramatic storm, turbulent enough in its motions and colours to
induce shivers, despite the fact that the room was really quite toasty.
Warm comfort food was the need of the hour.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked up to see Ginny wearing a dour expression on her face.
Behind her, Dean looked equally aggravated. They both collapsed onto the bench next to her,
tearing ferociously into their dinner.

“Ron is a hellacious arsehole.”
Ginny’s declaration was bolstered by Dean’s grunt of approval.

“Bad round of Quidditch?” Neville asked.
“Ugh,” Ginny replied, “That’s putting it mildly, I wanted to transfigure him into mound of dragon
dung, but I suspect Harry would have objected.”
She looked at Hermione; “Is he still being a shit to you?”
“Yes. And I cannot for the life of me figure out why...”
“Er... right. That may be my fault...”

Hermione just shrugged. She wasn’t even surprised by her complete lack of concern about the
whole issue. She had evolved, you see. Ron was a silly pubescent boy. Teenage drama was so far
below her. Sod him. Sod them all. Sod everyone. Sod the world. She’d had this sodding mantra on
repeat in her head all day.

She turned to Ginny, looking to change the topic of conversation, but Ginny’s focus was fixed on
something behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, Hermione saw... Harry.
Naturally.

With the way Dean was scowling down at his food, Hermione surmised that he was well aware of
what had stolen his girlfriend’s attention.
“I’m... I... need to talk to Harry... about tactics. Tomorrow’s the game, you know...”
Ginny’s voice had a dreamy quality that was almost Lunaesque, and Dean’s nose scrunched in
displeasure as she leapt off the bench. Across the table, Neville and Seamus wore near-identical
looks of trepidation.
Hermione cleared her throat. “So, Dean. I hear West Ham had a bit of luck with a new
defender...?” This was perhaps the first time Hermione was glad her dad rambled on about the
Premier League in his letters.
“Yeah. Ferdinand,” Dean grumbled back. And then fell silent. For good.

Well that was a failure.
Seamus gave Hermione a rueful half-smile. Something akin to a ‘nice try, old girl’.

It was only after nearly the entire table had cleared that Dean spoke up again.
“She’s going to dump me soon, isn’t she?”
“Um...”
“Yeah. Any day now. I’m expecting it.”
“I’m sorry, Dean.”
He chuckled at that. “I always knew I was a filler. She’s just been good at making me forget.”
He turned to consider her speculatively for a moment, and then said- “But this is all small potatoes, innit? Hook ups and break ups and all that. Just us pretending to be normal kids before shit hits the fan. It’s going to get bad for us muggleborns. Not that I need to tell you that…”

Hermione sighed. She would have preferred him going on about his broken heart.

“Yes. Bad.” What more was there to say?

“You know, I really didn’t think I’d have to face this fuckery around here. My dad’s a big bloke. Imposing, you might even say. And it doesn’t matter that he’s a civil rights lawyer; white, sanitised, suburban mums still look at him like he’s out to sell their children drugs. And then I learned that not only do I have the wrong skin colour… I have dirty blood too. Humanity sucks.”

“Power, insecurity, and subjugation: a historically inescapable pattern,” Hermione flinched almost as soon as she’d said that- it sounded pretentious and officious even to her own ears.

Dean, however, looked mildly amused, “What about your parents, then?”

“White, sanitised, suburban dentists,” she quipped, and Dean laughed. “…but also godless, commie reprobates, if that helps.”

“Oh, absolutely.”

Later, Ginny asked her how she had gotten her boyfriend to talk more than she herself had managed to in weeks.

It took Hermione a lot of effort to stop her eyes from rolling.

“We were talking about being muggleborn, and what it means, and such. He probably feels you wouldn’t understand…”

“Of course, I’d understand!”

She didn’t though. None of them did.

Hermione almost didn’t go down for breakfast the next day.

Mornings before a quidditch match were generally tedious, but ones before a Gryffindor-Slytherin match? Unbearable.

The ridiculous chest-thumping and trash-talking was enough to kill anyone’s appetite.

Predictably, the great hall was a riot of redgold and greensilver; the chatter and cheeriness was nauseating.

She paused when she spotted Ron. He looked vaguely sick and entirely uncomfortable. The sight of him sitting at the table not stuffing his face with sausages and eggs was so abnormal and disconcerting, that Hermione felt a little twang in her heart. Perhaps it was time she offered him an olive branch- he looked far too miserable for her to ignore.

“How are you both feeling?” she asked cautiously, unable to look away from a certain thatch of red hair.

It was, of course, Harry who deigned to answer her with a careless and succinct “Fine.”

Harry… who seemed far too absorbed in the pedestrian task of pouring a glass of pumpkin juice. Hermione peered at him, and to her horror, saw a flash of gold disappear up the sleeve of his robe.

“There you go, Ron. Drink up.”

She managed to stop Ron just as he was about to take his first sip. Both the boys looked
bewildered. Ron’s expression held a hint of anger, Harry’s was overcompensating.

“Why not?” Ron barked at her. 
Taking a calming breath, Hermione turned to Harry, “You just put something in that drink.”

“Excuse me?” Harry’s face was a mask of theatrical disbelief. 
Hermione seethed with barely suppressed fury. “You heard me. I saw you. You just tipped something into Ron’s drink. You’ve got the bottle in your hand right now!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Harry, lightly. But he made a show of shoving a tiny bottle abruptly into his pocket.

She was bowled over. She blinked at him in disbelief, and then tried again to reason with the other one: “Ron, I warn you, don’t drink it!”

“Stop bossing me around, Hermione.” Ron drained the glass defiantly and returned his gaze to the sky above, wordlessly dismissing her.

One of the things Hermione hated the most about herself was that her tear ducts were very easily triggered. She could feel moisture building up in her eyes, and the anger in her blood gushed through her veins.

She bent to hiss into Harry’s ear, “You should be expelled for that. I’d never have believed it of you, Harry!”

The look he gave her was one part reproachful, and two parts condescending. “Hark who’s talking,” he whispered back. “Confunded anyone lately?”

Hermione tore away from him and out of the hall. She marched aimless out into the grounds, across the pitch, where the crowd and excitement was building up, and... she couldn’t stomach it. She found herself at the edge of the lake, and she paced, back and forth, furiously attempting to work out the pent up frustration.

These were her friends. Her BEST FRIENDS. How wonderful. One she considered her brother in all but blood, one she was fucking besotted with... and here she was brushed aside, shoved over, disregarded.

She couldn’t think coherently. The anger was now being overpowered by hurt.

What was she to them? Did they truly only value her when she could be useful? Would they even miss her if she wasn’t needed for homework or research purposes?

Hermione let herself cry then. And once she started, she couldn’t stop. 
She could and would blame it on the fact that she was due to bleed in less than twenty-four hours.

As the sobs abated, she sank onto the grass, burying her face between her knees.
It was only a few seconds later that she heard the rustle of footsteps behind her. She hoped against all odds that it would be Harry and Ron.
She felt the motion of a body dropping down next to her, and an arm looping around her shoulders. Peeking through strands of her hair, she encountered the sombre profile of Theo Nott. He was looking out at the lake, but feeling her eyes on him, he met her gaze with his own.

“Hello,” he said softly.

“Hello,” she croaked back.

He sighed, taking in her wrecked visage. “What happened? It was those idiotic friends of yours, wasn’t it?”
He was rolling his eyes before she’d even started to deny his (on point) assumption.
“Don’t bother, Hermione. I saw you storm out after talking to them.”
“You... you followed me...?”
“Of course.” He pulled her closer to his side, and rested his cheek on the top of her head, “I’ll ask again. What Happened?”
“Just me coming in the way of quidditch, I suppose.”
She felt his irate expulsion of air as it blew wisps of her hair asunder.
“Fuckers don’t deserve your friendship, you know?”
Hermione could feel a fresh wave of tears welling up, and was unable to say anything in response.
“You’d think Potter would have the awareness and sensibility to understand how important you are. But he’s too wrapped up in himself, isn’t he? And you’re the most reliable, useful support system a prat like that could ask for. I’m not even going to bother assessing Weasley. He’s a right prick. Enough said. Everything else is expected. Why do you let them treat you like this, Hermione?”
She blinked furiously, begging the tears to retreat.
“An absolute treasure like you – brilliant, sharp, dazzlingly skilled – crying over a couple of mediocre tossers who have no refinement whatsoever...”
“Forward, the Light Brigade! Charge for the guns!” he said.
“...I’d hex the shit out of them, if I didn’t know all the other senseless, brawny Gryffinfucks would pummel me to death in retaliation...”
Well damn. She was sobbing into his chest.
“... And we both know I’m far too gorgeous to die young. I need to be allowed to age gracefully. It needs to happen. You can picture it right? I will cultivate a batch of very sexy wrinkles, sport glorious salt-and-pepper hair, and women – young and old – will throw their knickers at me.”
Hermione was a blubbery mess. Was she crying or laughing? But Theo didn’t give her the chance to sort it out.
“We’d be married, you and I. Obviously. You’d have aged wonderfully too. It’s inevitable, with the bone structure you have. And we’d have done something about your hair. Dear Merlin, Hermione, what is with your hair? You know, in the time we’ve been sitting here, it’s slithered its way into my ears and made a nest for the Blathergouts in my brain.”
“Luna’s convinced you they’re real?”
“She has some very compelling arguments in that regard.”
“Been spending a lot of time with her, have you?” Hermione asked, amused, in spite of the lingering sniffles.
“Your fault entirely. YOU caused our paths to cross, and now I can’t get rid of her. She’s actually mad, you know? Bonkers. Deluded, and... mad. Mad.”
Hermione chuckled softly, rubbing her eyes, and extracting herself from Theo’s embrace.
“You like her, don’t you?”
Theo balked. “I absolutely do not.”
She blinked at him in astonishment, as realisation dawned. “Oh my god. You like her!”
A series of different expressions flashed on his face, before he settled on a deep frown.
“Absolutely. Not.”

And Hermione began to laugh in earnest.
“Shut up, Granger!”
She squeezed her eyes shut, and fell back onto the grass, laughing and laughing, until the old tears in her eyes were all replaced by those induced by joy.
The game was over by the time Theo and Hermione made it back to the quidditch pitch. They stood at the edge watching the last few stragglers shuffle towards the castle—the ones in scarlet scarves were singing jubilantly.


“Um… Theo?”

“Yes, darling?”

“Why didn’t Malfoy play?”

Theo answered too quickly. “Unwell.”

“Right. Like that’s ever stopped him.”

“Heh. Right. So. What now?”

“Not the smoothest of segues, that.”

“Oh hush. What are you going to do, Hermione?”

“I’m going to talk to Harry and Ron.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. I’ll catch them in the changing room before they get swept up in festivities…” she couldn’t keep the nervousness out of her voice.

Theo gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze, (“Find me when you’re done”) and trudged off towards the castle.

Hermione ran into Ginny, Dean, and Demelza just outside her destination. Her feeble words of congratulations were muffled by thick red hair, when Ginny flew in to hug her.

“Coming to the party, Herms?” she trilled.

“Yes, in a bit,” she replied, faux-scowling at the obnoxious foreshortening of her name.

It was just Harry and Ron in the changing room, thankfully. Slowly and cautiously, she approached the two, and after a deep fortifying breath, she addressed Harry.

“You shouldn’t have done it. You heard Slughorn, it’s illegal.”

It was Ron who boisterously responded—“What are you going to do, turn us in?”

“What are you two talking about?” asked Harry, playing innocent—badly.

Hermione could feel her composure breaking. Her throat was closing up again, her vision was clouding, and her pitch was all over the place. “You spiked Ron’s juice with Felix Felicis at breakfast!”

“No!” sang Harry. He was grinning. Actually grinning.

“Yes. You. Did. You. Plonker.” she gritted out, “And that’s why everything went right, there were Slytherin players missing and Ron saved everything!”

“No!” he said, again, and pulled out a tiny sealed bottle from his pocket. “I wanted Ron to think I’d done it, so I faked it when I knew you were looking.” Then he aimed a proud, saccharine smile at Ron, saying. “You saved everything because you felt lucky. You did it all yourself.”

“Wait, really?” Ron gaped at Harry. “I was so sure…” he muttered, shaking his head in astonishment. And then he spun around to glower at Hermione, mimicking her shrill tone, “You added Felix Felicis to Ron’s juice this morning, that’s why he saved everything! Fuck you, Hermione. I can save goals without help!”

“I never said you couldn’t — Ron, you thought you’d been given it too!”
Ron shoved past her and left the room without a backwards glance. Harry’s grin had vanished, and he looked pained and uncomfortable. “Want to head to the party then?”

Hermione shot him the most disdainful look she could manage while trying to hold back yet another bloody batch of tears. “No. You go.”

And she walked back out into the dusky evening.

Her plan to make a neat escape into the nearest toilet was sabotaged by Theo who was waiting for her in the entrance hall. One look at her face had his mouth thinning into a grim line, and he dragged her into a shadowy corner. “Well?” he asked in a clipped tone.

“It didn’t go well,” Hermione stated, weakly. “No shit. I just saw Weasley go by looking mightily pissed off. Would that have something to do with your current state of distress?” He actually sounded so angry... at her. It stung. “Yes. It was... And he... Ron said... Ron...” she was stuttering like a total moron.

Theo studied her face, his neck bent at a very uncomfortable looking angle. What he saw make his scowl more pronounced. “I cannot believe,” his voice was getting gruffer by the second, “that you laughed at my liking Luna, when you fancy Ron fucking Weasley. Fuck.”

Hermione tried to lighten the mood – “So you admit you li--”

“Shut up. Are you serious?! Weasley? Ron Weasley?! Are you really that pathetic?” She knew that this moment warranted anger and indignation, but she had none of those left in her. So she just shrugged and peered at ground. Her feet looked so tiny next to his.

“How do you justify that to yourself? Dear fucking Merlin, Hermione! He’s so so so far beneath you, I just don’t....” he broke his sentence off with a strangled sound of disgust.

“Go attend your party.” He ordered.

“What? No.”

“Yes. Go. Have a drink. Talk to your friends. Don’t look at Weasley.”

“Won’t make a difference.”


Hermione Granger chuckled softly, and pulled Theodore Nott into a hug. He held her tightly, stroking her hair.

“By the way, if you utter a word about your ludicrous and baseless allegations to Luna, I will kill you.”

The usual casual airiness was back in his voice.

Oooooooh gosh.

Oh gosh oh gosh O!
Hermione hadn’t felt such a bizarre mix of simultaneous elation and dejection before in her life. Sure, Ron and Lavender were apparently an item now. But she had set a storm of angry birds at him. Oh gosh. She had made a flock of tiny canaries peck and claw at him. He’d come in with his newly acquired bimbo, all sheepish and pillock-like, and Hermione had directed a Tweety army to attack him.

_I Tawt I Taw a Ruddy Twat._

She was laughing hysterically as she walked towards the library. But by the time she got to Padma she was feeling morose again. The Ravenclaw in question was watching her closely as she pulled books out of her bag.

“What?” Hermione snapped.

“So... Ron and Lavender, huh?”

“How on earth do you know about that?”

“Ha. My sister is the biggest gossip Hogwarts has ever seen. I got a bleeding Howler about _Lav and her Ron_ about three minutes after it happened.”

“Ah.” Hermione hoped her manner would convey how completely she’d love a change of topic. No such luck.

“What do you see in him, anyway? You can do so much--”

“Yes okay.” She definitely didn’t want to hear that spiel again.

“No, honestly. He’s an idiot. I went to the Yule ball with him! He didn’t even have the decency to _act_ polite. He sat there all sullen and spent the whole evening staring at...” and then Padma’s eyes widened and Hermione glared. “...Oh.”

“Quite.”

“So that’s how it is.”

“Can we _please_ get down to work now?” Hermione all but growled.

“Yes ma’am!” Padma threw her hands up in mock surrender.

And for the next three hours, that’s all they did.
The sixteenth time Theo cast a wary glance at her, Hermione cracked.
“Yes, Ron is currently seeing Lavender Brown. I feel fine. Please stop staring at me like you’re expecting me to explode.”
“Sorry.”
Working on ancient runes assignments with Theo was becoming a regular part of her life.
“Are you sure you’re fine, though?”
“Theo,” she rumbled.
“What? You can’t expect me not to ask!” he exclaimed.
“Oh, alright. I wasn’t fine. But now I am. Definitely fine.”
“Okay.”
“I sicced some murderous canaries at him.”
His grin was like the cat that ate the canary. “Excellent. Hey, Hermione?”
“What?”
“I can’t make sense of a single rune on this page.”
“Show it here,” she said, overplaying her exasperation.

And that’s how Harry Potter found them some time later: in hysterics over Theo’s bizarre translation of 5th century druidic tenets, which he, by some impressive means, had turned into an autobiographical account of a plimpy’s search for existential fulfillment.

Harry cleared his throat – loudly – and said wryly, “Time for lunch, Hermione.”
After two beats of silence, Theo was packing his books up.
“This was fun,” he said with his customary waggishness, “I’ll see you later.” And in a move that
Hermione was sure was entirely for Harry’s benefit, he dropped a light kiss on the top of her head.

Harry waited until Theo had disappeared from sight, before falling into the chair he had vacated.

“Well. That was unexpected.”

“Um...”

“This is brilliant! I should have known you’d come up with something like this. Could have told me though! Is he a Death Eater too? How much have you gotten out of him so far?”

Hermione stared at him angrily and said, “That is not what’s going on here, Harry. I’m not using Theo to cement your crazy conjectures, nor to extract information.”

“Oh come now. Is he a Death Eater?”

“No more than I am!”

“But his father--”

“He is not his father!”

“His father,” Harry pressed on, “is fucking savage! He’s right in the inner circle! Hermione, have you lost your mind??”

“Harry Potter, Theo is not his father. That man is in Azkaban, and Theo is very glad about that. Now, if we start judging people for who their parents are, we’re no better than the other side. So stop being so fucking unreasonable and trust me on this, because you know full well that I am not a naive idiot!”

She definitely wasn’t using her library voice.

“... But...!!”

“He’s a very dear friend, okay? I will not entertain you casting such awful aspersions on his character.”

Harry’s mouth fell open a little. “How long has this been going on?”

“Since the beginning of term.”

“Whaaa—how on earth have I not noticed?” he demanded.

“Well, Harry, you haven’t exactly been around much, have you?”

He looked endearingly sheepish at that. Regret shaded his eyes, and Hermione reached out to gently touch his arm.

“It’s okay, Harry. I understand. Just lay off Theo, please? He’s a good person.”

He scoffed. “I don’t like this.”

“And you don’t have to. Do you trust me, Harry?”

“Look, this isn’t about that...”

“It is,” Hermione urged, “I trust him, and you have to trust that I know what I’m doing. So tell me, Harry – do you trust me?”

“Yeah,” he said, ruffling his hair awkwardly.

“Then leave Theo alone.”

They left the library and walked slowly towards the great hall.

“Ron’s going to blow a gasket, you know?”

“Ron’s already blown a gasket,” said Hermione dryly.

“Well he’ll blow another gasket.”

“Bully for him.”

“Um, listen... do you think you could maybe...” he began hesitantly.

“No, Harry.” Hermione’s inflection was emphatic enough to get him to abandon his weak plea.

“Okay. Just promise me one thing,” he ventured.

“What’s that?”

“Promise me you aren’t secret friends with Malfoy.”

“Good god! First, I am not secret friends with anybody. Secondly... Malfoy, Harry? Are you insane?”

“I just need to be sure, Herms.”
“I am absolutely not and absolutely never will be friends with Draco Malfoy. And I will not be friends with you either, if you ever call me that abominable nickname again.”


She shoved him into a particularly tacky Rococo tapestry.

“Fucking ouch, HERMS!”

Hermione was pulling her hair into a ponytail, and was determined to have it look neat – an exercise that invariably caused her arms to ache from being held aloft for a long stretch of time. She gave up when the pain got too sharp, dropping her arms and slouching her shoulders in defeat. Multiple curls simultaneously sprang loose like jacks-in-the-boxes. She knew that if her locks had faces, they would be laughing jesters.

A swarm of locusts – pardon me – a group of girls pranced into the bathroom, chattering madly. They didn’t notice her standing in front of the corner sink, so engrossed were they in their discussion.

One girl with perfectly straight blond hair (who Hermione was almost sure was called Martha) had an intensely off-putting whiny undertone to her voice.

“I mean, if he just knew me, I’m sure we’d be together!”

“Oh please,” said a rail thin girl with beautifully braided hair, “he wouldn’t look at you twice if you approached him in toffee-covered knickers.”

The rest of the girls broke into giggles, while probably-Martha scowled. The next one to speak was definitely called Romilda, and she had waves and waves of glossy black hair.

“Harry talks to me, you know. I can tell he’s intrigued!” she tittered inanely, “All he needs is a little push...”

“You’re sure these Weasley potions work?” asked a girl with smooth coppery curls: possibly-Viola.

“They do,” replied definitely-Romilda.

“And how exactly will you make sure he gets a dose?” snarked a girl with long straight coffee coloured hair... Aisha-maybe?

“Oh, Aisha, (-ding ding ding-) I’ve spiked a number of little delicacies. Harry can pick whichever he likes.”

“You’re so lucky you’re in the same house as him,” grumbled probably-Martha. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to get him to eat anything.”

The entire lot of girls burst out laughing at the unintentional innuendo.

“Sweets, you couldn’t get any bloke to eat anyt--”

“Ooh, you’re such a bitch, Emily...”

Hermione had heard enough.

“Excuse me,” she adapted her most prissy, commanding manner, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to confiscate those Weasley potions you’re in possession of. Strictly contraband, you see.”

Eight pairs of vacant eyes blinked at her in shock.

“We’re not in possession of any potions,” chirped possibly-Viola.

“Really?” Hermione drawled, doubtfully.

“It’s true!” recently-confirmed-as-Aisha said, raising her arms, “You can check!” she gestured down her body with her chin.

More giggles ensued.
“Actually,” purred definitely-Romilda, “You can get your friend Harry to frisk me.”
And then they were all delirious with giggles.

Hermione sneered and left the bathroom. Once outside in the superb giggle-free passageway, she let her hair down; the erratic heap of spirals and frizz tumbled down her back, and she swore she could hear it snarling and hissing a little. But that was okay. Those girls may have lovely soft hair, but at least she had a half decent brain under hers.

Dusk was a strange time. It was such a pronouncedly in-between time, so ambiguous and murky; the rich array of blues and purples it threw out induced a deeply poignant melancholy.
Even though she was walking with Harry, having an absurd conversation about Filch and Madam Pince’s alleged love affair, Hermione felt terribly alone.
She was participating in the banter, but her mind was far away. The castle lamps had been lit-luminous orbs of yellow, juxtaposed beautifully with the swaths of navy and prussian and plum that bloomed within the windows they bracketed. It was a palette worth of Van Gogh.

“I’m telling you, they’re having a hot torrid affair right under our noses. Why do you think Filch trained his mangy cat to patrol the corridors at night? It’s so that he could sneak into Pince’s personal corridor...”

“Harry! Yuck!” Hermione gasped.
He sniggered.

At least he was making an effort these days. He’d spent the whole afternoon with her in the library. Hermione chose to believe it wasn’t to watch out for Theo, or perhaps simply because Ron’s mouth was attached to Lavender’s, however much her pragmatic side told her that it was so.
Still... it grated. The way he had immediately assumed she was being reproachful when she sought to warn him about the squad of femme fatales panting after his... ahem, affections... had stung.

Hermione Granger: forever the nag.

She only ever felt like a tedious and sanctimonious bore when she was around Harry and Ron. Theo certainly never made her feel that way. Nor did Neville or Ginny. Even Luna, with whom she would often butt heads. And Padma...
Okay. Perhaps she should go down a couple of notches. Even Dean and Seamus seemed to think she was alright. Hermione thought it was all down to the protective sentiments Harry brought out in her. She worried for him so very intensely that it was only inevitable it would come out in her behaviour around him.
And she could never please Ron anyway.

When they arrived inside the Gryffindor common room, she found it far too full of bodies and activity. Hermione, in (vacant or in) pensive mood yearned for the bliss of solitude. To think about daffodils, or whatever.
Romilda Vane accosted Harry immediately, shoving all manner of eatables in his face.
“Told you,” Hermione said, haughtily. “Sooner you ask someone, sooner they’ll all leave you alone and you can-”

Down by the fireplace, Ron and Lavender were cuddled up in an armchair. She was sitting on his lap, playing with his hair, while he nuzzled her neck. Hermione’s stomach clenched horrendously.

“Well, goodnight, Harry.” She needed to get out of there.
The dormitory was, thankfully, deserted, and Hermione went and stood in front of the large arched window.
It was true what she had said to Harry- Ron could kiss whoever he liked. He didn’t owe her anything. The unsaid pull that existed between them wasn’t a promise of any sort.

She’d had a fling herself a few months back. Pete Harris, the son of her new neighbours, a student of History at Oxford, had come home for the summer. He modelled his look on Kurt Cobain, and smoked like a chimney while quoting Chomsky. Hermione was smitten.
She didn’t know where things stood with him. On their last evening together, he’d laid her out on his olive green duvet, peppered kisses down her body, and then torn her apart with his mouth. It was the lone sexual experience in her register – innocent kisses with Victor didn’t really count – and it had been... wonderful.
Pete hadn’t asked for any reciprocation. Instead, he had simply curled up beside her and fallen asleep. She'd woken up to a packed suitcase, and a deep kiss that smelt of smoke and aftershave. And then he had gone.

Sitting on the window seat, Hermione pulled in her rampant thoughts.
The point was this: No matter how badly it shredded her heart, Ron was free to kiss whoever he wanted. He was not free, however, to treat her like dirt; like she was disposable and dispensable. He was not free to make her feel like the shittiest toerag there ever was... especially since he had the power to make her feel brighter than the brightest star in the sky.

“Oh, Sirius...” she whispered, as she spotted his namesake twinkling through the window pane.
And just like that, the eternal cliché of gazing at an open sky for perspective reasserted itself.
The life and death of Sirius Black – now that was a true tragedy.
She pressed her palms against the glass. It had become dark enough outside for her to be able to see a hint of her reflection. Her face faintly superimposed onto the firmament... Hermione in the sky with diamonds.

What was that line from Thomas Hardy’s poem?
White stars ghost forth, that care not for men’s wives,
Or any other lives.
The process of spell casting goes something like this:
1. First, there is the incantation – a potent murmur in an arcane language, which leads to
2. The invocation of a specific strain of magical energy, which
3. Surges through the body of the conjuror (i.e., the sentient vessel within which magic resides) and then,
4. Pushes out into the world – either through a magical conduit, like a wand – or straight out of the conjuror’s pores (the latter requiring considerable skill).

Hermione felt alive with the glory of magic.
She could feel it running in currents under her skin, she could imagine its brilliant swirling iridescence. Kind of like how poncy new age gurus would tell you to ‘visualise your chakras’. *Om Shanti Om.*

There was a mirror on the desk at which she sat, and her eyebrows were teal; quite a good look on her, she thought. They went well with her skin tone, and gave the illusion that she had subtle green flecks in her eyes.
She’d achieved this feat in one go – the purpose of the day’s lesson on human transfiguration – so while the rest of her classmates were cursing at their reflections she arched one teal eyebrow at herself, tilting her head, and squinting her eyes sceptically.
Then she furrowed her teal eyebrows, settling them into a deep frown, and pursed her lips. She was in the middle of comically waggling her teal eyebrows (à la Groucho Marx), when Professor McGonagall appeared over her shoulder.
Hermione’s teal eyebrows puckered in mortification.
“Very good, Ms. Granger,” she said crisply. There was however the faintest of faint upward tilt to the corners of her mouth.

Hermione slumped back on her chair, looking around the room. Dean, who had half a red eyebrow, was perched at the corner of his seat, while Seamus pointed his wand at himself. Hermione was instantly nervous as well. Nothing ruined a peaceful day like someone blowing their face off.
A moment later, Seamus was sporting bright purple eyebrows, and a very large grin.
Dean gaped at him in disbelief. “How the hell did you do that?!"

Harry had one yellow eyebrow. Parvati’s were partially streaked with fuchsia. Lavender’s were still dark blond.
Ron’s were...
Ron had given himself a tufty, curled, very ginger handlebar moustache.
It looked so ridiculously incongruous on his face that Hermione burst out laughing. The rest of the class joined her soon after, and Ron turned crimson with embarrassment and fury. He glared fiercely in her direction... Hermione should have known comeuppance was imminent.

They moved onto the theoretical part of the lesson, with Professor McGonagall quizzing them on the limitations of human transfiguration. Hermione (*don’t say obviously*) knew all the answers – however, the smooth delivery of her responses was hindered by the great thespian Weasley’s needlessly embellished re-enactment of her enthusiasm.
Lavender and Parvati were in splits.
*Ignore them, ignore them, ignore them...* but she couldn’t.
Was it hypocritical of her to be upset?

The moment the bell rang, Hermione sped out of the classroom in search of holy sanctuary. Fuck, she’d been crying so much this year.

She found an empty bathroom and rushed in, collapsing against the nearest wall. As she sniffled pathetically, she cursed herself for being so bloody sensitive. She really, really wanted to get over Ron, already. Living with a broken heart was terrible, and she wanted out. She wanted to hurt him. Really hurt him, the way he kept hurting her. She racked her brain for ideas while she furiously swiped at her eyes. She needed to do something sufficiently drastic to...

There were footsteps, and then there was Luna standing in front of her, softly blurred because of her tear-filmed eyes.

“What happened?” she asked.

Hermione knew that Luna was very accustomed to cruelty, so she answered truthfully. “Stuff with Ron.”

“Ah. Yes. He can say upsetting things sometimes.”

“Indeed.” Hermione sniffed and blinked and shrugged. She was really bad at talking to Luna.

“Theo worries about you, you know?”

“Hah. I know. I’m sure he worries about you too.”

“Oh yes,” Luna nodded solemnly, “he gets quite angry when people make fun of me.”

Hermione smiled through the last of her whimpers, “I’m glad you’ve become friends.”

“Me too,” Luna beamed, “He’s even helping me with my care of magical creatures assignment. We go fishing for Dabberblimps every night!”

“That’s wonderful, Luna.”

“By the way, Hermione, your eyebrows look stunning.”

Oh shit. Her teal eyebrows. Hermione was shifting to pull out her wand, when Luna’s soft gasp halted her.

“What?” she asked; startled.

“How did you do that?”

“Do what, Luna?”

“Your eyebrows are brown again,” she said softly. Hermione frowned in confusion. “You can do wandless, non-verbal magic?”

“I... I don’t know. I don’t think so?”

“You just did,” said Luna, looking perfectly placid again. “You know, it’s said that people proficient in wandless magic generally suffer from frequent mental breakdowns. You ought to careful.”

“Ye—yes.”

Wandless magic. Hermione was itching to go somewhere private where she could explore this possibility further. Her blood rushed at the thought – “Shall we get out of this miserable joint then?” she asked Luna.

“Yes, please. It’s good that you’re not planning to cry in the bathroom anymore. Moaning Myrtle might think you’re stealing her USP, and you know how awfully sensitive she can be.” Luna patted her back gently as they walked out. “Oh, hello, Harry! Did you know one of your eyebrows is bright yellow?”

And indeed it was Harry with a yellow eyebrow waiting outside the bathroom. Hermione realised he must have rushed out right after her, without even bothering to fix his appearance, and she was filled with gratitude.

“Hi, Luna,” he said, uneasily, “Hermione, you left your stuff...”

“Oh yes,” said Hermione, taking her books and things from him, “Thank you, Harry. Well, I’d
She thought she’d spare him the burden of having to comfort her – for both their sakes. She was also desperate to give wandless magic another try.

Rushing up endless staircases, Hermione tumbled through the portrait hole, into the Gryffindor tower, and raced into her dorm in record time.

She paused at the foot of her bed, her eyes falling on a thick hardbound book that she has placed there in the morning.

Inspiration struck suddenly… she had to leave immediately.

Growling in frustration at her own warped, teenage girl priorities, she left the way she had come in just moments ago.

Hermione scanned the students pouring out of the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom on the first floor. When she spotted the individual she was seeking, she beckoned to him frantically.

Looking mildly perplexed, Theo strolled over to her.

“Hullo. You look like you’ve been sprinting laps around the quidditch pitch all morning.”

“Something like that,” she replied, a bit breathlessly. “You’d asked me about muggle wars and conflict and all that—” she waved her hand in the universal sign for ‘etcetera’, “- so anyway, I found this book, and, um, I think you’ll find it interesting.”

She was still panting a little. Bloody hell, she needed to exercise more often.

Theo took the heavy tome from her hands, running his fingers over the glossy cover. “History of the World by J. M. Roberts,” he read, “Wow. Thanks. You’ve been running around like a maniac just so you could give this to me?”

“Well… not exactly…” there was something off in his manner – his posture was too stiff, and his face was twisted into a muted frown. “You look upset?”

He took in a gulp of air, glaring into the distance. “Potter is taking Luna to Slughorn’s party tonight.”

“Oh?” she said in surprise.

“They’re fairly good friends…”

“Right.” he ground out, again.

“…not nearly as much as she likes you.”

He peered at her. “What are you saying?”

“I ran into Luna earlier today. She told me how much she appreciates you standing up for her, and helping her with her work, among other things,” Hermione replied loftily.

She has broadened the ever-collected Theo Nott had two bright spots of red on his narrow face.
“I can tell you with complete surety that both Harry and Luna are interested in people other than each other.”

“Yeah. Alright,” He cleared his throat, suddenly embarrassed; “Who’re you going with, if not Weasley?”

Hermione grinned. “You.”

“Oh?” his eyebrows shot up and disappeared behind his hair.

“Do you have any objections?”

“None! But the rest of Hogwarts might...”

“Oh, please. Virtually half the school has seen us together. Your friends have. My friends have. They think it’s strange, but they really don’t care. Harry knows, and he’s dealing with it. The only person who doesn’t is...”

“Weasley.” Theo’s smile was slow to come, but deadly in its impact. “This is very Slytherin of you, darling.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Don’t pretend like it won’t serve your agenda as well. So. Will you go to Slughorn’s party with me tonight?”

Theo laid his palm on his heart: “I’d be honoured to, Hermione.”

She nodded in a businesslike manner – “Eight O’clock” – and turned to leave. He called out to her just as she began to walk away.

“Thanks again for the book, by the way.”

“Don’t mention it,” she called over her shoulder.

“And, uh... this conversation... I mean the stuff at the beginning... you know... it never happened, right?”

Hermione was glad her back was turned – he wouldn’t have been pleased by her look of glee.

“Neeever happened.”

She walked deliberately slowly while leaving the great hall after her meal.

Deliberately. Slowly. She neared the grotesque, writhing, two-headed monster that materialised whenever Ron and Lavender came into contact.

“Oh, hi, Hermione!” Parvati’s cheery greeting was the very soul of contrition.

Hermione smiled, and shot back an equally jaunty “Hi, Parvati!” – Show time. – “Are you going to Slughorn’s party tonight?”

“No invite,” said Parvati sullenly. “I’d love to go, though; it sounds like it’s going to be really good... You’re going, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Hermione girded her metaphorical loins. “I’m meeting Theodore at eight, and we’re going up to the party together.”


“Mhmm. The very same.”

“Are you going out with him, then?” Parvati, demanded urgently.

Hermione did her best to channel the Romildas, the probably-Marthas, and the possibly-Violas of the world. She simply giggled in response. Harry, who was sitting next to Parvati, shot her a look of disbelief.

“Wow. I’d heard you both studied together, but I didn’t know it was a... a... thing!”

“He’s really quite intelligent.” Hermione considered twirling her hair, but didn’t want to risk creating an unnecessary tangle. “You can imagine how much pleasure I take in that. Well, see you... Got to go and get ready for the party...”

“Just a minute, Hermione!” Parvati said, still looking scandalised while she pulled a bit of parchment out of her pocket. “My sister asked me to give this to you.”
Hermione thanked her and left. She hadn’t looked Ron’s way even once, knowing full well that she was being catty and silly and such an adolescent... yet she couldn’t wrestle down a satisfied smirk. The parchment in her hand said: ‘Library- tonight. After your stupid party, obviously.’

“You’re scarily vindictive sometimes,” Hermione was told.
“Oh, and you aren’t?”

Ginny grinned at her – well, at her reflection, standing behind her as she was, braiding and coiling strands of atypically smooth brown hair.

“You should have seen Ron’s face. Like a troll struck by a dozen stunners, he was.” She paused to let Hermione finish laughing. “He’s such a moron. I’m sorry we’re related. Surely I can’t be the first person to tell you this – you can do better.”

Hermione regarded Ginny – Ginny’s reflection – thoughtfully. “My mum says that girls mature a good five years before boys. At the very least.”

Ginny nodded. “Mine says that same. And she’d know, you know?”

“OUCH.” Hermione yelped.

“Oh shut it. I didn’t pull that hard. Fuck me, you have so much hair! So anyway, my mum... she’d know. It’s why she kept popping out kid after kid until she had me. Pretty daft plan, honestly – stuck with six duds just for one pearl.”

“I’d say you’re worth all that and more, Ginny Weasley,” said Hermione, giving her a warm smile. Ginny kissed the tresses currently in her grasp. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Besides the Prat Extraordinaire, you’ve only had to deal with that lot in small doses.”

“True. But besides the Prat Extraordinaire, they’re a very decent lot, I’d say.”

“Oh, really?” said Ginny, deprecatingly. “let’s go over this decent lot, shall we? The eldest is engaged to an overbearing cow, the one after is so desperate to suppress his latent homosexuality that he ran off to train bloody dragons to establish his masculinity, and the third turned out to be a foul government toady who abandoned his family. Then came a pair of delinquents with massive issues with authority. And after that...”

“The Prat Extraordinaire,” Hermione joined in at the end of the tirade. She was quivering with laughter, and Ginny clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“Do you mind? I’m trying to work a miracle over here.”

“Well, excuse me,” Hermione attempted in vain to stem her chuckles, “I didn’t ask you to do this. You practically begged me to let you do my hair.”

“Of course, I did. This is a very important operation...”

“Operation Hang the Bastard Out Yonder. OHBOY.”

“You have such a way with abbreviations!”

There was a short stint of silence after their mirth had subsided. Ginny had finally reached the other side of her head when she asked- “Are you sure you aren’t coming to the Burrow tomorrow?”

“I am, Ginny.”

“Come on, Herms...ione,” she said, acknowledging Hermione’s glare, “You don’t have to interact with Ron at all. Harry wants you there, I really, really want you there, Fred and George want you there, and mum and dad would love to see you. Plus, Lupin and Tonks will probably come by...”

“Of course I’d love to see them all, too; you know that. But I honestly do have a lot of work to complete. I’m not even going to my own home so that I can stay here, and —”
“And spend time with Nott?” Ginny asked, drowning out the end of her sentence. Hermione rolled her eyes. “And there we go. I was wondering when you’d bring that up.” Ginny shook her head in bemusement while muttering: “It’s just so bizarre, Hermione!” “Perhaps,” she said, “but it is, okay? And before you ask, it certainly isn’t a ploy or sham.” In the mirror, Hermione observed her fiery-haired friend struggle to form her next query. After a beat or two, she seemed to settle on something and asked, “Are you actually going out with him?” “No, Ginny.” “Really? It’s completely platonic.” “Pity. He’s not bad to look at. A little scrawny, maybe, but then, so are you.” Hermione dismissed her with a soft grunt. “Not happening.”

Ginny picked up the final bit of her hair, and began plaiting it. Meeting reflection-Hermione’s eyes, she said, “Harry doesn’t like it.”

Hermione frowned. “He seems to have... grudgingly... accepted it, actually...” “Nah,” she said, looking a bit apologetic, “He’s just not getting after you because he knows you’re dealing with far too much shit as it is. He also feels guilty; like, he if had been around more, you wouldn’t have gone and befriended a sodding Slytherin.” “So what if he’s a Slytherin?” “So what?! They’re a bunch of no good snakes!”

No. Bad answer.

Hermione was instantly incensed. “That is blanket stereotyping, and it’s beyond absurd! If that entire house is unequivocally evil, why does it even exist? Let’s do away with Slytherin house, and there’ll be no bad witches or wizards in Great Britain ever again! Peter Pettigrew was in Gryffindor, remember?” “That’s not what I mean, Hermione,” Ginny said gently, “Bad eggs can pop up anywhere. But you can’t deny where most of them come from. Even the youngest kids here act like such pissing little...”

Hermione cut her off. “Can you blame them? They come in here as eleven year olds, get sent to a particular table by a mouldy talking hat, and suddenly they’re ostracised by practically all their peers, and even some of the teachers! How would you react to that?”

They fell into another stretch of silence, allowing them both to get lost in their own heads.

“I’m done,” Ginny whispered, causing Hermione to resurface. She stared in awe at the intricate coil of braids and twists at the back of her head. “You really are a miracle worker, Gin.” “No shit. I could have done my own hair ten times over in this much time.” “You don’t have to do anything to your hair,” she sniped, eying Ginny’s silky tresses, which she had justifiably left loose. Spinning around on the little footstool on which she was sat, Hermione looked up and smiled gratefully at her friend.

Ginny returned the gesture with a subdued smile of her own. “I’ll talk to Harry over the hols. You’re right; what you said... it’s true.”

The atmosphere was unacceptably sombre and intense; especially considering the fact that they were due to attend a party in half an hour. Hermione lifted her chin regally and said, “Of course I’m right.” Her inflection was all wrong, but Ginny indulged her with a grin. “Doesn’t it get tiring? Always being right?”

Hermione arched her brows and pretended to examine her cuticles. “Not in the slightest. ...HEY!” Ginny had pinched her shoulder – gently of course – and Hermione rubbed the spot while giving Ginny the two-fingered salute. Gasping in fake indignation, Ginny pulled her up by the arm and spun her around to face the mirror again.
“Not too shabby, eh?” she said smugly. Before Hermione could say or do anything else, she found herself being dragged out of the dormitory. “Where are we going? It’s only seven-thirty...” “We have to pass the time in the common room. OHBOY, remember?”

In those subsequent thirty minutes, Hermione felt just about as self-conscious as she had during the Yule ball. She tried desperately to involve herself in the conversation that Ginny, Harry, Dean, and Seamus were engaged in... but they were talking about quidditch, and she was consumed by the knowledge that a certain red-haired boy was sitting diagonally across the room from her, and he hadn’t stop staring at her for a moment.
Slughorn’s office was dressed up to look like a sumptuous Turkish tent. The walls and ceiling were draped with green, scarlet, and gold silk. A large gilded mosaic lamp threw a diffused red light that bathed the room in a treacherous, decadent glow, which was underscored by frequent puffs of smoke, lilting chants sung to the tune of various string instruments, and the unending murmur of conversation, punctuated with sudden loud bursts of laughter.

The atmosphere was heady in a suffocating, self-indulgent, trying-too-hard kind of way.

“People are staring,” Hermione grumbled.

“What did you expect? Although, I think we can safely say that at least half those stares are less about you being here with me, and more about the way you look,” Theo smiled at her, “Very nice, Hermione.”

She laughed awkwardly. “Thanks.”

“Why is that obnoxiously large fellow glaring at me like he wants to pull my guts out of my throat?”

“How? Oh. That’s Cormac McLaggen. He, um, had asked me to go with him...”

“And you’re telling me this now? You didn’t think you needed to warn me about potentially murderous, scorned suitors baying for my blood? I’ve told you before, I’m far too beautiful to –”

“...to die young. Yes.”

Theo laughed. He moved to take a sip of his mead, but midway... he froze. It was like he’d been petrified. An alarmed Hermione followed his line of vision, and it led to a very unlikely group of individuals: a somewhat bewildered looking Harry, a very red-faced and beaming Slughorn, a rather tubby gentleman who could be best described as ‘Barney Rubble wearing bifocals’, an animated cadaver – unquestionably a vampire, and last but definitely not the least as far as Theo was concerned, Luna.

Hermione smirked at her gobsmacked friend. “She looks very pretty, doesn’t she?”

Theo let out a breathless sound of agreement.

“Come on then.” She grabbed his arm and began pulling him towards the object of his fixation. A look of untempered relief spread across Harry’s face when he spotted her coming their way, and he took hold of Luna and broke away from his company.

They met near the centre of the room, and the purposefulness that had driven Harry and Hermione up to that point suddenly deserted them. There was a stretch of uncomfortable silence while she looked at him, and he glowered at Theo, and Theo made moony eyes at Luna, and Luna gazed beatifically at the fairies encased in the lamp overhead.

“Hi Harry, Luna!” Hermione chirped. She fucking chirped, and that was enough to draw the attention of the other three.

“Hey, Hermione... Hello, Nott.” Harry’s face, voice, manner, everything conveyed distaste. Luna spoke up before Theo could spit out a proportionately acidic greeting in response, gesticulating towards the twinkling lights above. “Fairies really don’t like being trapped in this manner.”

“Of course they don’t!” Hermione jumped on board with alacrity, pleased to have a legitimate cause to vent out her irritation, “it’s just one of the many ways magical creatures are abused. Don’t even get me started on the house-elves being forced to navigate this crowd with those humongous platters –”

“No,” Luna interrupted, “I mean fairies don’t like red-tinted glass. They don’t like what it does to their complexion.”
Hermione drained her goblet in one neat gulp.
“Why don’t you tell me more about that, Luna,” said Theo, an unsettling purr pervading his tone. He slipped his arm around her waist, and made to lead her away and into the crowd.
Hermione yanked him right back into place. “No. Your motive here is to establish your... er, political stance, yes? To make clear where your sympathies lie? So go on,” she said with a wild flourish of her arm, “Convince away.”

And again, there was an awkward moment where she looked expectantly at Theo, and he looked coldly at her, and Harry alternated between frowning at the two of them, and Luna gazed beatifically at the fairies encased in the lamp overhead.

“What grand gesture would you like me to make?” Theo asked, “Shall I stand on a table and recite an ode to Dumbledore? Should I have worn a giant Gryffindor hat? Or perhaps worn robes with ‘Death Eaters are dastardly dicks’ stitched on across the back? Would you like me to drag Potter into the middle of the throng and snog him in front of everyone?”
“You could start by not behaving like an utter wanker.” Hermione berated him over Harry’s splutter of horror, “You know what to say. You always know what to say.”
“You’re giving me too much credit there, darling...”
“I am not – ”
“No, actually, I am Nott.”
Hermione glared, quite ready to empty his drink on his head – she might be able to do it wandlessly now – but Harry interrupted her focus.
“How’s this for an overture of friendship,” he said to Theo, “Never argue with Hermione when she’s in advocate mode.”
“As bad as one would expect, ay?” Theo asked with a ridiculous amount of severity.
Harry responded with equal gravity. “Worse.”
“I have a beautiful Lion-head Gryffindor hat, Theo. I’ll let you borrow it for the next party.”

It was fair to say the ice was somewhat broken after that. The conversation was stilted, and both the boys were still a bit aloof, but with the help of fine, freely flowing libation, and Luna’s sweet candour, they managed to establish a fragile dynamic of sorts.

“Harry Potter!” came a lively cry from somewhere behind them. Sybill Trelawney materialised dramatically, in a manner befitting a fraudulent seer.
“Oh, hello,” said Harry, unhappily.
She greeted Luna with equal enthusiasm, nodded at Theo, but ignored Hermione completely, which suited her just fine. She zoned out as Trelawney twittered at Harry about something or the other, sipping her nth goblet of mead and listlessly trying to cast a weightlessness charm on a house-elf’s platter with nothing but her mind. She swayed from the strain of it... from the influence of her drink... and Theo placed a steadying hand on her back. “We’re doing alright, aren’t we?” he asked.
She smiled at him, and looking around she realised that their gathering seemed to have expanded. Slughorn was there too, and... Snape?
Indeed Severus Snape was flashing his usual acrimonious sneer at Harry, while saying- “Funny, I never had the impression that I managed to teach Potter anything at all.”
“Well, then, it’s natural ability!” Slughorn countered gaily. “You should have seen what he gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death — never had a student produce finer on a first attempt, I don’t think even you, Severus —”
“Really?” Snape looked sour and suspicious, and Hermione had to bite her tongue to keep from throwing her best friend – best friend, Hermione – under the bus.

Things were getting tense. She wanted to whisk Theo and Luna away to the opposite end of the room. Or maybe go hide alone in some corner. Or maybe leave this inane party altogether. She
zoned out again. The rosy rose light in the room was the colour of madness. The madness was a fog around her head, and Luna’s mellifluous voice broke through the mad fog, but only after her words were leech of all meaning. Then there was laughter. The pressure on her back was tremulous, the laughter was unfettered, crazy, and echoing strangely, like the mad fog had solidified, and was causing sound waves to refract in all sorts of mad angles.

She had never been this tipsy before.

Theo grabbed her arm with a jarring tightness just as she felt her eyes flutter shut. She resurfaced, and yet again, the alternations to her surroundings took her by surprise. ‘Surprise’, was really a ‘what the fuck?!’ which resulted in the very distressing phenomenon of sudden onset soberness.

Joviality looked very disturbing on Filch. There he was, with a manic grin on his face, saying: “I discovered this boy lurking in an upstairs corridor. He claims to have been invited to your party and to have been delayed in setting out. Did you issue him with an invitation?”

Draco Malfoy, mutinous and fuming, snarled: “All right, I wasn’t invited! I was trying to gatecrash, happy?”

“No, I’m not!” said Filch, grinning, grinning like a harlequin. “You’re in trouble, you are! Didn’t the headmaster say that nighttime prowling’s out, unless you’ve got permission, didn’t he, eh?”

Slughorn, keeping with the spirit of generosity associated with yuletide, dismissed Filch and extended a spontaneous albeit disinterested invite to Malfoy, welcoming him into the fold.

His pinched expression of displeasure morphed into a gracious smile. With his smooth brow, straight back, and gleaming teeth, he looked like a different person.

“This is very kind of you, Professor,” he said to Slughorn.

As the old man pompously waved away his thanks, Hermione looked over at Theo. He was staring fixedly at Malfoy, worry pulling his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth down into a frown.

“You okay?” she murmured.

He only shook his head, eyes still locked on his best friend.

“I’d like a word with you, Draco.” This was Snape, whose presence Hermione had nearly forgotten. He, too, looked extremely displeased.

“Oh, now, Severus,” Slughorn slurred, “it’s Christmas, don’t be too hard —”

“I’m his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be. Follow me, Draco.”

Hermione dragged Theo to the side once they had left. He slumped against the wall and sighed dejectedly.

“He wasn’t trying to gatecrash, was he?” she asked. Theo merely shrugged. “He wasn’t. And you aren’t going to tell me what he was really doing.” She teetered slightly, unexpectedly. Stupid platform sandals.

Theo steadied her with a hand to her shoulder, and the last vestiges of his frown melted away.

“You’re drunk.”

“No,” she laughed feebly.

“You’re nearly there, then.” Theo smirked, “Come on. I’ll see you to your common room.”

“No… I have to go… to the library.”

“Don’t be absurd, you mad bint. You can study tomorrow.”

“Have to meet Padma. Shouldn’t take too long…”

With a long suffering sigh, Theo pulled away from the wall and began walking her towards the exit. “I’ll drop you to the library then.”

Perhaps she was relying a little too much on him for support.
They walked in companionable silence, each lost in their own thoughts.
“Who’s Kubla Khan?” Theo asked, suddenly.
“…Mongol emperor. Why do you ask?” she blinked at him in puzzlement.
“You were just muttering something about him and a dome.”
“I was? No? Was I?”
Theo shook his head at her in indulgent exasperation.
“You are such a bizarre little creature. And here we are at the library, so I bid you farewell.” He laughed as Hermione curtsied. “You are really good at that.”
“My grandmother insisted I attend ballet lessons as a kid.”
Giving her a gentle one-armed hug, he said “Goodnight”, and strolled back down the corridor. Hermione watched him until he disappeared from sight.

With careful but wobbly steps, she navigated through the sea of tall bookshelves until she arrived at the table Padma favoured for their study sessions. Except Padma wasn’t at the table… she was sitting on the floor, under a large arched window.
Her long hair was loose for once – a shiny oil spill meandering in waves down her back – and so was her posture; there was a general wilted look about her. She was still in her uniform, which was disastrously rumpled.
“Hey, Hermione. Nice dress.”
“Thanks?” Hermione regarded her uncertainly. She even sounded wrong; all hoarse and drowsy. Hermione stumbled to the spot besides her, and sat down heavily on the thick carpet. Then she noticed the leather hipflask in Padma’s hand.
“Er… what’s that?”
“Firewhiskey.” Padma shrugged carelessly, and then proceeded to take a huge gulp from it. “Ah.”
“So the term-end results are out. Did you see? Did you see what a powerful brand new pain potion, and an instant allergy eliminating potion warrant? Second and third place apparently. And guess who topped? Yes. That’s right. Your superstar chosen one Potter boy.” She made a sound of abject disgust.
When she offered her flask to Hermione, it was accepted with much gratitude.
They sat side by side, rapidly passing the flask from one to the other. Firewhiskey burned like nothing Hermione had ever known. It was very aptly named. It had none of the smoothness of her dad’s favourite Glenfiddich that she had snuck a few sips of at parties her parents threw. But she found she liked the burn – the burn that filled her while simultaneously emptied her so that there was room for more burn to fill and empty.
The mad fog was back, and now it was gold like dust mites set alight by candle flames.
Padma’s head landed on her shoulder.
“Fuck Slughorn.”
Hermione recited Kubla Khan (…again?) while Padma played with the silky hem of her dress.
“Nice dress.”
A voice that was muffled against a shoulder.
The flask was empty. They looked at it forlornly.
“Fuck Potions.”
She felt Padma nod against her neck.

Two rows of bookshelves were visible from where they were seated. They converged as they receded, bending unnaturally to meet at a point blacker than the lock of Padma’s black hair resting
on her wrist. Lines of books were moving into that blackest of black holes at varying paces… it was dizzying, discombobulating… an M.C. Escher mindfuck…

Padma lifted her head slightly. “Nice dress…” Hermione felt the intoxicated hum in the warm breath against her jaw. She turned to look at –

Warm, soft lips brushed against hers with the gentlest of pressure. If a kiss could be whispered, that was how it was done. The whisper grew into an assertion as the pressure increased… as Padma sucked at her lower lip, Hermione felt another firewhiskey-like burn consume her. She pulled back in bleary confusion, and Padma looked back at her with blazing twin black hole eyes – “Please.”

– and Hermione surrendered. Her mad fog closed in, rushing in through her ears and saturating her brain cells. They gave up on being tentative. It was a kiss of defeat and resignation. It was a frantic acknowledgement of futility and disappointment and desperation. Hermione got lost in the clash of lips, and when she felt Padma’s tongue flick against her mouth, she brought out her own. They clutched at each other, full-on snogging, mouths open, tongues tangling, breaths heavy.

Padma broke away with a lurch. She gasped, squeezing her eyes shut…

Hermione shakily stood up, catching herself on the nearest chair as she staggered. She walked precariously between the bookshelves; one hand grabbing at whatever it could find to keep herself steady… She walked towards the universe’s end… the ultimate vanishing point… the blackest of black holes…

Hermione frowned. She was standing in front of the portrait of the fat lady. How on earth did that happen? She gave the blatantly disapproving pink puffer fish the password, and veritably crawled up the stairs to her dorm. Everyone else was asleep. She slipped into her bed without bothering to undress.

Her head was swimming; the mad fog was grey early winter morning London smog. And she couldn’t shake away the memory of lips and warm breath… Unbidden, her hand crept into her underwear, and she touched the sensitive dampness with a shudder. She remembered the way Pete had touched her, gentle strokes at first… Wonderful, glorious currents travelled up her legs and down her spine. She pictured dirty blond hair and strong tattooed arms, a gruff voice saying baby baby and her hand went deeper and faster and deeper…. And she was confused because blond kept getting streaked with red, and oh baby she spun her fingers in circles, and the last thing she remembered were eyes so blue blue blue blue
blue
blue
blue o god
blue
Waking up after being petrified by the basilisk was a very strange experience. She vaguely remembered hurrying out of the library all those years ago… and then there was: Nothing. A long expanse of blank… and then existence. It had been non-being, and then being. It had been like someone had switched her life off, and then her eyes opened, and things came on again. It had been startlingly abrupt.

This is what Hermione felt when she woke up on Christmas Eve morning: Suddenly extant. She stared up at the canopy above her bed like a newborn taking her first breath – acquainting herself with her surroundings. Her head was throbbing raucously, and she could hear her eardrums pulsing with the rhythm. Her throat was the driest thing in the world. She sat up slowly, groaning in agony. Thankfully, the dorm was empty, and she hurriedly slipped into the bathroom.

She stood under the hot shower for a long time, tipping her head back and closing her eyes. She vehemently scrubbed her orange blossom scented body wash into her skin, desperate to get rid of the pungent distillery smell that had embedded itself into her pores, and then went over her dim memories from the night before while massaging her scalp with shampoo.

Oh dear god.
Fucking hell.
Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

As she put away her toothbrush after a very thorough cleaning of her teeth, she contemplated her reflection, feeling deeply uncomfortable. Sure, the girl in the mirror looked like she ought to – her skin flushed and dewy, contrasting starkly against her shower-darkened hair that spread around her shoulders and back like seaweed – but Hermione couldn’t find herself relating to this image in the least. She took a couple of steps back, dropping the towel wrapped around her body, and glanced down at her torso… small breasts, narrow waist and shoulders…

She reached out, stretching her arm to touch her index finger to the mirror. The girl in the mirror followed her movements, and their digits met on the glass, creating a tangible connection. The Creation of Hermione.

Alas, this was no Genesis, no divine moment, and there would be no glorious, iconic ceilings painted to immortalise this moment. It wasn’t a creation, or even a recreation, for that matter. It was a bloody teenage crisis; a cliché. A run-of-the-mill existential dilemma… which she wrapped up in fortitude and stowed away. She was not the kind of woman who’d come and go, talking about Michelangelo.

There will be time for such extravagance later.

“Hermione! There you are!” An anxious looking Ginny rushed towards her, followed closely by Harry.

When Hermione had finally bothered to look at the clock after her shower, she realised that the Hogwarts Express was due to leave in twenty minutes. She got dressed in a frantic hurry, and charged down to the platform to say goodbye to her friends.

“Where the hell did you disappear to last night?” Harry asked.
“I went to the library,” Hermione muttered, hoping they would think that her face was flushed due to the cold.
Harry and Ginny rolled their eyes in synchrony and laughed. Like, *ha ha, that’s just so Hermione; so typical ha ha ha.*
Ha ha indeed. *Typical,* rule-abiding Hermione overdid it at a party, went to the library to get utterly shitfaced on smuggled goods, and then indulged in a bit of harmless sexual experimentation. Except that she couldn’t say with certainty that it was harmless, because she wouldn’t be seeing Padma until after the holidays, so she had no way of knowing how the other girl had processed the incident.

Hermione shook those thoughts away. There will be time for meditation later.

Harry was speaking to her. “I really needed to talk to you! It’s important. Last night I –”
He was jostled forward awkwardly, when that repugnant, flailing multi-limbed beast Rovender crashed into him.
“Oi!” he cried indignantly, and the sound speared through the beast, and Ron and Lavender emerged.
“Sorry!” Lavender giggled, sounding as sorry as Snape did while dishing out detentions.
Hermione was powerless against the determination of her eyes, as they insisted on fixing themselves on Ron. He was looking at her with the ugliest look of contempt she had seen.
“Yeah, sorry mate. Just saying goodbye to my girl,” he said to Harry, “I’ll see you on the train.”
He stalked off, pulling his girl along, and they morphed into Rovender again as they walked.

“You were saying, Harry…?” Hermione asked calmly.
“Er, right. So, last night I followed Snape and Mal –”
This time he was interrupted by the shriek of the train’s whistle. Grumbling impatiently, Harry pulled her into a hug. “Sod it. I’ll tell you when I get back. Have a happy Christmas, Hermione.”
“You too,” she said, and then went to hug Ginny.
“I’m really going to miss you, Herms.”
Hermione let it slide, just this once.

The train trundled off, all fat and wobbly like a millipede. Smoke rose in great big tufts, bright against the pastel blue and mauve of the winter morning sky. Haze fractured the sharpness of the surroundings, and everything seemed to be made of irregular flecks and dabs of colour. It was an impressionist painting come to life – like someone had animated Monet’s rendition of the Gare St-Lazare station. Hermione pulled her coat tightly around her and turned to walk back to the castle.

There would be time for romanticism later.

Oh how she loved brisk, solitary walks. She breathed out into the clean wintry air, sullying it with tiny puffs of fog. She stomped emphatically down on the carpet of snow below, sullying its pristine perfection. These acts of petty destruction were helping her exorcise her inner demons – it was cathartic. Hermione dared to eat a peach.
Nothing had changed.
Sure, she had woken up feeling like her skin wasn’t her own. She had broken rules for ignoble reasons, she had kissed a girl, and she had relinquished control of her faculties. But nothing had changed, because while the kiss had been nice and being intoxicated was liberating, she was still the girl who was hopelessly pining. The clever girl who really should know better: that was her reality.

Was it time for introspection yet? Was she ready to go down the rabbit hole? Hogwarts castle loomed in front of her, housing hundreds of warm fires, hundreds of comfortable armchairs, thousands upon thousands of books...

Later, she thought. There will be time later.

“There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions
And for a hundred visions and revisions
Before the taking of a toast and tea.”
Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Hermione beamed up at the towering stack of books on her bed:
her parents had truly outdone themselves. Every year they’d pick a theme of sorts, and between her
birthday and Christmas, they’d ply her with a carefully curated collection of books. There was
however, a less-than-pleased sentiment conveyed in the letter that accompanied them.
"I've made you an absolutely killer mixtape, but of course you'll only get to hear it when you
bother to come home next." Clearly, dear old dad was a bit brassed off.

Okay. Concentrate.
She stared hard at the book at the top of the pile, and thought Accio! with all her might. It shifted
perceptibly.
The second time it hopped up into the air and hovered for a few seconds, before falling back down.
The third time it came flying into her outstretched hand.
Hermione grinned with manic delight. One by one, she summoned all the books, stacking them on
the floor next to her forsaken wand.
She summoned the glass sitting on her bedside table. Aguamenti! she cried in her head. Nothing
happened.
The second time, she thought the glass felt marginally cooler.
The third time, she managed to conjure a few condensation-like beads along the inside of the glass.
The fourth attempt left her with half a glass full of icy water. Definitely half full.

Hermione spent an hour creating absolute chaos in the dormitory that was all hers for the next ten
days. Summoning, conjuring, severing and repairing, transfiguring, shrinking, enlarging... She
failed a lot, but succeeded more. She felt like Matilda Wormwood after she’d learned to control her
powers. Exactly like Matilda – she was an extraordinarily talented, woefully misunderstood
bookworm... suddenly exalted.

Exhaustion gripped her soon enough. She stood amid the wreckage, basking in absolute self-
satisfaction. Her magic and her mind had done this. She had tossed a room; surely with enough
practice, she could bring down mountains, part the sea, summon tornadoes, chisel rock and steel
and build cities like the world had never seen. Elated and euphoric, she stretched out on her bed
gracefully like the blooming queen of Sheba, and with languorous waves of her arm, took her time
putting things in order again. A botched reparo had left an uncomfortable looking dent in
Lavender’s mattress, which Hermione made a point to forget to rectify.

Turkey and Potatoes and Parsnips, oh my! Christmas dinner at Hogwarts was utterly spectacular,
and Hermione hoped the house-elves slaving away in the kitchens liked the hats, socks, and
scarves she had sent them. As always, very few students had opted to stay back for the holidays, so
they were all comfortably seated on one table in the middle of the great hall. After a surreptitious
glance up and down the table, Hermione crooked a finger at a salt cellar, and it sprouted legs and
scuttled over to her.
“Could you perhaps direct some salt my way, Ms Granger?” said an amused voice.
Startled, Hermione looked into the brightly twinkling eyes of Professor Dumbledore. Clearing her
throat, she mumbled, “Yes sir, of course,” and with a slight flick of her finger, set the cellar a-walking.
Every single pair of eyes in the room watched the tiny bit of silverware scamper down the table. “Impressive,” said Professor McGonagall, gracing Hermione with a rare smile. “Simply marvellous!” Slughorn exclaimed through a mouthful of food, beaming. Many other commending assertions, hushed and loud, piped up along the table, and Hermione felt her whole face burn. “Show off,” Theo muttered in her ear. She glared at him half-heartedly as he grinned at the splodges of red on her cheeks. “Shut up,” she hissed back.
A few seats down, Hagrid was telling Slughorn about how consistently brilliant she had been over the years. The younger children were gaping at her in awe. Thanks for that Dumbledore. She saw that he was still watching her, smiling knowingly. Hermione wondered how much energy he must expend in keeping that sparkle going in his eyes. It had to be a charm – human eyes didn’t do that.

They sat on the steps by the archway that opened onto the central courtyard, stomachs full and minds briefly unburdened. Hermione was leafing through a book on Arithmancy, and Theo, seated one step below, rested back on his elbows, lazily contemplating the setting sun that looked like a grimy, dumpy little pumpkin though the evening haze. Save for the odd stray student milling about, they were completely alone, and a deep stillness pervaded the usually raucous castle. “Why on earth did you choose to stay here for Christmas?” Theo asked her sullenly. Hermione emerged from her book and frowned, “Why did you?” He shrugged mordantly. “It was bound to be me alone in a cold and lonely castle either which way.” “You live in a castle?” she asked in wonder. “Mansion. Whatever.” Hermione studied his profile for a moment – perhaps he didn’t share her tranquil mood as she had assumed. Indeed, his furrowed brow and cloudy eyes were obvious indicators of inner turmoil. “I can’t be around my parents,” she said hesitantly, “I... I just don’t know how to downplay the hell we’re hurtling towards. I never have been able to lie to them.” Theo’s frown deepened. “Would they stop you from coming back if they knew?” She couldn’t hold back a derisive snort. “Hardly. They’d want to join the Order and fight.” His eyes widened with incredulity as he turned towards her. “Seriously?!” “Oh yes. No power on earth can stop them from fighting for a worthy cause. They have to stand against all injustices, oppose all wrongs; running and hiding is never an option.” “Dear Merlin,” Theo’s expression cleared, and he grinned. “So that’s where you get it from!” Hermione sniffed snootily. “I get it from both sides. That’s why I’m twice as insufferable.” His laugh rang out, echoing around in the empty courtyard, and she smiled at the sound and the way he looked.

“I’m going to show you something,” he said slowly, “but you have to promise you won’t laugh, or get all sappy on me.” “Okay?” “No. Promise.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Alright, you lug. I promise.”
He fished around in his bag for an eternity, muttering to himself. Hermione made out a couple of ‘where the fuck’s, a few ‘somewhere here’s, three ‘Ah-haaaa...nope’s and one notable ‘dickering doxy bollocks, where is it???’

She tapped her foot, emitting impatient growl-sighs. The forth ‘Ah ha!’ was, thankfully, not a false alarm. With it, Theo pulled a small badge out of the depths of his bag.

It was a S.P.E.W. badge, slightly scratched up and a bit dented.

“I nicked it off you ages ago. Well, not nicked,” he backtracked, “I definitely left you a sickle in place of it.”

“Why?” Hermione asked, stunned.

“I suppose I thought... I still think... they’re important. House-elf rights I mean...” Theo paused as though to mull over his next words. “I already told you I didn’t have a very happy childhood. After my mother died, Boffin – he was her elf – he took care of me. On particularly... bad... days, when I’d be up in my room crying, he’d bring me hot chocolate and biscuits, and tell me stories. For a scraggly kid who rarely saw any kindness... it was, well, everything. I hated how my dad treated him. And then I saw how other wizards and witches treated their elves, and I hated that as well. When I heard about your venture, I knew I had to support it; even though it would’ve had to be-regrettably- in secret. Wasn’t brave enough to take a stand at that point, see. Also, I wasn’t too chuffed at the thought of wearing the word ‘spew’ on my chest. You really didn’t think that one through, did you?”

Hermione knew her eyes were huge. Huge in that cartoony-doe-eyed kind of way. “Oh, Theo, I can’t beli – ”

“No.” He shot her down, pointing an accusatory finger. “You promised you wouldn’t get sappy. Stop it now.”

She let out a watery chuckle and said, “Those badges were worth two sickles.”

“Guess I owe you, then.” Theo laughed... and then stopped abruptly, as though struck by the unintended significance of his statement. Hermione shook her head, hoping to cut short that train of thought.

“Wow. I managed to recruit four members. Brilliant.”

“Who were the other three?”

“Harry, Ron, and Neville.”

Theo scoffed. “Pathetic. Twat number one and two probably only joined to shut you up. And Longbottom would happily dive into the lake in the middle of a snowstorm for you if you smiled at him.”

“You mean like you do for Luna?”

“Fuck off.” He scowled.

Hermione struggled with a broad grin – she loved how defensive he was about his feelings for the eccentric Ravenclaw.

They chatted into the evening, well after the sky was a domineering navy blue, and all the lamps inside the castle had flared to life. He was extremely inquisitive about her parents, about their activism, and what were considered ‘contentious issues’ in the muggle world.

It soon got too cold to be sitting on stone steps out in the open. They moseyed back indoors, aimlessly wandering empty corridors.

“Do you talk to them like this? Potter and Weasley, I mean. Do they know you like this?”

Hermione’s silence evidently conveyed enough, and Theo made a noise of disgust. “I just cannot understand this supposedly great friendship. You don’t talk about things that matter, you don’t confide in them... they don’t think twice before abandoning you –”

“Harry has never abandoned me.” Hermione asserted. “Look, I know how it seems to you, and yes, maybe Harry and I don’t have tender heart-to-hearts, but there’s this... implicit and deeply strong trust between us. Like I know, I know, Harry Potter would risk his life on my behalf, no matter what. Nothing can destroy that.”
“He’s a sodding Gryffindor. And look at his track record – risking his life is like a habit for him.”
“And you think that hasn’t taken its toll?” she retorted, shrilly. “The things he’s had to endure, the horrors he’s faced, the people he’s lost... and the worst is yet to come. His burden is bigger than any of ours, and he’s never had a choice. He was orphaned, marked, and forced into accepting this fucking nightmare as his destiny. And I will gladly, willingly, unconditionally give him my help and support, because in spite of being in the eye of the storm, Harry takes time out to cheer me up when the boy I fancy goes and gets himself a girlfriend.”

A heavy silence succeeded Hermione’s rant. They’d stopped walking, standing stalk still and on edge in the middle of the passageway. This caused a very crusty looking portrait to tartly chastise them: “Move along yer dawdling dingbats!”
Both Theo and Hermione jumped. “Naff off!” Theo spat, and Hermione let the ridiculousness of the moment eradicate all the tension.

“Anyway,” said Theo evenly, as they recommenced their directionless trek, “That boy you fancy is a knob.”
Hermione laughed bitterly. “One of his many character flaws.”
“And yet you fancy him.”
“I’m bad at choices.”
“Well, Hermione,” said Theo, graciously, “I will endeavour to be an exception to that rule.”

A group of ghosts floated by, with vacant eyes and empty smiles. “Merry Christmas,” they softly whispered, and “Merry Christmas,” Hermione and Theo said back.
Bah! Humbug!

Theo pulled out a box of Fizzing Whizbees from somewhere within his robes. They walked, talked, periodically floated off the ground as they ate the sweets, and it was only after an unpleasant run in with Mrs Norris that Hermione realised that it was well past midnight.

Christmas was officially over.

“What I don’t understand...” and then he halted briefly to take a long sip of butterbeer, “...is how you can dismiss the entire concept of Divination, but believe wholeheartedly in Arithmantic predictions.”

The Three Broomsticks was only moderately full that afternoon. Madam Rosmerta sat idly behind the bar, looking strangely glassy-eyed, as if she had indulged in too much of her own stock.
It was a cold and sunless day, one that – as both Hermione and Theo agreed – could only be assuaged by warm butterbeer and a steaming plate of chips and gravy.

“Pshaw,” said Hermione, popping a chip into her mouth, “They’re completely different. Divination is all smoke and mirrors. Arithmancy uses numerical calculations and tabulations to deduce the probability of certain outcomes, with solid empirical evidence to back each claim.”
“Oh, but what about –”
“Honestly, even the Astrology-based centaur method of divination has its merits. Studying planetary movements to predict broad future scenarios is perfectly plausible... it has its base in legitimate Astronomy, after all. Now compare all that to Trelawney’s ridiculous tea leaves and crystal balls and ooooh you’re in grave danger!” Hermione’s attempt at putting on a spooky voice
had Theo looking completely bemused.
“Luna was right about you, you know,” he said, “You really are obsessed with hard facts and logic.
They’re like crutches for you, and you can’t move forward without seeing proper tangible proof
for everything.”
“And what’s wrong with that!!” Hermione spluttered indignantly. “It’s how you establish facts and
the truth…”
“What’s wrong is that it makes you myopic. Limited. Tell me something,” Theo leaned forward,
resting his arms on the table, “How did little precocious muggleborn Hermione end up believing in
magic?”
“McGonagall turned into a cat in my living room. Hence proved.”
He rolled his eyes. “Easy as that? But surely that didn’t suddenly supply you with all the answers to
the magical world. Like, how you came to possess magic, or what it comprises of –”
“I’m not neurotic,” she said resentfully, “I know that... that... fire is, without knowing its exact
chemical make. And I know magic is, without knowing the exact atomic deviation that caused it to
be. I’ve been looking into it for years now... but it’s a disturbingly unstudied area. And for that,”
Hermione slapped her palms down on the table for emphasis, “I blame the complacent, blasé
attitude that you, Luna, and most of the magical community are content to stew in. It can’t just be
all whimsy and sparkles! Magic is energy; Muggleborns and squibs prove that the genetic make of
muggles and magical folk is near equal. So what is the origin of magic? Where does it come from?
I sure as hell am not going to find those answers in the bottom of my tea cup.”

Hermione drained the last of her butterbeer, and Theo fell back in his chair.
“Blimey, Hermione. Sometimes... the way you talk... you sound just like...” He pulled a face and
looked away.
“Like what?”
“Nothing.” He replied swiftly, “I’m going to ask for the bill now, and this one’s on me. Don’t you
dare argue. You got me three books and that incredible hamper of muggle sweets for Christmas,
and I gave you one fucking quill. Merlin. All our outings from now until the end of time are on me.
Or until next Christmas, at least, when I can get you a unicorn. Or perhaps your birthday. When is
your birthday? I was born on February twenty-ninth, nineteen-eighty. That’s just the kind of luck I
have - a sodding leap-year baby. So I just consider the second half of the twenty-eighth of......”

Nobody rambled at the speed of light like Theo. Hermione could only blink, nod, and laugh as he
went on and on. There was no stopping him. *Mister Fahrenheit*. Yes; she’d found his theme song.

“No, no,” she said in frustration, “There are six balls in one over, and fifty overs in one innings.
But that’s only in one-day matches. Test matches don’t really have a fixed number of overs.”
“And that’s four innings to each side?”
“No. One to each side in ODI’s, two to each side in Test matches. Of course, there are certain
exceptions, and –”
“How do you score goals?”
“Gah, Theo, I told you, there are no goals. The aim is to collect runs –”
“You mean the goal is to collect runs,” he said cheekily.
“Ha ha. Sure. So anyway, six balls in an over, fifty overs... or not, as the case may be... and see,
this is the pitch, where the action takes place, this is the crease...”

Professor McGonagall would be most annoyed if she knew her blackboard had a crude diagram of
a cricket stadium on it.
“Bleeding shite, Hermione. I can’t believe you said *quidditch* is unnecessarily complicated.”

“Oh god, are you alright?” Hermione gasped through uproarious laughter when Theo fell smack dab onto his arse after a long, frenzied skid down the Hogwarts grounds. She pulled at his arm ineffectively, as he sat there groaning. It took her over five minutes to get him up and moving again, all the while enduring an enraged tirade against snow.

“You certainly invoke this god fellows name a lot, for someone who claims to be an... er... eighty-ist?”
“Atheist.”
“Ah. That’s just as well. Eightyist sounds like what you’d call someone with a fetish for geriatrics.”
“Oh *god*.”

*The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,*
*The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,*
*The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,*

And Theo and Hermione were writing— Writing—writing – Theo and Hermione were writing, while sitting on large cushions on the floor.

There was a full but contained fire crackling between them that Hermione had conjured and Theo had suitably praised. Then he had rolled his eyes when she’d pulled out a book and parchment from her bag, before settling down to write a letter to Luna himself.

She drew herself out of the world of *Protective Enchantments and Spells for Conservation* after a long period of quiet, suddenly finding herself in desperate need for conversation. Honestly – and shockingly – the book had begun to bore her.

“Theo.”
“Yeah?” For once, he was the one looking jarred and abstracted, and she was the one smirking.
“That’s a mighty long *billet-doux* you’re penning there.”
Theo glowered. “Funny.”

“Tell me,” she said, “How’re you finding that history book I gave you?”
For some reason, he flushed and instantly looked away from her. “Good. It’s good. Really fascinating,” he said shiftily.
“Oh...kay? Where have you reached?”
“Um, far. Not too far? Sixteenth century. Yeah.”
Hermione narrowed her eyes. “So the Industrial Revolution then?”
“Yeah. Exactly,” he said promptly.
“God, you’re so full of it,” she snapped.
“Excuse me?”
“You haven’t read a word, have you?” she demanded. It looked like he was going to protest for a moment... but then his shoulders slumped in defeat.

“No.”

Hermione shook her head at him, torn between annoyance and amusement. “Can I have it back in that case? There’s something I want to look up.”

“No! No. I’ll read it. I will. Really.”

She laughed at his whacky display of near-panic. “I’ll give it back to you soon. Just... our last conversation got me thinking about paganism, and...”

“I can’t give it back to you, alright?”

Two – Four – Six – Eight seconds went by with her just staring at him.

“Why on earth not?”

“I um...” he grimaced and ducked his head, as though expecting to be smacked, “I gave it to somebody else.”

“You WHAT!?!”

Oh no. Shrill voice.

“Er, yeah. I just... You see... someone, they um, saw me with it and expressed great interest, so I lent it to them, and...”

“Where the fuck do you get of lending MY books to other people?!!!” she yelled.

“Hey, hey... Hermione calm down...”

“Do NOT tell me to calm down, you... you... todger! How dare you...”

“Look, he was genuinely intrigued, and I promise you’ll get it back in pristine condition...”

“— bloody trusted you with MY BOOK, and you went and...”

“...overreacting...”

“OVERREATING?!” she bellowed, outraged, “Hullo? Have you met me? Are you truly surprised I’m extremely protective about my books?”

She hoped for his sake that he’d carefully considered what he’d say next, because she was so close to hysteria.

“I’M SORRY!” he blurted out loudly, looking quite sincerely repentant.

Hermione gave him the most poisonous look in her arsenal. “Who did you give it to?”

Theo, impossibly, looked even more contrite, and also... scared? He looked downright wretched.

“Oh no. She felt nauseous.... and she knew. Of course she knew. It was obvious.

“...I um... I gav—I lent it... to... ohfuckdontkillme... Draco.”

Hermione felt dangerously livid, and when she spoke, it was with the kind of precarious, deceptive quiet that most people would instinctively run far away from.

“You gave my book to Draco Malfoy.”

“...yes. Listen...”

“You gave my book... my muggle book, written by a muggle man about muggle things, to that awful, bigoted muggle-hating bastard.”

The fire between them rose to an alarming height, roaring flames nearly scorching the ceiling.

“WHOA! Hermione, calm down!”

Deep breaths. Count to ten. That little shit, she thought.

“You little shit,” she said.

“Listen, I am sorry, but you have to...”

“Do NOT tell me to calm down. He’s probably torn it to shreds by now! Set it on fire! How could you do this? Oh god, I’m so furious with you right now!”

“NO!” Theo interjected forcefully, “He wouldn’t do that, alright? I promise you, your book will come back to you looking exactly like it was when you last saw it.”

“UGH. WHY would you... UGH.” Hermione balled her fists and squeezed her eyes close. Deep. Breaths.
“Hermione,” Theo adapted a very cautious and gentle tone, “I swear, he isn’t like you think he is. And he’s been reflecting on some things that your book will help him through and –”
“Don’t try and make me feel sympathetic towards that arsehole,” she cut in acerbically, “It isn’t going to happen. I don’t care about what’s going on in his perverse little mind. I don’t want him anywhere near my book; you get it back Right. Now.”
“Why?” he asked seriously, with a frown.
“What do you mean, why?”
“Why can’t you— okay not sympathise—understand his situation?”
“What bloody situation? And UNDERSTAND?? Seriously?! All I understand is that I’ve been subjected to his ghastly racist invective for as long as I’ve been a part of the magical world. And now he’s got his claws on my book, and.... oh god. Does he know it’s mine?”
“He doesn’t. No! But will you please, please let me talk?”
“No.”
“Hermione...”
“Oh just talk, will you.” she barked, crossing her arms tightly across her chest and glaring stonily at the tip of her shoe.

“Draco is every bit as tied down to his fate as Potter –”
“HAH.”
“Every bit as tied down. He was born into it. His family, his life, everything has led him to where he is and –”
“You were born into it too!”
Theo gritted his teeth at her interruption. “Sure, except my father was a fucking monster,” his temper and tempo were both rising: “He’s been beating the shit out of me for as long as I remember. He beat the life out of my mother. Yes, literally. I can see the thestrals, remember? No, don’t... I’m not saying this to soften you. But understand that that is where I’m coming from. Of course I’d want to run away from it all.
“But Draco...? His parents adore him. They spoiled him rotten from the moment he was born; he’s known nothing but love and indulgence. So why wouldn’t he go along with what his father – the man who he respected and admired above all – told him? He’s been a dick and bully, but it’s not fun and games anymore, and he knows it. He... he knows it, and it’s fucking killing him. He’s my best mate, Hermione. I know him through and through, and I can see what all this is doing to him. It’s like he’s on a fucking precipice; on the brink of either a revelation... or a complete breakdown. So yes. I gave him your precious book. I’ll do anything to help him, and I won’t apologise for it again.”

Hermione collected her things, packed them into her bag, and stood up. The fire extinguished itself, drenching the room in shadows.
“I want you to get my book back to me the very second he gets back to Hogwarts.”
“Okay.”

She walked away, fully prepared to leave Theo alone in the murk with his thoughts. However, just before she stepped out of the room, Hermione paused, and without turning to face him she said, “Don’t build him up as a victim in front of me again. I understand that he’s important to you, but I’m in no way obligated to be concerned about his circumstance.”

“Okay.” His voice was raspy, and broke on the second syllable of the word. Hermione was thrown back to the day by the lake when she had cried, and he had held her.

The fire flared back to life. She turned around, and went to sit opposite him again. They passed the time silently holding pieces of parchment to the flames and watching them blacken, curl, and crumble.
“Sing it for me.”
“Absolutely not!”
“That’s not fair. You can’t tell me you know the perfect muggle song for me, and then refuse to let me hear it...”
“I’ll recite the lyrics.”
“Fuck off. That’s pathetic. Sing for me, darling. Come on.”
“You’re pathetic.”

On new year’s eve, he lured her over to the astronomy tower with a bottle of wine and half a dozen cauldron cakes. It was cold and blustery, but alcohol combined with a couple of nifty warming charms had them feeling perfectly comfortable.

And they were nicely, gently fuddled.

“This wine is good,” Hermione smiled.
“That’s it? Good?” Theo said, drolly, “Aren’t you going to comment on its smokiness, or earthiness, or pick out obscure undertones...”
She giggled, tilting her head back to look at the stars. Struck by sudden vertigo, she sat straight down by the railing against which Theo was casually leaning. He took a swig of wine, and looked out into the night like a king surveying his flourishing empire.

“What did you think was the craziest thing about Hogwarts when you first came here?” he asked.
“The fact that we had a Herbology teacher whose name was Sprout.”
Theo choked. Wine dribbled down his chin, and he doubled over laughing.

After recovering, he dropped down next to her, and put his head in her lap. His hair was ridiculously long, with the fringe falling into his eyes. He looked like a young George Harrison. Hermione swept the strands off his forehead and said, “Why don’t you cut your hair? Doesn’t it annoy you?”
Theo laughed loudly, again. “Oh, Hermione. Do you honestly want to start a conversation about annoying hair?”
She flicked his forehead.
“Ah! That was so unnecessary!”
“Stay out of my hair.”
“Clever. Ha ha. Then you stay out of mine. ...Oi. Not literally. Keep stroking. Feels nice. I think I might take a nap.”
“If you fall asleep on me, Theo, I will turn your hair blue. Permanently.”
“We both know I’ll pull it off.”

An owl glided by. Hermione checked her watch... Eleven Fifty-Six PM.
Another year gone by. She supposed this was meant to be a big moment, but she felt neither anxiety nor excitement. She felt serene. In the past few days, she had finally known what it meant to have a confidant – a true peer.
She didn’t know when the war was going to fall upon them. She didn’t know when she’d have to fight, when she may die, if she’d ever get to sit for her NEWTs, if things with Ron would ever get sorted...
But she knew that she would be keeping Theo Nott forever.

“Happy New Year, Theo.”
“Haaappy fucking New Year.”
Hagrid was a wreck.

He was blubbering over his tea as he told Hermione about Aragog’s rapidly diminishing health. Bit by bit, Hogwarts was filling up with students returning after the holidays, and Hermione had thought spending time with Hagrid would be a pleasant and diverting way to pass the morning, till Harry and Ginny showed up.

It was a decision that she had cursed ten times over in the past hour. There was only so much you could say to comfort a man who was in pieces over an ailing once-ruthless and murderous giant spider whom you’d never had the thrilling pleasure of interacting with.

So, it was with great keenness – after the fifty-sixth “there there” – that Hermione deposited Fang’s drooling head onto his owner’s lap and left the cabin with a vague line or two about needing to meet the bunch arriving from the Burrow.

She traversed the grounds unhurriedly, carefully casting a charm to harden the snow so that she wouldn’t find herself waist deep in the stuff. Just as she made it indoors, dusting her cloak, a squeaky cry of “Ms. Granger!” had her spinning around to face Professor Flitwick, looking fairly out of breath.

“Oh, Ms. Granger,” he rasped, “I’d been asked by the headmaster to hand this over to Mr. Potter, but I’ve just been informed that some students have set off a whole array of those Weasley twins’ products somewhere on the fourth floor, and I’m afraid it needs to be dealt with immediately...”

“Of course, Professor,” Hermione replied, taking a scroll of parchment from his hand, “I’ll see that this gets to Harry the moment he gets here.”

“Excellent, excellent,” he called over his shoulder, already charging up the stairs.

Hermione shook her head as she followed in his wake, albeit at a slightly saner pace. Of course a lot of students would have gotten Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes goods as a substantial part of their Christmas loot. Ignoring the burning curiosity that was begging her to go have a gander at the commotion, she dutifully trudged over to the Gryffindor tower.

Harry, Ron, and Ginny appeared to be caught in an argument with the fat lady. Remembering the newly changed password, Hermione rushed forward.

“Harry! Ginny!” she called out, “Did you have a good Christmas?”

Surprisingly, it was Ron who piped up to answer- “Yeah, pretty eventful, Rufus Scrim —”

Hermione was having none of it. She didn’t even look at him. “I’ve got something for you, Harry,” she said loudly, “Oh, hang on — password. Abstinence.”

“What’s up with her?” enquired Harry with a raised brow once they were inside.

“Overindulged over Christmas, apparently,” Hermione replied. A grin spilled across her face as she remembered how the fat lady’s complexion had been as pink as her dress that evening, “She and her friend Violet drank their way through all the wine in that picture of drunk monks down by the Charms corridor. Anyway...” She held out the scroll she had been assigned to deliver.

Harry took hold of it eagerly. “Great,” he said, unrolling it at once, “Another lesson with
Dumbledore tomorrow night! I’ve got loads to tell him — and you. Let’s sit down —”

Like a sudden explosive spurt of thick ketchup from a clogged nozzle, Lavender appeared on the scene. With a piercing cry of “Won-Won!” she leaped into Ron’s arms. There was a short outbreak of laughter from a few bystanders, and Hermione participated with only a slight edge of resentment. Turning to Harry, she gestured to the other end of the room. “There’s a table over there… Coming, Ginny?”

“No, thanks,” Ginny replied limply, “I said I’d meet Dean.”

Hermione and Harry watched her go over to the boy’s dormitory where Dean was undoubtedly… ready… for her. Then they looked at Ron… well, the few fragments of him that were visible from behind Lavender.


“Walk.” she consented willingly.

They leapt out of the portrait hole, and Harry grumbled, “Forced out of our own common room. Bollocks.”

“It’s shameful.” Hermione commiserated with a laugh.

He flashed a half-smile at her. “So how was your Christmas?”

“Oh, fine,” she shrugged. “I hung around the castle. How was it at Won-Won’s?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute… Look, Hermione, can’t you — ?”

“No, I will not make nice with that self-absorbed prat.”

“No, I can’t.” she said emphatically. “So don’t even ask.” Ever.

“I thought maybe, you know, over Christmas —”

“It was the Fat Lady who drank a vat of five-hundred-year-old wine, Harry, not me,” she snapped. Harry didn’t need to know that the wine she had consumed had only been a few decades old. She fixed her most stern look on him, setting her jaw. Harry sighed in surrender.

They fell silent as they passed a huddle of Hufflepuffs on the fourth floor landing, buzzing with excitement over what seemed to have been a spectacular show. From amid the throng, Hermione heard frantic high-pitched cries entreating the students to “Clear off, clear off at once!” It was obviously Flitwick, but all that was visible of him was the tip of his hat.

They bound down the stairs to the third floor in better spirits, and Hermione asked, “So what was this important news you wanted to tell me?”

But she had cause to gasp, loudly, before Harry could respond. There, beside a rusty suit of armour, stood Theo and Malfoy… and Theo was pale as a sheet and clutching his nose, which was bleeding profusely.

“Theo!” she exclaimed, frightened by his state, but then Malfoy was suddenly in her face, blocking Theo from view. He snarled viciously, “Get the fuck out of here, you cunt!”

“Drago!” Theo berated thickly, while Hermione struggled to hold Harry back, as he made to launch himself at Malfoy, claws out and teeth bared.

“What?” Malfoy spun around and scowled at Theo, “Hasn’t she done enough?”

“Drago, stop… fug’s sayg… Stop…” Theo was tilting his head further and further back as he struggled to speak intelligibly.

“I am not going to fucking stop. This little bitch is the reason you –”

“Dno! Just go Drago. I’ll get this fixed… join you layder… Drago…” Using his free arm Theo lightly shoved Malfoy towards the staircase leading downstairs. The blond’s face was twisted with fury, and only Theo’s pathetic desperation seemed to be keeping him from drawing his wand. He descended woodenly, turning back every few steps to glower menacingly at Hermione.

Hermione had more important things to care about. “Oh good god, Theo! What happened?” she fretted, “Let me have a look, please?”

He removed his hand, and Hermione whimpered. Even Harry hissed sympathetically. His nose was red, purple, and three times its usual size. Blood dribbled down past his chin and had soaked up his
“Episkey!” Her voice quivered, but the spell worked. The bleeding stopped, and Theo winced as his nasal bones clicked into place. “Okay. I think that should do it. It will be sore for a while, though. Just... be careful...”

“Yeah,” Theo replied throatily, “Thanks. A lot. Well... I’ll be off...”

“Wait!” Hermione grabbed his arm. “Who did this to you?”

“It was nothing, Hermione. Just an accident...” he tried to shake off her hold, but Hermione was not going to allow that.

“Why did Malfoy say it’s my fault?” she demanded.

“Well, he’s barmy, yeah?”

“That’s true,” Harry chimed in.

“Hush, Harry. Theo. Theodore. Tell me what happened... Right. Now.” Hermione knew perfectly well that her glare could be used as a weapon, and she was not ashamed to wield it when necessary. Theo held her stare for two seconds before succumbing. The amateur.

“It was Blaise and Vince, alright?” he growled, “They were saying shit about... about, well... you. I let them know that it’s not acceptable to do so in my presence. They retaliated a bit violently. The end.” He looked half angry, half embarrassed, and Hermione and Harry gaped at him.

“I... um, Th –”

“I will also not accept any gratitude from you. Not for this. I did what was expected... what I believe you should expect from me by now. So don’t thank me... and for Salazar’s sake, do not wallow in guilt. You patched me up, so we’re even. Not that you and I need to be keeping score. If we were to keep score, I’d say I have a whole lot left to do to catch up. Oh, you don’t want to open that can of worms, darling. I’ll bury you in gratitude, I’ll drown you in 'thank you’s and thoughtful gestures, and then you won’t know what to do with me, or yourself, and then if I’m left with a bleeding nose it will be your doing... I’ve heard from a very reliable source that you can inflict a lot of damage... surprisingly... so if you don’t mind, I’d like to go now. There’s a dragon in the dungeons that need to be tamed.” He paused then, looking thoughtful, “That was not a euphemism for anything salacious. You saw it go by, roaring and spitting fire. So Hermione... Potter... May I be excused?”

Hermione nodded weakly, and he hopped down the staircase, disappearing from view.

“He’s alright, that Nott,” said Harry after a few moments.

“Yes,” she replied bitingly, “Just about ‘alright’.”

“No. That’s not what I... I meant...”

She sighed. “I know what you meant, Harry.”

They found a nice large window ledge to perch on, overlooking the forest with its snow covered trees looking like they’d been dusted with icing.

“Has Nott ever told you anything about Malfoy, about what he’s up to?”

“No.”

“It’s just that... well, this is what I’ve been meaning to tell you for ages –”

And then Harry told her about a heated argument between Malfoy and Snape on the night of Slughorn’s Christmas party. It aligned quite well with the little that Theo had let slip about Malfoy. A task... him being in over his head... under pressure. She decided against voicing these thoughts to Harry. He didn’t need any more fuel. As far as Snape was concerned, however...

“Don’t you think — ?”

“— he was pretending to offer help so that he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he’s doing?” Harry interjected in a strangely practiced manner.

“Well, yes.”

“Ron’s dad and Lupin think so,” he said reluctantly. Then he rallied - “But this definitely proves Malfoy’s planning something, you can’t deny that.”

“No, I can’t...”
“And he’s acting on Voldemort’s orders, just like I said!”
“Hmm . . . did either of them actually mention Voldemort’s name?” she asked softly. Surely, he couldn’t actually be a Death Eater. Would Theo protect him if he was? The answer came to her not a fraction of a second later – he would. Of course he would.

Harry appeared to be recounting the altercation in his head: “I’m not sure… Snape definitely said ‘your master,’ and who else would that be?”
“I don’t know,” said Hermione, biting her lip. “Maybe his father?”
She really, really hoped it was his father. How was she supposed to handle things if Harry happened to be right? What tricky, equivocating game was Theo playing? No… no… she couldn’t doubt him. Not now. “How’s Lupin?” she asked, buying herself some time.
“Not great,” Harry replied, “He’s undercover among a pack of werewolves – Voldemort sympathisers. He’s been struggling, trying to win their trust…”
“How awful,” Hermione breathed, feeling a devastating shiver surge through her body.
“Yeah. I asked him about the Half-Blood Prince too,” Harry rolled his eyes at Hermione’s scowl, “He hadn’t a clue… OH!” he exclaimed, suddenly gaining volume, “I had a row with Rufus Scrimgeour as well!”
“What? The minister?!”
“Who else? He showed up on Christmas with a Percy Weasley shaped scapegoat to get me alone and demand that I give the general public the impression that the ministry and I are great chums now.”
“Seriously? Seriously? After the way they treated you all of last year… after Umbridge… he wants you to… oh, he has some nerve doesn’t he?”

Harry grinned. “Don’t worry. I let him know exactly how I felt about his pitch. And the twins and Ginny let Percy know exactly what they thought of his reappearance.”
“I’m sure,” Hermione said, and laughed.

Hermione felt like a bit of a stalker. It was early in the evening, and she’d hidden herself behind a statue of Athena outside the library, periodically peeking over the goddess’s arm.

Finally, after goodness knows how long, she saw her intended victim come marching out of the library. She shot out from her hiding spot, and planted herself firmly in Padma’s path.
“Hello,” she said pleasantly.
Padma’s eyes widened, and darted from side to side. She looked like a frightened, cornered animal.
“Oh... hi... Hermione...” Her typical self-assurance was obviously still on holiday.
“Did you have a good Christmas, Padma?”
“Oh, yes. It was nice. Thanks. Er... you?”
“Mine was lovely as well. I stayed back at Hogwarts, and... wait...” Hermione pulled a bundle of parchment out from her bag, “I did a lot of reading on higher Arithmancy. These are the notes I compiled, but I’m sure I’ve missed something. Perhaps you could look over them?”
Padma looked at her slightly nervously, but made no move to take her notes.
Sighing in a long-suffering manner, Hermione said, “Look, we work well together. Regardless of the outcome last time, I think we can both profit if we continue to exchange ideas. Now, are you going to look over my notes or not?”

Slowly, Padma divested her of the bundle, and then nodded. Her confident demeanour seemed to be pouring back into her. She took out a notebook from her own bag. “Would you read through my research on Dragon Pox? I’ve hit a dead-end, unfortunately. While there are lots of books on the impact of the disease on the heart, I honestly can’t find a single book that has the diagram of a regular heart to compare it with, and –”
“I have an aunt in Cornwall who’s a Cardiologist. She has a lot of good books for beginners that
I’m sure she’d let me borrow if I asked.”
“Oh, would you?” And just like that, she was alight and beaming.
“Sure,” Hermione smirked, “I’ll see you in a couple of days then?”
Padma laughed, and in a charming homage to the past she said, “Affirmative.”

It was ridiculously easy to reason with Ravenclaws, Hermione thought as she prepared to sink into her favourite armchair in the library. It was just a matter of appealing to their intellectual fervour. It was a shame that only life threatening situations worked with her housemates. A troll, a dragon, an execution... she wondered what terrifying and dangerous thing would have to occur before Ron came back into her life.

By seven o’clock, Hogwarts was at proper full capacity again. There was a body, or two, or six... every which way Hermione looked. To think that just a day ago, it had felt like Theo and her were the only people in existence, roaming where they pleased, when they pleased.

Now, as they walked back from the owlery, (after Hermione had sent off a long letter to her parents and a shorter one to dear Aunt Malorie in Cornwall) she missed the carefreeness of those days. Theo was covertly guarded, but she was too well attuned to his mannerisms to be fooled.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked when they arrived at their point of parting.

“Yes, Hermione,” Theo tried for lightness, nodding with comical solemnity, “don’t you worry your pretty, bushy little head.”

Hermione bit her lip uncertainly.

“Look,” he tried again, “It isn’t going to be all hugs and kisses down there in the dungeons, but that’s hardly much of a change from the usual. And maybe I’ll just have to never speak to Blaise, Vince, Greg, Pansy... Daphne... Ah, sod it all, I don’t care. They aren’t going to try anything serious, I’m sure. Big, bad Draco has my back. And, speaking of...”

It was with an outstandingly sheepish look on his face that he gave her back her copy of *History of the World*.

Hermione wordlessly handed him Camus’ *The Rebel* and Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

“Hermione! Finally!” Seamus’ cry besieged her the moment she entered the Gryffindor common room.

“Um. Yes?”

He beckoned to her a bit madly from his spot on the carpet, where he was sprawled along with Dean, Ginny, and Colin Creevey. Between them sat a large gramophone.

“Got this old thing for Christmas,” Seamus explained, “It’s an important heirloom, or some such rot. We’re trying to get it to play some of Dean’s muggle records... but it just won’t work.”

Taking his cue, Colin dropped the needle, and immediately, the whole room was filled with the most horrible scratching sound. There were shouts of protest from every corner, and Colin quickly silenced the machine again.

“Ya see?” Seamus asked, pained, “The records that came with this are full of some old bat
shrieking... reminds me of fooking Banshees...” he shuddered.
“I think it works like a normal gramophone – a muggle one, I mean. Same mechanism... I think. Just run by... magic?” said Colin, “but something goes wrong, like it’s not in sync or something...”
“Let me see the record,” Hermione requested, and when Dean handed it to her, she raised a brow. “New Order, Dean?”
Dean bristled, “They’re really bloody good!”
“I agree completely...”
She examined the grooves on the record, and then looked at the needle on the gramophone; like most wizarding equipment, it was flamboyantly large. She shrunk it with a ‘Reducio’, and fingers crossed, set it to play once more.
It didn’t move. “She’s peeled!” Seamus cried, and Dean and Colin squirmed.
Hermione rolled her eyes. A simple ‘Rennervate’ later... there was music everywhere.

Dean whooped joyously, and jumped up onto his feet while pulling Hermione and Ginny along. Before and during the Yule ball, Hermione had been a tangle of nerves; all that formal, synchronised dancing terrified her. But this...? This she could do.
Tossing her hair back, she hopped and capered around with a giggling Ginny and Dean. Seamus dived into the fray as well, and Colin pulled out his camera, and soon enough, the entire room was cheering and clapping while watching them go mad.
Hermione’s eye got caught on Neville, sitting nearby wearing an easy smile. Something in her expression must have revealed her intentions, because his smile suddenly disappeared, and he was shaking his head in terror.
She skipped over to him and hauled him up, dragging him into the dance...carpet. Neville looked painfully uncomfortable; Hermione just grinned and poked his arm. With a resigned grumble, Neville attempted to... well, “dance”. It was a mess of arm waving and head bobbing, that had Hermione helpless with laughter. So helpless in fact, that she missed the narrowing of Neville’s eyes... and...
The next thing she knew, she had been lifted up by the waist and was being spun around and around. The music... the tempo... the cheery noises all around... Hermione clutched onto Neville’s shoulders and threw her head back, taking it all in.
He put her down, now grinning widely, before taking her arm and spinning her yet again.
Snow gleamed in the bright mid-morning sunlight, and Hermione squinted against its harsh whiteness. Still, it was a clear day and she fancied a stroll – she so rarely got long breaks between classes. Pulling her hat low on her head, and wrapping her thick muffler tightly around her neck, she sauntered out onto the courtyard with an air of content purposelessness.

She had barely covered a few meters when she heard her name being called out from behind her. “Hermione,” Harry panted once he had jogged over to her side, “Hi. I just...” and he held up his hand, begging for a moment to catch his breath.

Hermione grinned at him in all his red faced, skewed glasses glory. “My. You’re quite the athlete.” “Oh, shut up,” he wheezed, “You try... running... through ankle... deep... snow.”

Ten minutes later, they were taking slow circles around the yard while Harry gave an account of his latest lesson with Dumbledore. Hermione had to grapple with a twinge of untimely envy; oh, but how could she not want to be a part of such a fascinating investigation into the mind of a psychopath? Dumbledore’s approach was nothing short of an adventure. She could only imagine what it must be like to see firsthand, and through various memories and perspectives, the burgeoning evil blooming forth in a young Tom Riddle.

“…and then he showed me a memory of Slughorn’s where he was sitting in his office surrounded by admiring students… as always,” Harry rolled his eyes, “Riddle asked him about something called Horcruxes –” “Hor… what?” “Horcruxes. So anyway, suddenly there was this dense white fog that obscured everything, and Slughorn’s voice yelled through it, telling Riddle he knows bugger all about these horcruxes, and he should just fuck off. Er, in different words of course.” “That’s… odd.” “Yeah,” said Harry, “Dumbledore said it means that the memory has been tampered with. Said that Slughorn’s obviously ashamed of what he said, so he hid it. And now I’m supposed to get the real memory from him. It’s my ‘homework’ apparently,” he finished wryly.

Hermione frowned. She knew immediately that Harry was going to struggle with this task. “He must be determined to hide what really happened if Dumbledore couldn’t get it out of him,” she said slowly. And what irked her even more was the fact that she hadn’t even the slightest inkling of what Slughorn was trying to conceal. “Horcruxes… Horcruxes… I’ve never even heard of them…” she muttered irately. “You haven’t?” Harry’s disappointment was palpable, and it made her feel ten times worse – she didn’t have an answer ready and waiting… she had let him down.

“They must be really advanced Dark Magic; why else would Voldemort have wanted to know about them?” she tried desperately to make her speculation seem substantial, “I think it’s going to be difficult to get the information, Harry, you’ll have to be very careful about how you approach Slughorn, think out a strategy…” “Ron reckons I should just hang back after Potions this afternoon…”

As if her frustration and regret wasn’t enough. Lately Harry had picked up the habit of dropping Ron’s name in every bloody conversation they had. Hermione felt her temper flare up like it had been given a dose of rocket fuel. “Oh, well,” she retorted angrily, “if Won-Won thinks that, you’d better do it! After all, when has Won-Won’s judgment ever been faulty?” “Hermione, can’t you — ?” “No!”
She marched away from him before he could make any more preposterous requests. Had he ever asked this of Ron? She seriously doubted it – too unnecessary and uncomfortable, she thought. She didn’t like throwing tantrums, stalking off all petulant-like, but… but… but she missed her mum. The sudden pain of it hit her like a sledgehammer. The last time she had seen her had been nearly six month ago, and Hermione longed to see her smile, feel her embrace, and relive those lovely days in summer when they’d go explore secondhand bookstores while sipping refreshingly chilled lemonade.

A bezoar. A fucking bezoar. Hermione charged out of the potion’s classroom with a head full of brain-melting fury. There were beads of sweat dripping down the back of her neck, her hands were sooty, she was missing a lock of her hair (not that it made a dent in its overall volume), and Slughorn hadn’t even looked into her cauldron. She was perhaps the only person in the room who understood Golpalott’s Third Law, and definitely the only one who had implemented it correctly, yet Harry and his stupid goat stone had won the day. If only Snape had still been teaching them… he would have given Harry three weeks of detention for pulling something so audacious. Slughorn had been so thoroughly tickled. This was it. She’d had enough. She was going to steal that blasted textbook and throw it into the lake. She was going to tell Slughorn exactly where Harry’s inspired potion making skills where coming from. She was going to tell Theo, who would tell Malfoy, who would tell Snape, who would confiscate the book and give Harry lots and lots of dirty cauldrons to scrub, sans magic. But really, she was just going to mutter angrily to herself while she stomped up the stairs to get to her next class.

There were exactly two hundred and fifty books on Dark Magic in the restricted section of the Hogwarts library. Hermione had zipped through seventy-three so far, and she hadn’t found a single mention of Horcruxes. In addition to having to deal with the acute aggravation of failure, she now had to live with the knowledge that there existed a potion that could turn a person’s veins into tapeworms, and one that could cause a breakout of large and painful pus-filled boils on a person’s entire body… eyeballs included. She knew of spells that could recreate the symptoms of leprosy and anthrax simultaneously, spells that caused organs to rupture, spells that made schizophrenia seem tame… holy shit, magic was capable of inflicting all sorts of horrors.

She chucked aside useless book number seventy-four. Book number seventy-five let out the most frightful wail the moment she touched it. Then it erupted with a stream of horrible blood-slurs that would have impressed Walburga Black. Hermione silenced it with a sneer.

After she’d slammed useless book number ninety one shut, she rested her head on the table in front her. She felt feverish, exhausted, and defeated; A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear... A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief, Which finds no natural outlet, no relief... In word, or sigh, or tear -

“Hi, Hermione.”
Just the sight of Theo smiling down at her improved her mood drastically. “Hi,” she croaked due to her underused voice box.
He took the seat across from her, and raised a brow at all the towers of books with dodgy titles that lay between them.

“Interesting choice of literature,” he remarked.

Hermione shrugged dismissively. “How’ve you been?” she asked.

“Undoubtedly better than you. You looked like an angry little Erinys after potions yesterday afternoon.”

Hermione simply shrugged again.

“Right-oh,” said Theo, give her an odd look, “Well, speaking of interesting literature, those books you gave me... they’re quite something, eh?”

Hermione smiled tightly, “I hope they’re giving you much to think about…”

He smirked and eyed her calculatingly for a couple of seconds. Then- “You know full well I’m not the one reading them. I knew the moment I saw those titles that I wasn’t the one they were meant for. You’ll be happy to know that they’re doing quite the number on your intended target.”

Hermione huffed angrily and looked away from Theo’s self-satisfied expression. Yes, she knew exactly whose hands those books were going to land up in... but couldn’t he afford her the dignity of pretending like she didn’t know? What was his problem? When she looked back at him, he was grinning hugely, and Hermione quite nearly threw useless book number forty-nine (it had a scorpion tail for a bookmark) at him.

“Have you finished translating the runes on page seventeen of –”

“No, not yet.” He was still grinning as he placed his books, parchment, and inkpot on the table.

“Shall we get started?”

It was like every boy she knew had secretly come together and made a pact to annoy the life out of her.

Thus, a couple of days later, when Ginny asked if she’d like to join her on a nettle collecting expedition, Hermione agreed with great enthusiasm.

“I’m really worried about mum,” Ginny said morosely, kicking a small clump of frost, “She’d only just come to terms with Fred and George quitting school, and then this whole fiasco with Percy happened. And she’s so bloody scared for Harry…”

Hermione sighed sympathetically as they delved into the edge of the forbidden forest.

“And then there’s Tonks,” she continued, “I don’t know what’s happened to her.”

“I don’t think it’s because of Sirius anymore,” said Hermione quietly, “Maybe she’s worried about her parents too…”

“Maybe. But... I don’t know. It can’t just be that. It’s like she’s been drained of life and colour and... well, it’s a little alarming.”

Ginny sat on her haunches in front of a bush, and took out a small pair of clippers from her cloak pocket.

“How are things with Dean?” Hermione asked.

“Shit,” Ginny answered glumly, “I need to end it... it isn’t fair. I just don’t know how. I think he knows it’s coming too, so he’s started being overly attentive. It’s driving me mad, but I can hardly dump him for being sweet…”

“You’re really sure you want to end it, though...?”

“I am. I...” she sighed, looking up at Hermione, “I can’t stop thinking about Harry. I know what
you said about loosening up and all that,” she waved the clippers about expressively, “but I can’t do it anymore. If Harry doesn’t want me, he doesn’t want me –” (Hermione rolled her eyes. Ginny couldn’t possibly be that blind) “– I just can’t seem to stop… bleh.” she finished with a gloomy scowl.

“Yes,” Hermione laughed sombrely, “I know how that…”

“Oh no. Harry at least treats me like I’m a person worthy of respect. You have no excuse.”

Hermione grumbled. “I know that too.”

She looked up through a mesh of barren twigs and branches at the jigsaw sky above. Blackbirds streaked across in a flurry; just enough in number to bake in a dainty pie to set before a king.

Ginny stood up, her pouch full of thorny leaves, and she looped her arm around one of Hermione’s. “Let’s go back in. It’s too damn cold,” she said. They began walking back to the castle, arm in arm.

“Ron accosted me during the hols, you know. He ordered me to tell him what the deal was between you and Nott. I don’t know why he didn’t just ask Harry… I bet he thought he could bully proper answers out of me. Ha! The idiot.”

Hermione swallowed the uncomfortable lump in her throat. “What did you tell him?”

“Oh, I told him it’s none of his business. Then, predictably, he began ranting about evil gits, Death Eaters, and betrayal. Worry not, fair maiden; I defended your honour… was proper indignant on your behalf. He was gaping like a buffoon by the time I was through with him.”

Like a slow ripple, Hermione felt a smile unfurl across her face. “You are an invincible Valkyrie goddess, Ginevra Weasley.”

Ginny was torn between a grin and a glare. “Thanks ever so much, Herms.”

Harry was waiting for them at the entrance hall, looking agitated and malcontent.

“Hi, Ginny... Hermione.”

Things between Hermione and Harry had remained a bit strained. Her anger over the bezoar episode still felt raw, and he had no patience for it.

Ginny’s eyes darted curiously between the two of them. “What’s up, Harry?”

“I was just wondering if either of you had gotten an invitation to one of those Slug club parties recently.”

“Not me,” said Ginny, and her inquisitive expression intensified.

“No,” said Hermione, curtly.

“Oh. Alright.”

Six beats of silence later, Ginny let out a low whistle. “Oookay then. I’ve a class to get to...” She smiled at both of them before departing.

Harry watched her go with a flustered blush on his face. Then he turned to Hermione. “Er, we’ve got transfiguration, yeah? Shall we...?” he trailed off uncertainly.

“Okay.”

“So, um... I really hope Slughorn will have one of his little suppers soon. It might give me another chance to... to attack. Have you had any luck finding out what Horcruxes are?”

Oh, Harry knew her too well. Of course she couldn’t keep up the silent treatment when he chose that line of conversation.

“I haven’t found one single explanation of what Horcruxes do! Not a single one!” she was promptly reminded of her frustration with the library, “I’ve been right through the restricted section and even in the most horrible books, where they tell you how to brew the most gruesome potions - nothing! All I could find was this –” she pulled useless book number hundred and sixty one out of her bag, “–in the introduction to Magick Moste Evile – listen – ‘Of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction...’ I mean, why mention it then?” she slammed the tattered old tome shut and stowed it away.

Harry got lost in thought, frowning down at the stone floor.
She had conquered wandless, non-verbal conjuring. When she was younger, she’d sometimes (only when she was really, really idle) watch those outlandish Japanese cartoons on the telly. She remembered one in particular, which had a brawny, glowing man with radiant golden hair who could summon balls of intense energy between his palms and send them shooting off wherever he pleased.

Hermione had a big swirling ball of light cupped in her hands, and she gazed at it with wide-eyed wonder. A second later, she pulled her arms back over her left shoulder and threw the ball into the lake, where it hissed as it was extinguished, and sunk.

Padma had managed to double Hermione’s Arithmancy notes. She hugged her in delight when she saw the books on cardiovascular medicine that Hermione was holding... and then stepped back immediately. “Oh, thanks, thank you, cool,” and then she scarpered away. Hermione watched her bolt with amusement. Honestly, Padma was one of the last people she’d expect to have difficulty in letting go of awkwardness.

“Maybe something a little more cheerful the next time?” Theo said jauntily. He tapped Hermione on the head with The Rebel, before placing in her hand. “The other one will be a bit longer, I’m afraid. Tara.” She looked daggers at his retreating back, at his merry little strut. She could almost imagine him in a top hat and coattails, swinging a cane and whistling.

Late at night when she had buried herself in bed, she flipped through the book at random, reading passages she had forgotten, and some that she remembered vividly. She encountered no dog-ears, no smears or smudges... her book had been well cared for. There was nothing about it that said it had been in the possession of an utterly vile....... There was a piece of folded parchment on page seventy, placed directly under the line, ‘The dilemma at this stage is not to be free or to die, but to kill or to enslave’. Hermione gently pulled it open, and gasped as a small spiral of ash lifted off the sheet and hovered a few centimeters above it. Beneath this floating spiral, written in moderately neat cursive was the first stanza of Shakespeare’s the Phoenix and the Turtle:

“Beauty, truth, and rarity.
Grace in all simplicity,
Here enclos’d in cinders lie.”

Hermione folded the parchment shut and placed it carefully back into the book, too bewildered to know what to think.
The month of January had gone by so fast. Snowfall had all but ceased, yet the sixth year students were caught in the deluge of another form of precipitation – a relentless torrent of homework assignments.

There was a large table by a window in the common room, and Hermione, Harry, Neville, Parvati, and Seamus sat around it, working on various essays. Dean was sitting a short distance away, drawing them as they worked. Ginny sat by his feet on the carpet, constructing increasingly complicated obstacle courses for her pygmy puff. Seamus’ gramophone was softly playing the best of Louis Armstrong.

It was all so normal, so unremarkable and comfortable that Hermione nearly cried.
Seriously though, what if her life had been a corny screwball neo-noir parody sort of thing? It had a fairly clichéd premise – a group of quirky world saving teenagers, with a hideous and crazy arch-nemesis. There was mystery, intrigue, and a good amount of gore. There would, of course, be no dearth of clever and funny *bon mots* throughout the entire adventure. Eventually, they’d come face to face with ghoulishe ol’ Volde, and Harry would slide up to him like, “Psycho Killer, *Qu'est-ce que c'est?*” and bind him in layers and layers of rope. Then, when Tonks and Mad-Eye would come to take him away and lock him up in Azkaban, Voldemort would scowl and end the saga with one of the most iconic and moving sentences in pop-culture.... “And I would have gotten away with it too, if it weren’t for you meddling kids!”

She rubbed her eyes and shook her head. *Focus, Hermione.* She had an hour to finish three essays, or she wouldn’t have any time left to recommence her search for the meaning Horcruxes, and continue with her research on protective enchantments that she was sure would come in handy very soon, and also...

*Focus, damn it.*

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*But February made me shiver... with every paper I'd deliver...*

Hermione’s overtired brain was crooning as she handed her three-and-a-half feet long essay to Snape. He looked down his nose at her, and she felt a rush of... good grief, was that *fondness* towards the only person in her life that had the decency to be consistent. She always knew what she would get with him – derision and condescension served cold and tart. It was soothing soul balm, really. Sevy’s Scornfully Soothing Soul Balm™. Altruistic old Sevy dished it out for free; all you had to do was exist. Such admirable steadfastness, Sevy...... oh shit.

She had been blinking up at him blankly for an entire minute, while her inner monologue suffered from an attack of Theodoritis. His lip curled... and there it was! That entirely predictable look of Sevy-disdain™, perfect for curdling milk, making little children cry, scaring delicate old biddies... he would make such an excellent evil genius terrorist action film villain...

“What do you want?” he spat.

Hermione jumped back in alarm and chagrin. “N-nothing, nothing! Good evening, sir...”

She turned and scammed.

“What the hell was that?” Harry asked her with wide eyes.

“Harry. *I haven’t slept, Harry.***

He looked at her like she was a leper. “In how long?”

“I don’t know!” she wailed.

“Okay, okay,” he said firmly, putting a comforting hand on her back and leading her up the stairs, “How about we rectify that now, yeah? Come on.”

No sooner did they walk into the common room than Hermione crumbled into the armchair closest to the fireplace. It was raining and raining buckets outside. Curling up into a tight little ball, she felt
someone drape a blanket over her. She waved a grateful hand at whomever it was... her eyes had fallen shut of their own accord.
“What’s happened to her?” said a voice. She couldn’t quite put a face to it at that point.

“This will be the day that I die,” she garbled.
And promptly fell asleep.

Grey, olive, and rust : lake, forest, and sky.
Four o’clock, and world outside had turned into a work of abstract expressionism. Someone call Rothko and tell him to have at it.
Hermione paused by a window on her way to tea and stared out at the fuzzy horizon line.
“What are you looking at?” Theo hopped up on the ledge and peered through the glass enquiringly.
“A metaphor, I’m almost sure,” she replied inanely.
He gave her a look, and Hermione rushed to stop him from commenting.
“How is it that I never see you and Luna together?”
Theo smirked knowingly before answering her. “It’s intentional. I don’t want my highly opinionated housemates to know that we’re... er, friends.”
“Why ever not?”
He sighed, and a sudden grimness took over his features. “They might try to hurt her, wouldn’t they?”
“Ah,” she breathed. Then she crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. “What about me then?” she asked hotly.
“Oh please,” Theo rolled his eyes, “As if any of those twits could hurt you. Specially now, since you can crush all their bones with one casual hand gesture...”
Hermione was mollified. “Not all their bones.”
He grinned, and tugged at one of her curls. “I’m starving.”

The journey from the greenhouses to the castle was bloody murder. Hard raindrops like beestings pelted down from every direction, wearing away even the strongest of repelling charms.
One of Lavender’s boots landed in a puddle of sludge, and the earth accepted this sacrifice with the entitlement of an all-powerful god, leaving her standing in the rain with one soaked, mud-spattered stockinged foot.
“Won-Won!” she squealed in horror.

The journey from the greenhouses to the castle was an absolute delight. Hermione hung back with Harry and Seamus, and they sniggered as they watched Ron struggle to wade through the slush while carrying Lavender on his back.

On a perfectly dreary Saturday morning, the sixth year students gathered in the Great Hall for their first Apparition lesson. The four heads of houses stood in a line on a raised podium, and they were joined by the ministry appointed instructor.
“What do you reckon,” Harry whispered in her ear, “all that appearing and disappearing has somehow diminished his substance or something...”
Hermione fought a valiant battle with a chuckle. He was right – the man before them looked
terribly frail and faded.

“– I mean, he’s practically half-ghost.”

“Shhh!”

She clamped the insides of her lips between her teeth.

“Good morning,” said the spectral entity, “My name is Wilkie Twycross and I shall be your Ministry Apparition instructor for the next twelve weeks. I hope to be able to prepare you for your Apparition Tests in this time —”

He was interrupted with a whip-like shout from Professor McGonagall: “Malfoy, be quiet and pay attention!”

A sea of heads turned this way and that, until they were all looking at a pink-faced and glowering Malfoy. Under this scrutiny, he shuffled away from Theo and Crabbe, both of whom were looking quite aggravated as well. Hermione tried to catch Theo’s eye, but he fixed his gaze most determinedly on Twycross, who had gone on speaking as if there hadn’t been any disruption.

“— by which time, many of you may be ready to take your tests. As you may know, it is usually impossible to Apparate or Disapparate within Hogwarts. The headmaster has lifted this enchantment, purely within the Great Hall, for one hour, so as to enable you to practice. May I emphasize that you will not be able to Apparate outside the walls of this Hall, and that you would be unwise to try.

“I would like each of you to place yourselves now so that you have a clear five feet of space in front of you.”

This gave everyone permission to wreak havoc. Pushing, pulling, move over, and listen here…

simple chaos, which Harry decided to take advantage of.

“Harry, where are you going?” Hermione hissed, but he ignored her and moved away swiftly, darting between people until he had disappeared somewhere in the back of the crowd. Undoubtedly, he had gone and situated himself closer to Malfoy. She shook off a mild surge of irritation, and focused on the simple wooden hoop that had appeared on the floor in front of her.

“The important things to remember when Apparating are the three D’s!” said Twycross. “Destination, Determination, Deliberation!”

(Behind Hermione, Parvati muttered, “Thanks, but I’m perfectly happy with my double D’s,” and Lavender giggled hysterically.)

It was one of the dullest hours of her life. She could see her Destination, she had Determination in spades, and bloody hell, she was moving with Deliberation… except she wasn’t moving at all. It was like driving lessons all over again. Sod her poor coordination skills. Her dad had experienced many mini heart attacks when she’d suddenly accelerated instead of breaking, or when she had stalled in the middle of traffic.

After the fourth try, when Susan Bones had splinched herself, Hermione just knew she’d be the next one to do so.

Thankfully, that didn’t happen. Nothing happened at all, in fact. There wasn’t a single success story in the Great Hall that morning.

Twycross’ tone betrayed a complete lack of surprise, “Until next Saturday, everybody, and do not forget: Destination. Determination. Deliberation,” and after vanishing all the stupid hoops in the room, he left.

Hermione followed soon after, as excited chatter bloomed up around her. She stalked out with determination, knowing her destination was likely to be a bit flaky…

However, Theo was leaning against the railing of the grand staircase with his arms folded in a very deliberate stance.

“You thought I was going to be running away, didn’t you? You thought you’d have to chase me, and then haul me over to some secret corner, and demand that I tell you what the hullabaloo in the
Great Hall was all about… and I’d protest, but you’d work yourself up in that gloriously *Hermione* manner, (have I told you how much I adore that about you?) and you’d righteously order me to–” “Man alive, would you shut up!” Hermione exclaimed. He snapped his mouth closed, looking affronted. “Your attempt to distract me, while admirable, was futile as always. Since I am not a fan of futility, I’m not going to bother asking you what the hullabaloo was all about.” “Oh.” Now Theo looked like he didn’t know what to do with himself.

Hermione steeled herself, begging her blood not to rush to her face, and said, “Um, I have more books…” Instantly he was grinning, she was flushing, and *oh, hang it all.*

Theo had asked for cheerful, hadn’t he? Hermione shoved a stack of half a dozen P.G. Wodehouse paperbacks into his arms, and jogged up the stairs.

Except… she had snuck in *Crime and Punishment* between *Carry on, Jeeves* and *The Mating Season*. It was just too damn important.

Hermione had precisely twelve point six minutes to get from Arithmancy to Potions. Since it was just a matter of going from the first floor to the dungeons, she tempered her pace to a brisk walk. As she passed the courtyard, she saw Harry perched on the balustrade with his nose buried in a book. He was wholly, completely absorbed, and for a second Hermione felt so proud, believing this to be her influence…… before she realised that he was most likely pouring over his Prince’s notes. She tip-toed over to his side, and craned her neck to look over his shoulder. He wasn’t reading at all – he had the Marauder’s Map resting atop his open book. *Curious.* Hermione slowly moved her head closer to Harry’s so that she could speak directly into his ear.

“WhachadoingHarry,” she murmured.

“MOTHERFUCKER.” Harry roared. He slid off the railing, and hopped, skipped, and trotted for a good two meters before he spun around and gaped at her. “*Hermione!* Oh shit. You nearly killed me!”

No, Hermione was sure that she was the one who was going to die. Her stomach ached from laughing so hard. It took her a while to recover, after which she sniffed, wiped her eyes, and said, “Sorry about that.”

“I’m sure you are,” said Harry, *very* dryly.

“What *are* you doing, though? We have potions in… er, now.”

“Right. Let’s go. I was… I was looking for Malfoy. I’m sure I’ll catch him doing something dubious…”

“Was he doing dubious things right now?”

“Well, no. He was in your Arithmancy class. But it’s only a matter of time. You know what’s really weird? Sometimes he just disappears. Literally falls off the map. Where could he possibly be going?”

Oh no. *Oh no.* She could just picture Harry three weeks from now. Unshaven and wild, he’d be hugging his knees and rocking slowly while staring at the map and dully chanting, “where’s Malfoy, where’s Malfoy, where’s Malfoy...”

Hermione was late for potions that afternoon, but since she was with Harry, it hardly mattered.
“Where does Malfoy disappear to?” Hermione asked Theo demandingly later that evening in the library.
“Sorry?”
“You heard me. He’s nowhere in the castle or the grounds. So... where does he go?”
“How do you know that?”
“That’s not the point.”
Theo shrugged innocently. Hermione glared.
“Hey, what’s the difference between the ‘u’ symbol with three dots, and the one with four?”
“Theo!”
“Hermione! I really don’t know where Draco...”
“Right.” Hermione cut in with a growl.
An infuriating grin spread across his face. “I’ll tell you what... why don’t you ask him yourself? Next time, you can give him your books in person, and have a lovely long chat about his comings and goings.”
“You know,” she said angrily, “I would think you’d give me less of a hard time about this whole... thing. I’m not remotely invested in it. I’m doing this for you.”
That was enough to wipe his smile away. “I know.”

She huffed and turned her mind back to her work. She needed to finish these translations as soon as possible, so that she could move on to her Transfiguration assignment, and then get back to more important research matters.

“Thank you, Hermione.”
His sincerity touched her, and she sighed. “What was it you had said...? ‘I will not accept any gratitude from you’...?”
His answering smile was so pure and full, that she simply had to smile back.
The professors were all going to think that Harry was suffering from severe incontinence with the way he was constantly asking to use the john. Hermione, of course, knew he was really just slipping away to check the Marauder’s map for Malfoy’s whereabouts. It was as she had feared – Harry was obsessed to the point of madness. He was always, always searching, his eyes darting wildly hither and thither, and he was always, always disappointed. If he found Malfoy doing regular, innocuous things, he’d shove the map away and run his hands through his hair in frustration. If he found that Malfoy had pulled one of his mysterious disappearing acts, he’d shove the map away, yank his glasses off, and rub his eyes in an utterly harrowed kind of way.

That was the position Hermione found him in as she returned to the common room after an evening of studying about medicinal herbs with Padma. She sat down next to him on the sofa, and waited patiently for his face to emerge from his hands.

“Hello,” she said pleasantly.

“Hi,” he sighed, slipping his glasses back on and giving her a look of pure despondency.

“Malfoy’s gone missing again, has he?”

“Yes!” cried Harry, suddenly full of heated agitation, “It’s so bloody maddening. I’ve scanned every inch of the castle; he’s nowhere. I can’t have missed him! I can’t... I mean, I don’t think I could have...” he trailed off and stared into the fire. Then he turned back to look at her. “Hey! Why don’t you have a gander? See if I’ve missed any–”

“No.”

“Hermione, come on...!”

“Absolutely not,” she pressed, “I will have nothing to do with your fanatical mission, Captain Ahab. You’re wasting away your time and sanity! Give up, already.”

“How can you say that?” Harry demanded, “You know that Malfoy is up to something shifty and dangerous; how can you happily sit on your hands while he goes about doing... it?”

“You’ve told Dumbledore, Harry. Why not let him deal with this?” Hermione adapted a gentle, pacifying tone.

Harry was not pacified. “Fat lot of good that did. Dumbledore didn’t give a shit.”

She didn’t say anything. Hadn’t he understood how Dumbledore functioned by now? He was all about maintaining a facade of absolute calm, when in fact his mind was whizzing, covering every corner. Hermione often wondered how much the old man really knew... how much he had planned, foreseen, or manipulated...

Since the post-triwizard horror show and the shambles at the ministry, she had had plenty of harsh thoughts about her headmaster. While she knew he cared about Harry, she hated how he was only providing him with information in bits and pieces, at a pace that he seemed to think would best serve the course of events. He had an agenda – that much was obvious. Certainly, his motive was to see the end of Voldemort... but this determination made Hermione very nervous. She didn’t know how much he was willing to sacrifice, and... he clearly wasn’t infallible. Sometimes, she wanted to barge into his office and insist that he tell her everything.

Harry was lost in his thoughts as well. His forehead was creased with aggravation and preoccupation. Hermione felt terrible.

“Show me the map, Harry,” she said softly.

He jerked in surprise, and after considering her for a short moment, handed over the yellowed bit of parchment.
Hermione bent over the sheet, and let her eyes sweep across it, registering every black dot present. Not one was marked ‘Draco Malfoy’. She sighed, straightening her spine. “He isn’t there.”
“I knew it,” Harry growled, scowling down at her lap.
“Crabbe is over there, between the sixth and seventh floor... and Goyle’s...... there! Fourth floor corridor...”
“They’re hardly ever together, the three of them. Which would be weird but, well... not everybody remains friends forever, right?” and suddenly, Harry was morose, “Look at you and Ron– ” She felt her face heat up. “–Are you sure Nott doesn’t know anything?”
“Yes, Harry. He’s got nothing to do with any of... whatever’s going on.”
“Alright. Mischief managed,” he intoned bleakly. He was so transparently glum, which was a very unsettling anomaly. Harry almost never let his emotions show.
They fell into their own minds again.

“Who’s Captain Ahab?” he asked, out of the blue. Hermione felt a smile tug at the corner of her mouth. She told Harry the story of a bitter, manically obsessed man, out on a debilitating and vengeful quest to slay a great white ferret.
It was wonderful to hear him laugh.

It was truly mindboggling that the wizarding world couldn’t come up with a single decent mode of transportation. Broomsticks were a safety hazard, the floo network was messy and potentially unreliable, portkeys induced motion sickness and vertigo simultaneously, and finally, apparition... a slippery, monstrous menace that could go straight to hell.
This was the sentiment that united the entire lot of sixth years’ after their third lesson. Not a single student had managed to apparate successfully, though twelve people had splinched themselves, the latest being Justin Finch-Fletchley. Hermione watched him limp into the Great Hall during dinner, looking exceptionally sulky.

“Nobody,” grumbled Seamus, “Nobody told me it would be this difficult. That Twycross... I could give him a clatter.”
“Yeah,” Dean seconded, “Fuck his three D’s!”
Ginny smirked. “What? All at once?”
Harry choked on his pumpkin juice, spilling more than half of it down his robes.

On the twenty-eighth of February, at twelve PM sharp, she began looking for him. However, much to Hermione’s dismay and irritation, Theo Nott was nowhere to be found. At twelve-thirty, she gave up, and dejectedly went to attend her Transfiguration lesson.

She finally saw him two and a half hours later, when he burst into the potions classroom, looking flushed and dishevelled, like he had come running all the way from Albania. Taking his usual seat next to Malfoy, he looked confused at Hermione’s look of displeasure when their eyes met.

After class finally ended, Hermione indicated with a gentle tilt of her head that he should follow her, and stalked out of the room. He caught up with her as she reached the stairs, and silently ascended alongside. They were on the second floor when Hermione finally spoke.
“Where have you been all day?”
“With Luna. She said she had something for me, and it ended up being in the sodding forest. Of course it couldn’t be somewhere sane and normal, and just... well... there was tree climbing involved... ah, but, anyway... did you need me for something?”

As they walked into an empty classroom, Hermione gave him a look that screamed ‘obviously’. She rummaged around in her bag, and pulled out a neatly wrapped package.

“Happy birthday,” she stated.

Theo grinned as he took custody of his present, and began tearing into the paper with gusto.

“You don’t have to open it right now...”

“Yes, I do! I simply have – wow! This is beautiful, Hermione! Thank you! Did you make it yourself?” he chirruped as he held up the jade and indigo scarf.

“Yes,” Hermione said, timidly, “It’s imbibed with six different protective charms. Not fail-safe, by any means, but it should hold against basic hexes. It’s also temperature sensitive; it’ll keep you cool in the summer, and warm in the winter...”

“You are brilliant,” Theo declared. He wrapped the scarf around his neck, and beamed at her.

“How do I look?”

“Very smart,” Hermione laughed. “There’s also this,” and she pulled another box out of her bag, “I had my mum send it over – it’s from my favourite bakery back home...”

Inside the box was a small frosted chocolate cake. Setting it down on a desk, she conjured a candle and lit it, then took a small step back waiting for Theo to do the honours.

He was still wearing a humungous grin, and with dancing eyes he bent his head to blow out the tiny flame.

“Happy birthday,” Hermione said once more.

With large slices on conjured plates, they stood by a window and ate while watching storm clouds gather outside.

“Mother of Merlin, this is glorious,” Theo groaned.

“Isn’t it? I’ll have to take you to this place someday. They have the most incredible assortment of baked goods. You might die, but it’ll be a good way to go.”

“Definitely.”

“So,” Hermione’s grin felt a bit wicked as she said, “Theo and Luna were sitting in a tree...?”

He flushed instantly, but his high spirits seemed to be preventing him from projecting a convincing look of disapproval. “Yes. But we were not engaged in any scandalous activity as you’re so inelegantly implying.”

“That so?”

“That is so.”

She laughed, and Theo marched off to help himself to more cake. He came back with a slice considerably larger than the first.

“This is truly,” he said between mouthfuls, “One of the best birthdays I have ever had. The entire morning in the company of the girl that I, uh, with Luna... Cake and presents with my best friend... and there is, without a doubt, a bottle of firewhiskey and sweetmeats from the Malfoy kitchens waiting for me in my dorm. There’s also a good chance Narcissa would have taken the trouble to ensure that...” He went on talking for a while, but Hermione had stopped listening, her brain stuck on a word. She didn’t know how much later he picked up on her inattentiveness, but she resurfaced when he tugged at her sleeve, asking, “Where’d you go off to?”

“Erm, I... I was just...” she felt ridiculous and childish, but soldiered on, “You said, um, ‘best friend’?”

“...Yes...?” Theo’s expression communicated a tacit ‘and your point is.....?’

“I thought... Malfoy...”

“Well, yeah,” he rolled his eyes, “Draco is my brother, and I care about him more than life itself. But lately, he’s been more than a little preoccupied and absent. Not that I blame him, mind you. Not in the least. Nonetheless, he’s not been... around. Now you,” he smiled down at her
indulgently, “you are my tiny, mad-haired salvation. And I love you to pieces.”

Warmth bloomed somewhere deep in her chest, and suffused her entire being. She stared up at him with wide eyes, utterly bowled over. Nobody, besides her parents, had ever so blatantly declared their affection for her.

“Speechless, are we? It’s okay. I understand. You’re overwhelmed. I have that effect on people. You needn’t worry though; I know you love me, too.”

Still gripped by her awe, Hermione couldn’t find the words to vocalise her concurrence. So instead, she simply nodded. Vigorously.

Hermione sat up in bed that night leafing through a book on concealment charms with total determination. Yes, she was focused. Her mind was completely occupied. Full. Focused. No, wait... she’d already used focused. She was absorbed. Engrossed. Immersed. She was not thinking about inconsequential trivialities, like the fact that there was to be another birthday the next day, and that there was another boy who’d be coming of age... a boy who had not – and wouldn’t ever – tell her he loved her, in any capacity...

Fuck, shit, dash it all.
She wondered what Ron had planned for the day. He must have been terribly upset that the weekend’s trip to Hogsmeade had been cancelled... perhaps, if the weather allowed it, he’d have a small picnic by the lake, with Harry, Ginny, Dean, Neville, Seamus... Parvati...... Lavender.

Hermione put away the book, extinguished the orb of light she was reading by, and lay down in the dark, focusing on breathing.

Why oh why couldn’t she feel this way about Theo? But then... he was besotted with Luna, and that would be a whole other terrible situation in itself. Why couldn’t she feel this way about... god, one of the many single, decent boys in her year? About... about Padma. Or better yet... why couldn’t she just not feel this way at all? About anyone. Ever.

Honestly, such maudlin yearning was tarnishing her brilliance. She had turned away from a book she’d normally have finished before falling asleep, so that she could... what?... Moon over the cruelly tantalising way in which red hair gleamed in the sunlight, when a tall figure with lovely broad shoulders would throw back his head and laugh?

She closed her eyes, and begged for sleep.

“Yes, I thought as much.”

Hermione spun around and blinked at Ginny’s look of exasperation. “I beg your pardon?”

“I said I thought as much. I was damn near certain you’d choose to hide in some sad corner instead of going to the Great Hall to eat breakfast.”

“I am not hiding in a sad corner,” Hermione groused from the sad corner shadowy crook where she’d been standing for the past fifteen minutes, “I’m not hungry.”

She was ravenous.

“He hasn’t come down yet, you know.”

“Who hasn’t?” Hermione asked mulishly.
Ginny narrowed her eyes. “My idiotic brother, that’s who. I reckon he’s still in bed, cuddling and petting his presents. So? Will you please come eat breakfast with me? I promise I’ll leave with you if he shows up.”

Hermione huffed, but let Ginny lead the way downstairs. She needn’t have worried – Ron didn’t make an appearance... nor did Harry. She tried staunchly not to wonder what that was about. Ginny offered to accompany her to the library after breakfast, on the condition that Hermione proofread her Muggle Studies essay.

But they never made it to the library. Professor McGonagall, pale and grim, waylaid them in the entrance hall. “Ms. Granger, Ms. Weasley; come with me please.” With no further explanation, she began a brisk march up the stairs.

“Um, Professor,” Ginny ventured, after exchanging an apprehensive glance with Hermione, “Is something wrong?”

“I’m afraid so,” she replied sombrely, “Your brother was poisoned earlier this morning.”

Hermione felt the bottom fall out of her world.
Sixteen

That day Hermione learnt how it felt to unravel completely.

“...Who... drink... when... Slughorn...” said Ginny’s voice, and “...Foaming... panic... bezoar... Dumbledore...” said Harry’s.
She registered nothing, feeling demented and devastated.

The three of them had been standing outside the closed doors of the hospital wing for... oh, forever, while Madam Pomfrey worked on Ron. Dumbledore had whizzed in a while back, followed by Snape. Then Dumbledore had left. Each time, the doors opened and closed too quickly for her to be able to catch a glimpse of what was going on inside.

“...can’t see Slughorn wanting to poison...”
How were they still summoning up the sanity to fucking speculate, while Ron was lying there in god knows what state, maybe even... She was standing rigidly, uncomfortably straight. She clenched her fists, digging her nails into her palms. She concentrated hard on maintaining this insane tension in her body, because if she let that go... she’d let go of a lot of other things.
If Ron didn’t make it, he’d never grin in that wide, puckish, perfect way again... a grin that she hadn’t seen in months... and may never...
She clenched her jaw.

Time was passing in flashes, inching forward in abrupt jerks every time she blinked.

“...then someone had to know that he planned to gift that bottle to...”
Blink.
The puddles of sunlight on the floor had shifted.
Blink.
McGonagall entered the hospital wing; Snape left.
Blink.
Theo laid a hand on her arm... “something to eat, please?” ... Blink.
It was raining.
Blink.
“I’m sure Dumbledore will investigate every possible aspect...”
Blink.
Was that Neville?
Blink.
Lavender came to put on the most ludicrous show of distress. A mortified looking Parvati dragged her away after McGonagall burst out looking furious.

Night fell, and they were still waiting. Harry and Ginny had finally stopped conjecturing, and stood silently on opposite ends of the double doors, like a couple of sentries.

“Mum!”
Hermione twitches, and saw that indeed, Mrs Weasley was hurtling towards them, followed closely by her husband, and Dumbledore. She didn’t acknowledge any of them, tearing straight through the doors without a word. Mr. Weasley offered them a dismal nod.
Another age went by...

...After which Dumbledore and the Weasley’s reemerged, the missus sobbing pitifully into her husband’s neck as he held her.
“Dad?” Ginny asked in alarm, but neither of them spoke. They just continued to walk away, down the corridor. “Dad!”
Hermione’s throat closed up, her vision blurred, her ears felt like they were on fire.

“Calm yourself, Potter!” Professor McGonagall’s command had Hermione, Ginny, and Harry spinning on the spot as if they wished to apparate. “He’s fine. Ron Weasley is going to make a full recovery,” she articulated each word slowly and thoroughly; and with each syllable, Hermione felt herself come out of her fugue state.
The doors opened once more, and Madam Pomfrey’s face popped out, and she finally allowed them in.
“Yes, Mr. Weasley should be completely fine. Of course, he will have to stay here for a week or so, and be regular with his doses of essence of rue,” the matron said as she led them to Ron’s bed.
Hermione’s stomach muscles clenched tighter and tighter with every step she took.

There he was. His skin was the color of bleached corals, and dotted with beads of sweat. His scruffy hair was damp and swept away from his forehead. From chin-down, he was covered with a thick quilt. She came to a halt at the foot of his bed, her eyes glued to his faintly quivering lips, to his barely trembling eyelashes…
Ginny fell into the chair closest to his bed, picked up a soft looking cloth that lay by his pillow, and began to lightly dab at his clammy temple.
“You bloody prat,” she whispered. Then, as she brushed the cloth across his brow, Ron hummed. It was that clear, unassailable proof of his aliveness that got Hermione to uncurl her fists. She gasped.
“Why don’t you sit down?” Ginny said to her, kindly.
She did, blindly shuffling over to the closest chair, her gaze not shifting off Ron for even a fraction of a second.

That day, Hermione felt relief in an entirely new... sharp and shattering... way.

She watched him breathe in terror and wonder.

Fred and George joined Ron’s bedside gathering a few minutes later – apparently, they had been waiting to surprise Ron at Hogsmeade – and like Harry and Ginny, they were both extremely eager to talk about the mystery surrounding the ‘accident’. Vultures, she thought gracelessly. She didn’t participate, only loosely following the discussion. It was mostly an endless regurgitation of the same old facts and speculations; it was all entirely pointless.

“So the poison was in the drink?” Fred asked for the second or third time.
Harry jumped to answer with same alacrity every time: “Yes, Slughorn poured it out —”
“Would he have been able to slip something into Ron’s glass without you seeing?”
“Probably. But why would Slughorn want to poison Ron?”
Ron’s lip twitched, and Hermione wished with all her might that her would open his eyes and frowned grumpily at them with a “do you mind, I’m trying to recover from a near-death experience here!”

They went over the same stale questions: who was the poison really for, where did it come from, was Slughorn a Death Eater (honestly), was Slughorn in danger…
“But you said Slughorn had been planning to give that bottle to Dumbledore for Christmas,” Ginny unnecessarily reminded Harry, “So the poisoner could just as easily have been after Dumbledore.”
“Then the poisoner didn’t know Slughorn very well,” Hermione snapped before she could stop herself. Well, she didn’t snap so much as rasp… twelve hours of complete muteness was bound to have some effect. “Anyone who knew Slughorn would have known there was a good chance he’d keep something that tasty for himself.”

“Er-my-nee.”

Her heart stopped beating.

They waited for Ron to say more… but all they got was some incomprehensible mumbling, before he simply started snoring.

He’d said her name. Her name. Of all things… it had been her name.

With a loud bang, the doors were thrown open, and Hagrid came stomping toward them, pulling Hermione away from her attack of sentimentality.

“Bin in the forest all day!” he said; a fact that was corroborated by his damp hair, bear skin coat, the crossbow in his hand, and his mud-caked boots. “Aragog’s worse, I bin readin’ to him — didn’t get up ter dinner till jus’ now an’ then Professor Sprout told me abou’ Ron! How is he?”

“Not bad. They say he’ll be okay,” Harry replied.

“I don’ believe this. Jus’ don’ believe it… Look at him lyin’ there… Who’d want ter hurt him, eh?”

“That’s just what we were discussing,” said Harry. “We don’t know.”

“Someone couldn’ have a grudge against the Gryffindor Quidditch team, could they?” Hagrid said with actual genuine concern. “Firs’ Katie, now Ron…”

“I can’t see anyone trying to bump off a Quidditch team!” Thank you, George.

“Wood might’ve done the Slytherins if he could’ve got away with it,” Fred joked.

“For god’s sake.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s Quidditch,” Hermione interposed, “but I think there’s a connection between the attacks.”

“How d’you work that out?” Fred asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Well, for one thing, they both ought to have been fatal and weren’t, although that was pure luck. And for another, neither the poison nor the necklace seems to have reached the person who was supposed to be killed.” She faltered at that point, frowning as she thought out aloud, “Of course, that makes the person behind this even more dangerous in a way, because they don’t seem to care how many people they finish off before they actually reach their victim.”

Alas, they didn’t get a chance to pursue this thought, as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley chose that moment to enter the ward. The first thing Mrs. Weasley did was engulf Harry in the hug, while sobbing, “Dumbledore’s told us how you saved him with the bezoar! Oh, Harry, what can we say? You saved Ginny… you saved Arthur… now you’ve saved Ron…”

Harry had turned the colour of ripe cherries. He clumsily tried to dismiss her, but Mr. Weasley had his own bit to add – “Half our family does seem to owe you their lives, now I stop and think about it. Well, all I can say is that it was a lucky day for the Weasleys when Ron decided to sit in your compartment on the Hogwarts Express, Harry.”

The cloying, mawkish display was not doing Hermione’s unaccommodating mood any favours. As much as she wanted to spend the night sitting by Ron’s bed, holding his hand, she chose to leave with Harry and Hagrid when Madam Pomfrey came by to remind them that Ron was allowed only six visitors at a time.
Hermione awoke from a deep, dreamless slumber and felt around for her watch in panic. It turned out to be one of those strange situations where she felt like she’d been asleep for ages, but really… it was just quarter to five in the morning.

It was completely pitch black outside. She shuffled out of bed and wrapped her warmest cloak around herself as silently as possible, so as to not disturb any of her dormmates. She crept up staircases, down hallways, and soon she was climbing the stairs of the murky tower where Sirius had been locked up, before Harry and she (and Buckbeak) had rescued him. It looked exactly the same, untouched by time – and time-turners. In the illusory dark, she could pretend Sirius was sitting crumpled in a shrouded corner. She walked over to the window to which they’d flown up to, remembering the look of supreme astonishment on his face when he saw them… All that was visible outside were a few flickering lights. If she unfocused her eyes, they bloomed into enormous spheres, and she could have been looking at the solar system.

Ron was alive, and life could go on. Hermione thought that perhaps it was time to gather abandoned half-thoughts, and piece together a theory about what had happened the day before. She didn’t think she could do worse than the collective mind-power of Potter, Weasley, Weasley, and Weasley.

Someone had poisoned Slughorn’s bottle of mead, hoping it would reach Dumbledore. Most likely, Katie was supposed to deliver the cursed necklace to him as well. She was fairly certain that someone was hell bent on assassinating the headmaster. The motive wasn’t clear, but the most obvious and serious one would have something to do with Voldemort, and that exponentially intensified the gravity of both these incidents. When Hagrid (to Harry’s great glee) let slip the tidbit about Snape and Dumbledore’s argument, Hermione was struck by the sudden conviction that Dumbledore knew exactly who was behind these attacks, and yet was perfectly at peace with letting them continue their mission, albeit under Snape’s watchful eye.

A ‘mission’… Snape’s involvement…
These factors brought her to a most discomforting conclusion: what if Harry was actually right? What if… What if it was Draco Malfoy after all?
Whether or not he had been officially branded a Death Eater was irrelevant; if he was out to kill Dumbledore, he was exactly as dangerous as Harry feared. But… was he? She had too many contrary ideas about him. He was egotistical, arrogant, and horrible. He could quote fucking Shakespeare, and Theo swore he wasn’t unsalvageable. This was a boy she’d slapped silly once. The boy she could surely take down in a duel with her eyes closed. However, circumstantial evidence was still evidence, and she couldn’t think of a justifiable alternative.

What a ghastly world they lived in. A simple, mediocre schoolyard bully could possibly turn out to be a diabolical killer – a ruthless minion of the most malevolent wizard alive. At the age of sixteen.

A weak hint of light was creeping up from behind distant shadowy trees. Hermione turned away from the window and began the long walk back to the Gryffindor tower. She told herself quite firmly that she would be getting answers from Theo. He dare not prevaricate this time; Ron had nearly died.

Her mind raced, but her legs dawdled; it was nearly daybreak by the time she reached the sixth floor. As she rounded a corner…… she stopped short with a jerk, narrowly missing colliding with
someone. She blinked disconcertedly at the black cloaked chest standing like a wall in front of her. When she looked up, her blood ran cold.

His pale skin was stained with the dusty blue cast of early dawn. It brought out the deep purple rings around his eyes, and he looked like a bloodless Inferius. He was every bit as startled as she was, looking down at her in surprise, rather than the usual revulsion.

Hermione was, honest to god, scared. With all the notions she had been entertaining, all she could think at that moment was... he’s a killer. She stood rooted to the ground, watching as surprise made way for loathing, as soon enough, Malfoy was proper sneering. Sneering, and (possibly, probably) capable of murder.

She couldn’t move. She couldn’t tear her wide, panicked stare away from his strange mist-and-steel eyes. He didn’t move either. They were trapped in a vortex of fear and odium, and... move move move... she remained inert.

Would he pull out his wand? Would be spit abuse and vitriol? Would he physically assault her? He blinked twice, straightened his shoulders, walked around her... and away.

Hermione didn’t turn, even after the sound of his footfalls had faded. She took a few fortifying breaths, then half ran all the way back to her bed. She really, really hoped Harry wasn’t awake and having an early morning crack at his map.

‘Say, Hermione, I saw you and Malfoy having a showdown at dawn... did you find out what he’s up to?’

‘Oh, no, Harry! I was paralysed by irrational terror, so he just glared at me and left.’

‘Ha Ha! How quaint.’

Goodness, she really had been paralysed, and completely sodding useless.

“...As if any of those twits could hurt you. Specially now, since you can crush all their bones with one casual hand gesture...”

She laughed to herself bitterly.

Ginny came sprinting towards Hermione and Harry as they were exiting the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom later that morning.

“He’s awake,” she panted, “Ron’s awake!”

Within an instant the three of them were dashing toward the hospital wing. Harry charged straight in, but Hermione stopped dead at the door, suddenly assailed by insecurity.

“Herms?”

“Yes... Ginny, I... you go on. Perhaps it's best if I –”

“You can’t be serious!” Ginny cried, “You still don’t want to talk to him?!”

“I don’t think he’ll want to talk to me. I just –”

“Oh Morgan. Don’t be a stupid cow. Of course he will. Come on,” Ginny grabbed her by the elbow and dragged her inside.

Ron looked like... himself. His cheeks had regained their colour, his hair was shiny and shaggy, and he was laughing at something Harry had said... until he spotted her.

His eyes got round and dimly apologetic, and his breathing picked up a touch. She wasn’t doing much better – the thrumming of her heart was sure to shatter her ribcage.
“Hi.”
“Hi, Ron.”
Harry rolled his eyes. So did Ginny, but with a grin.
“So. Um. Was, uh... was it really necessary to celebrate your birthday in such a terribly dramatic manner?”
And he gave her that wide, puckish, perfect grin. She could hear her blood rushing and churning about inside her.
“You know me,” he quipped, “I never do anything by half.”
Except homework,” she reminded him, barely managing to fight against the pull of a manic smile to do so.
“Except homework,” he agreed, laughingly.

Ginny jumped in then, listing out all the many, many, many things that Ron did by half. Harry and Hermione interjected occasionally. Ron gave them a sour look, but said very little besides the occasional, “almost died,” and “give me a bloody break”.

The banter and ridiculousness went on for a while, after which Ron was instructed to nap, and they had to leave. In that while, Hermione collected six full grins, two fond chuckles, and one secret, overwhelming, exhilarating, significant glance.

“Fucking finally. There you are!”

Hermione looked up from her essay and Theo smiled, setting his bag down on the table in their favourite quite corner of the library. He was wearing the scarf she’d gifted him. “I’ve been trying to catch hold of you all day. So, Weasley’s well out of the woods, then?”
“Yes,” she replied, tersely.
“That’s good. And I suppose things between him and you are all peachy again?”
She glared, silently daring him to go on.
“And that’s a yes. Brilliant. What a lucky break for him, in that case.”
“Lucky?” she spat in disbelief.
Theo shrugged, arranging his books and things in front of him.
“Are you okay?”
“Fine.”
He peered at her, looking annoyed. “Why the hell are you being so short with me?”
“Oh, I don’t know. Why would I be? We’re best friends, after all. So what if you’re constantly lying to me? We’re buddies, you and I.”
“Excuse me?” Theo retorted indignantly, “First of all, don’t ever use the word ‘buddies’ again. And secondly, I have never lied to you. Not once.”
“Oh, really?” Hermione shot back, incensed, “Okay, Theo... who put Ron in the hospital? Who poisoned that mead?”
“How should I know?!”
Hermione slapped both her palms down on the table. “Stop. Lying. Tell me it was Malfoy.”
“It wasn’t,” Theo denied immediately, but Hermione saw his face blanch.
“Stop ly –”
“I’m NOT fucking lying. Why the buggering hell would Draco want to kill Weasley? He doesn’t love him, sure, but he’s isn’t going to –”
“It wasn’t Ron he was after. He made a mistake. Like he had earlier with Katie Bell.”
Theo paled even further. “No. That wasn’t him. He... he wouldn’t... No. No.”
“Either this is your worst attempt at perjury so far, or you’re up to your ears in denial,” Hermione snarked.

He frowned at her in utter confusion and devastation. It was an expression she couldn’t quite label – was it horrified resignation, was it shocked disbelief? – all she knew was that it was raw and upsetting, and she instantly eased her hardened stance.

“Theo,” she murmured, reaching out to lay her hand over his, “I do believe that you aren’t lying to me, alright? But you have to admit to harbouring certain... suspicions. You must have noticed... that is to say, with the way Malfoy’s been acting, the awful things that have been happening... what I mean is...” she felt distressingly inarticulate, “Look, you’re the closest to him. Surely you can muster something substantial, and we can put a stop to this madness.”

“How?” Theo croaked, his eyes fixed on hers with disconcerting directness.

“Um... well, we could talk to some of the professors...”


“It isn’t all that farfetched,” Hermione grumbled. What **would** Dumbledore do, though? All evidence pointed to the fact that he already knew... “Can’t you get Malfoy to admit...?”

Theo pulled a face and looked away.

“This is **serious**, Theo!”

“Oh, **really**?!” he replied, affecting a guise of facetious disbelief, “**Serious**, is it? Oh, dear me! I thought we were all just larking about! But it’s **serious**! Ah! Thanks for letting me know, Hermione.”

Hermione threw up her hands, “Clearly you **are** larking about! Do you honestly think keeping Malfoy’s nefarious secrets is more important than –”

“Than **what**? Your insatiable curiosity?!”

“It’s NOT about my sodding curiosity! Ron could have **died**!”

“And Draco had nothing to do with it!”

“You don’t know that,” Hermione hollered.

Theo dragged his chair back loudly, making her cringe. He packed up his bag in a towering rage, while saying, “I’m sure pinning this shit on Draco is very convenient for your lot, but leave me the fuck out of it. I am not going to sit here and help you bolster such despicable allegations. Good night.”

And he left her with the coldest look he’d ever aimed her way. She growled under her breath; her anger, distress, and frustration boiled over, and she stood up to pace feverishly, in an effort to calm her nerves. How could he point-blank reject everything she had set forth? There had to be a limit to personal loyalty when lives were at stake... when there were far bigger things at play... ...It was TOO MUCH. Everything was TOO MUCH.

She circuited the medium sized library table until she was dizzy.

Of course, the day just had to end with a confrontation with Lavender Brown.

“Well, you’ve been out late,” she noted resentfully when Hermione walked into their dormitory. Hermione was in no shape to deal with such puerile cattishness. She ignored the huffy blond bint, and stomped straight into the bathroom, letting the door close with a slam. She stood under a stream of hot water for a long time. Steam swirled around her, laden with the scent of oranges and
cinnamon.
Oranges.... Dead oranges.
Woodcutter.
Cut down my shadow.
Deliver me from the torment
of bearing no fruit.

What a day.

Outside the bathroom, Lavender had been waiting for her with a face like thunder.
“Where have you been all evening?” she demanded.
Hermione shrugged offhandedly, sparing her a perfunctory half-glance before crawling into bed.
Lavender got even more riled up at such cavalier treatment.
“Where you with my Won-Won?” she yelled, marching right up to Hermione’s bed.
“I did go see him, yes,” Hermione answered vaguely, as she looked over the stack of books on her bedside table, hoping to pick something diverting to end the day with.
“WILL YOU PAY ATTENTION?!”
Hermione gave her the exact look of mock surprise that Theo had displayed earlier. She knew from experience that it was bloody lethal.
As predicted, Lavender seethed. “So you want to be his friend again? He’s become the star of the school, and you’ve suddenly decided you want to make up with him?”
“Star of the school?!” Hermione laughed incredulously, “He was poisoned, you idiot. And yes, it put our differences in perspective –”
“Oh, Please. Spare me that bullshit. You need to stay away from him!” Lavender fumed when Hermione laughed at that, “I’m serious! You stay away from him!”
“Go away, Lavender. You have no business telling me what to do. If you have problems, go talk to Ron.”
“Oh I will,” she avowed menacingly, “The second he wakes up.”
Hermione raised a brow, but decided not to bait the crazed termagant any further. “When he wakes up. Right.”

With pointed finality, Hermione wandlessly, wordlessly closed the curtains around her bed, shutting out Lavender... and the rest of the world.
“McLaggen is a stonking great arsehole,” Harry grumbled, “I’m going to fix him onto the highest goalpost with a permanent sticking charm, and leave him there forever.”

“Someone would notice, sooner or later,” Hermione said, regretfully, “he has a way of making himself known. I say we give him the Umbridge treatment...”

Harry shuddered, “I’d rather not go anywhere near those Centaurs again. Chuck us a chocolate frog, will you Ron?”

“Sure. Well, I reckon he’ll take care of himself, gnormless troll that he is. All we’ll have to do is sit back and watch the show. You remember how he fucked up his trial, yeah?”

Hermione blushed, immediately looking away from Ron, who was leaning back against the headboard of his sickbed with a dreamy smile on his face.

“No, I’m pretty sure that was a onetime occurrence,” said Harry, pointedly. Hermione refused to look at him as well.

“Hmmm,” she mused, pretending to be utterly transfixed by the play of sunlight on the ward curtains, “Want me to design a pimple-tattoo? I’m sure Dean will gladly chip in... We can create something really spectacular...”

“Blimy,” Ron muttered, “Why do I keep forgetting how dangerous you are?”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “If you’d like, I can conjure a bird or two to remind you.”

They were approaching dangerous territory. Ron visibly gulped, searching for something appropriate to come back with. Hermione stared at him in anticipation...

Harry cleared his throat loudly. “I think it’s time to go, Hermione. Don’t want to be late for McGonagall.”

“Right, yes,” she hastily stood up to leave, suddenly embarrassed, “Bye, Ron. We’ll come by again soon...”

“Yes,” he answered tetchily, “See you.”

Harry grasped her upper arms once they’d exited the hospital wing.

“Listen. Hermione,” his eyes bore into hers, “Please, please, please...”

“What?” he asked, blankly.

She shook her head. “Nothing. Sorry. Go on...”

He gave her a ‘jesus, you’re mental’ look, and said, “Can you please not fight with Ron again?”

“Can I not fight with him?! Well, excuse me, but...”

“Yeah, I know, he’s um... but, just... please, Hermione. I’m asking you because you’re obviously the mature one here...”

“Oh. Nice. Flattery. If this is how you appeal to Slughorn, it’s no wonder he hasn’t given up that memory yet.”

“Cheap shot, Herms!”

“Oh, bugger off.”

They got stuck on a moving staircase, pulling them away from their destination. Hermione sighed in resignation, crossing her arms. Victim to the whims of a flighty flight of steps... wasn’t she suffering enough?

Harry decided to take advantage of that gift of time, and pulled out the Marauder’s map. He shoved it away only moments after.

“In the DADA classroom,” he huffed impatiently, “For fuck’s sake.”

“Haven’t had a breakthrough yet?” she asked him in what she hoped was a casual manner.
“No!” he wailed, “I’m bloody *stalking* him, and still... nothing! I go out of my way to be where he is, and so far, all I’ve seen him do is walk between classes with various girls, or Nott... one time, I caught him having a row with Zabini, but they both shut up when I got close enough to hear. Oh, and once I caught him with his tongue down Parkinson’s throat.”

“Lovely.”
Harry made a sound of deep disgust, “And he’s disappearing more and more often. He’s almost never in bed, even when I check in the middle of the night, or way early in the morning...”
Hermione twitched involuntarily, once again reminded of how lucky she was that Harry hadn’t been glued to his map ‘way early in the morning’ two days ago.

“Hermione...” he continued, “I don’t think Nott is being completely honest with you.”

*Oh shit.* She had been dreading this moment for a while.

“He hasn’t got anything do with this,” she answered immediately.

“Maybe,” he allowed, “But he has to know something. Maybe I should talk to him...”

“What? *No!*” she said in alarm. She was astounded at the mere thought.

“Why not? If he really is on our side, he should be glad to help!”

“Things aren’t so cut and dried, and you know that. I mean, of course Theo is on our side as you put it... but he isn’t going to spy on his friend, who –”

“Who’s a manky Death Eater! And surely if they’re so close, Malfoy must have told him some stuff!”

“...*He hasn’t.* I... I trust Theo implicitly, okay? If he knew anything, he would –”

“Would he, though?”

“YES,” she stated emphatically, “Remember, Harry... the... *the world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters!*”

She knew it was absolutely awful of her to throw Sirius’ words in his face like that, but she was frantic. She needed to get him off Theo’s back.

Harry was quiet after that.

In a desperate bid to lighten the mood, Hermione said, “You know, of all the ways in which the Dursleys mistreat you, depriving you of muggle music is probably the worst.”

Harry gaped at her. “Yep. That’s definitely the worst.”

“Oh god! I didn’t... that wasn’t what I...”

He grinned slowly at her horrified expression, “Good thing I’m getting a heavy dose of the stuff thanks to Seamus’ gramophone, right?”

“Yes,” Hermione muttered, mortified, “Remind me to put on The Smiths sometime. They’re a great guilty pleasure for moments of weepy self-indulgence.”

“Oh yes please,” Harry intoned monotonously, “I could really do with some of that in my life.”

As usual, on Wednesday evening, Hermione sauntered over to the library to spend an hour absorbed in good, wholesome research with Padma. Keeping with the other girl’s Healerly ambitions, they’d been studying magical medicine in great depth.

They met just outside the library doors, and walked over to their usual table, passing Madam Pince, who was actually feeling generous enough to offer them a ghost of a smile.

Hermione passed over *Moste Potente Potions* to Padma, and picked up *Important Modern Magical Discoveries*, quickly flipping over to the section on medicinal inventions.

Fifty-six minutes later, she stretched. Something around her shoulder blades cracked audibly, causing her to grimace. She really hated when that happened.

“Mind if I take off a bit early, Padma?” she asked. “I promised Neville I’d help him with his water-
making charm.”
“Sure. But, um...” Practical Padma had turned into Piteous Padma again that day after a long time, and Hermione was annoyed. “I was just wondering... er, my sister was telling me about how upset Lavender is about the fact that you and Ron are on speaking terms again...”
“Your sister needs to find better things to do with her time than gossiping mindlessly,” Hermione said with a scowl.
“Ha ha, oh yes, I agree. But, um... it’s true then?”
Hermione arched her eyebrows, and bluntly began packing up to leave.
“So you still... you’re still interested in him?”
“I do believe that’s none of your business, Padma.”
“It is though!” Padma rushed out. Hermione looked at her in surprise, and saw that her face was flushed. “You need to know... you have to know... You shouldn’t have to settle for him! You... you... you have options, alright!”
“What,” Hermione breathed, startled, “are you talking about?”
“I don’t do things out of the blue, Hermione,” Padma’s speech picked up momentum, and she kept her overbright eyes fixed on Hermione, “I think about everything. I always make sure. I know what I want before doing anything. It’s never impulsiveness, or alcohol, or... or...” she huffed in an agitated manner, “You have options.”
Hermione felt an icy tremor make its way up her spine. She stared down at her hands that were clasped together on her lap: her stupid tiny and narrow hands, with their ink-stained fingers and uneven nails. She knew what she had to say next, and she dreaded it. She wished she would spontaneously disappear. She wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole. She wished anyone – anyone – would rush over and demand she leave with them.
Swallowing thickly, she said, “Maybe. But they aren’t options I would consider.”
“...I see.”

Hermione tentatively looked up from her hands, biting her lip, bracing herself... Padma had looked away. She had turned her face to the side, and Hermione could see that she was blinking desperately to keep the sheen in her eyes from leaking out.
“I can’t do this anymore,” she declared hoarsely. “I’ve been trying really hard. I’ve been compartmentalising to the best of my ability, because I know what we’ve been doing is important, and it’s helped me a lot... but... I just can’t do it anymore. I can’t. I can’t. I’m sorry.”
“I understand,” Hermione said softly. When Padma sniffed and nodded, she knew it was time for her to leave. There was something about that gesture that evoked farewells and finality.

When Hermione reached the Gryffindor common room, she told Neville she was feeling too unwell to study.
“Since when has that ever stopped you?” he called out wonderingly to her back as she climbed up the stairs to her dormitory.

She felt completely out of sorts the next day. By early afternoon, guilt and disquiet had acquired a sombre note, and when she stepped out of Greenhouse two, she took an abrupt turn towards the lake, rather than going back into the castle. Nobody noticed her slip away; most people were excitedly discussing how large and dangerous the Venomous Tentacula plants had gotten. (Neville had been an unlikely hero that day, shielding an unsuspecting Hannah Abbott from being struck by a spore-ball by deflecting it with his watering can.)
The weather was atrocious. Immense grey clouds portended a brutal downpour, and the wind was beastly and cold, scraping at the skin of her nose and cheeks. Hermione tightened her muffler around her neck and walked to the edge of the lake. It rippled and churned, aggravated by currents of air. She was mesmerised by the cacophony of colours. Focusing on one isolated patch of water, she severed it from its surroundings and context until it was just a piece of marbled volatility and tremendous beauty: Thick grey streaks warped by shots of steel blue, celtic blue; thin frills of frothy white; a sudden bloom of deep gunmetal; blue and grey overlapping... Then an unexpected weight on her shoulders dragged her back into the real world.

“Hello, buddy.”

Hermione looked up to her right. Theo’s nose was red, and his hair was tucked into his hat, baring his seldom-seen forehead. He was wearing the scarf again. “Hi,” she replied blandly, and was irrationally incensed when he presented her with a grin. “I’ve come to rescue you, fair princess! The elements are cruel and determined to drench and freeze you to death... but do not fret!” He spun them around with a jaunty turn, and keeping his arm around her, began briskly leading her back towards the castle. “What are you doing here?” she asked cantankerously. “I told you, I came to rescue –”

“What are you doing here?”

He sighed, squeezing her into his side, and said, “I haven’t seen or heard from you in three days, Hermione. If you think you can give me the sulky silent treatment like you do to Weasley, you have another thing coming. I don’t care if you’re throwing the most awful, Merlin-be-damned wobbler. You cannot ignore me. It’s against the fundamental rules of our world. You can have a look in Primordial Laws of Magic. It’s right there – chapter one. You and I are simply not allowed to cold-shoulder each other.”

“You and I specifically?”

“Oh, yes.”

She didn’t know why she thought a disagreement with Theo would go the way it usually did with Ron, or Harry. Everything about her friendship with him was unprecedented. For once, the issue wasn’t being buried and ignored after a long, tormented period of silent fuming; Theo had acknowledged it, and wanted to move past it. They hadn’t been forced to reconcile over some death-defying situation. He had sought her out, and was being warm and silly and himself, and she hadn’t had to do a thing. God. He was amazing.

Hermione planted her feet firmly onto the ground, bringing them to a halt. They turned to face each other in a strangely synchronised manner. He gave her an anxious, questioning look, and she responded by taking in a huge gulp of air, and... “Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“... Thank you, Theo. I didn’t know how...; I mean... You. You’re just... just...”

He was visibly fighting a smile as he watched her. “Yes,” he said, cutting short her moronic babbling, “I am. I know.”

He sounded very smug, and Hermione allowed it. She also allowed him to pull her back under his arm, and pilot her across the grounds.

They were only a few meters short of the entrance hall, when the corner of her eye saw a flash of... something... on Theo’s wrist, as it rested limply on her shoulder. “What’s this?” she enquired, moving to pull his sleeve back to have a proper look. At once, he tore his arm away from her and hid it behind his back. “Nothing!” he exclaimed, far too loudly, far too quickly.
It was such an alarmingly extreme reaction.
Hermione reared back, “What the hell?”
“It’s nothing Hermione. Just a rash. Rather frightening looking one, I’m afraid. I don’t want to
traumatise you…”
“It most certainly did not look like a rash!”
“It is... a rash...” Theo spluttered feebly.
Hermione narrowed her eyes, and surged forward, tugging at his arm. “Let me see.”
“No!” he fought against her, and unfortunately, battle of strengths were not her forte.
“Theo!”
After a minute-long struggle, he relented. Greedily, Hermione pulled back his sleeve...

He was wearing a bracelet. It was a rather chunky, obviously handmade one, consisting of some
sort of iridescent pieces of bark strung together.
“It’s Wiggentree bark, dusted with powdered moonstone,” Theo informed her snappily with a
supreme blush on his face, “It’s supposed to be restorative and lucky, and it... wards off Blibbering
Humdingers.”
He was so, so red. Hermione grinned ear to ear as she examined the bracelet. “It’s quite pretty,” she
offered consolingly.
Theo glared. “I like it.”
“So do I!” she gushed, “I’ll be looking into the healing properties of this combination. Luna
actually might be on to something.”

“You should tell her,” Hermione said after they’d resumed walking.
His high colour hadn’t completely receded, and at that statement, it came right back into
prominence. “Don’t be stupid,” he gritted out.
“I’m not! You should tell her. Come on, Theo... You know she feels the same way.”
“Or she doesn’t. And she’ll laugh, or turn away, or... fuck. She might blame it all on some seedy
little parasitic beasties that have colonised my brain, and then I’ll just die, Hermione. I’ll fucking
just die.”
“Oh come now. She won’t do any of those things,” Hermione rebuked him playfully.
“How can you be so sure of that?”
“For god’s sake, Theo. Everybody knows I know everything.”
He laughed and it was like he had done so in spite of himself. “Ah, yes. The biggest, most
successful case of mass delusion that world has ever seen!”
She pushed him, hard, and laughed as he exaggerated his resulting stumble.

He tucked her under his (bracelet-free) arm, and pulled her along up the wide marble staircase,
offering a wide, shit-eating grin to a cluster of fourth year Slytherins that had stopped to stare at
them.

It was no wonder, with all the ups and downs and emotional turmoil she was experiencing, that she
should forget that Harry and Ginny had quidditch practice that evening.

Hermione was genuinely shocked to find nobody else at Ron’s bedside when she went to visit him.
He looked up at her, equally startled, and they gawked at each other in silence.

“Oh,” she gasped, after a stretch.
“Hey,” he mumbled uncomfortably.
Keeping her eyes lowered, she gingerly settled on the side of his bed. “How are you feeling?”
“Fine,” he said blankly. Then he shook his head, and after taking a moment to gather his wits, went on, “Bored. I wish Pomfrey would let me out of here already. I’m going mad staring at the ceiling all day.”
“Oh stop,” she said with a laugh, “You have enough people coming by to keep you company.”
“Eh,” he grunted dismissively, “Neville looked in yesterday. Ginny and Dean were here in the afternoon, but like Harry, they don’t really have time...” he suddenly grinned euphorically, “McLaggen’s giving them hell.”
“I’ve heard. Many times. Many, many, many times.”
“Yeah well, if that dowdy, dried up old matron would just let me out....”
“Ron!” she chastised, but he saw through her facade of disapproval and laughed.
“Anyway. Point is, I’m bored to death, Hermione. I don’t s’pose you could come by more than once a day? I survived being poisoned; it’ll be really sad if boredom kills me.”
Predictably, she felt hot and bothered after his endearing request. “If I do that, I’ll bring homework. Assignments. Tons and tons of thick, dusty books...” she warned.
He laughed again, and she wondered if he was in this good a mood when other people visited him. “And that might kill me too. Bugger it all, looks like I’m doomed to die one way or another.”
Hermione stuck her tongue out at him.

He certainly looked completely healthy. Right then, he was her favourite version of Ron Weasley: that lovely, dishevelled ginger hair, that easy smile, and best of all, those twin orbs of cerulean splendour beaming down at her, glowing like they were backlit. He was warmth, comfort, and an unexpected jolt to the heart. She wanted (and how she wanted) to curl up by his side, breathe in the smell of his skin, have him turn around and cup her face, kiss her forehead, kiss her cheeks, kiss her...

Ahem.
They both looked away from each other awkwardly.

“So, um... Lavender must come to see you often enough?”
Ron grimaced; “I donno. I mean, sure, she must... but I think I was asleep and missed her.”
She looked at him sceptically, “Every time?”
“Er, yeah.”
“Right. Well, I guess I’ll go now...” she burbled, standing up slowly.
“Hermione, wait!” His hand shot out and grabbed hold of her wrist, pulling her down unceremoniously.
“Ow, Ron!”
“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” he rushed out, “You, erm... alright?”
“Yes,” she said, more curiously than curtly, “What’s the matter?”
“Listen,” he started, “I wanted to say...” he puckered his brow earnestly, “...er, these past few months have been total bullocks. I’ve umm missed you.”
Not quite an apology, but he was making those solemn, penitent eyes at her, and seriously... was she still solid?
“I’ve missed you too, Ron.”
He smiled, pleased and relieved. Did he know he was still holding on to her wrist? With the way his thumb was slowly tracing her veins, he probably did. And he definitely knew exactly what he was doing to her pulse.
“One more thing...” he murmured, “This thing with you and Nott...”
“What about it?” she asked guardedly.
“Are you... I mean, are he and you... together?”
“He’s my friend. A very good friend, but that’s all.”
“How the hell did this happen, Hermione?” His ears were turning redder by the second – a sure indication of his temper.
Hermione bristled. “It doesn’t matter how it happened. He’s my friend, and he’s a wonderful person; that’s all you need to know.”
“Look, Harry and Ginny told me he’s uh... okay, and that I shouldn’t get up in your face about it. Ginny threatened me something awful over the hols,” he laughed humourlessly, “I just want to understand...”
She sighed. “He needed to distance himself from his family and its associations, so he sought me out, because he knew I’d listen. And I did listen, and... I’ve gotten to know him really well, Ron. He’s important to me. Just like you’re important to me.”
Ron didn’t seem to appreciate the parallel at all. He scowled, and took a moment to collect himself.

“He’s still friends with Malfoy.”
“Yes.”
“And Malfoy’s fine with him being your friend?”
“Yes.”
“You’re fine with Nott being friends with a tosser who thinks you’re scum?”
“Yes. Just like he's fine with me being friends with people who think he’s scum.”
“Are you friends with Malf –”
“Absolutely not.”
“Alright.”
“Alright...?”
“Yeah. I mean, he was never as bad as Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle and the rest of that lot. And Harry’s vouched for him.”

Of course. The Potter Certificate of Approval was all Ron ever needed. Nonetheless, she pushed down her resentment and said, “Thank you.”
He smiled again and squeezed her wrist affectionately. “Maybe he’ll give out the Slytherin team’s secrets. Make it easier for us to hammer them in the next match.”

She sat with him for another hour, until Madam Pomfrey came around to send her away her. She floated out the door.

The Gryffindor quidditch team wore a fascinating variety of aggrieved looks on their faces when they joined the rest of their house at dinner. All except Cormac McLaggen, that is. He loomed over Harry as he trailed behind him, talking his ear off.

“...thing is, Potter, you’re not using your beaters to their full potential. Now if I was captain, I’d have ‘em both circle the outer –”

“You’re not the bloody captain,” Harry snapped, plonking down opposite Hermione, “Now let me eat in peace.”
McLaggen didn’t bite back – he was too busy leering at Hermione. “Watcha, Granger,” he said slickly, sliding onto the bench next to Harry, who looked livid, “Long time no see.”
“Yes, well, looks like my luck’s run out.” She glowered fiercely at him, a look which usually left her pupils quaking in their boots. However, it appeared that McLaggen was too stupid to comprehend its dangers.
“Aw, you don’t mean that, doll.”
Dean, Ginny, Demelza and Neville were chortling into their plates. Hermione looked down at hers – it was still partially piled up with food. But nothing – not even the prospect of pudding – was worth spending another second in the company of that unrepentant letch. She rose smoothly and
walked towards the doors leading out of the Great Hall. McLaggen garbled a few words around a mouth full of food, she flipped him a dismissive V-sign, and Ginny put down her fork and applauded.

Nobody witnessed the pièce de résistance, though. She’d wandlessly, non-verbally tied his shoelaces together.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way — in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Hermione had honestly lost count of the number of times she’d reread the brilliant first chapter of A Tale of Two Cities. But this time, it pulled at some deeply visceral part of her, and her reaction went beyond a profound appreciation of the artful spin of words — it was her time, age, epoch, and season at play here. Dickens was using these words to set the tone for the rest of his novel - to lay an ominous shadow across his reader’s consciousness… well, she felt that dread towards her here and now. He’d unwittingly stomped all over her grave.

The time was to come, when that wine too would be spilled on the street-stones, and when the stain of it would be red upon many there.

Hermione shuddered, burrowing deeper under her quilt.

“Hermione. Hermione!”
Someone outside her bed-iverse was calling for her, and she chose to take the noble path of feigning sleep.
“Hermione!”
Her curtains were brutally, callously pulled apart, and a breathless Parvati stared down at her recumbent form. An involuntary spasm shook her at the sight... they were identical twins after all. That guilt she’d been carrying around all day intensified. She promptly sat up; “What is it?” Parvati looked acutely unnerved. “You’re pretty good friends with my sister, aren’t you?” she asked urgently.
“Er...”
“Did she talk to you about Anthony Goldstein?” Parvati was too agitated to bother waiting for replies to any of her questions, “Did she mention anything about fancying him? Do you think it’s been going on for longer than she’s letting on? Did she —”
“Wait, wait, wait,” Hermione cut in, “What on earth are you talking about?”
“Padma is apparently going out with Anthony Goldstein! Did you know? I mean, she did tell me that he was, like, constantly pestering her, but I was so sure she wasn’t interested... and now Romilda just told me that Aisha just told her that she heard Mandy telling Terry that they’re together. And she asked him out! I can’t believe this!” she stomped her foot on the ground like a toddler throwing a snit. Hermione was staggered. Well... that was one way to cope, she supposed. It was much like the advice she’d given Ginny over a year ago...
“Well, um... good for her, I guess...”
“Good for her?!” Parvati choked, “No, this is not good. My own sister, and she didn’t think to tell
me that she’s planning to get herself a boyfriend. Oh Merlin! She has a boyfriend. My prudish,
swotty sister has a boyfriend, and... and... I’m just going to be alone forever!”

She was on the brink of an utterly fatuous meltdown, and Hermione was too bleeding tired to deal
with anything of that sort.
“Good grief, Parvati. Get a grip. And look at yourself, you can easily get yourself a boyfriend if
you’re gagg-ahem-so keen on it. I know for a fact that Seamus is –”
“Don’t make me cry, Hermione. Seamus? Are you serious?! He might end up making me explode
if I get him too excited, like... you know...”

Hermione couldn’t help it. She pictured the scene: Parvati and Seamus are wrapped up in an
embrace, snogging heavily. He has her against a wall, and she has her hands in his hair, and it’s
getting more and more heated... suddenly... ka-boom!... and there’s empty space where Parvati’s
head once was. Seamus is covered in bits of brain and skull and blood. He blinks, looking stunned.
“Cor...” he says.

The image was enough to break her overwrought composure – Hermione threw back her head and
laughed till she felt tears leaking out of her eyes. Sometime in the middle of her fit, Parvati had
closed her curtains violently (and with a muted shriek), and marched away while ranting irritably
and incomprehensibly.
Eventually, her laughter mellowed into soft chuckles... and then died down entirely. What followed
was quiet, and not just in her surroundings; her mind had mellowed. She welcomed the lull with
tremendous gratitude. As she slowly succumbed to sleep, she thought back to the summer she’d
spent in the south of France with her parents, when she was thirteen. She saw her mum and dad
sitting on a blanket under the sun, against a backdrop of the rugged mountains of Provence that
Cezanne had immortalised. They were laughing at nothing in particular while feasting on cheese
and wine, and the last thought Hermione had was... it was the best of times.
Hermione walked slowly out of the hospital wing after another successful one-on-one stint with Ron. She had given him a belated birthday present – a dragon skin wallet that she had imbued with anti-theft wards and a charm that would have it leap back into his pocket should he ever accidentally drop it.

“Cool!” he had exclaimed with a pleased grin, and then they’d passed the time agreeably, engaging in small talk and pleasantries, with Ron giving her his own humorous account of Christmas at the Borrow, followed by a short (and entirely useless) discussion on what horcruxes could be.

And yet... Hermione wasn’t feeling the giddy euphoria she expected to. There was a bothersome niggle sense of dissatisfaction swirling in her gut, and she frowned at herself in perturbation.

Much to her frustration, her next lesson was over an hour away – there was nothing to distract her thoughts from travelling down a path she really preferred they stay away from.

Her mind was a bustling, hyperactive, never-stagnant bundle of neuronal confetti, constantly engaged in processing, planning, imagining, contextualising, reasoning... Ron’s simplicity was exactly the respite she ought to crave. He was uncomplicated. Comfortable.

...Stultifying.

Hermione sighed uneasily. He didn’t actually give her any respite, did he? Rather, he frequently gave her the additional baggage of emotional and psychological trauma, and that... well, she really had no damn time for that. How many people had tried to tell this to her – and how many times?

Why did she still... STILL... it made no sense...

‘Love int s’posed ta make sense, ya meff!’ She heard her obnoxious cousin Charlotte’s voice clear as day in her head.

Oh, why was she letting herself get worked up when they had only just re-established their camaraderie? It was fine. Ron still had a girlfriend, anyway. ...And there it was: that painful twist in her stomach.

It was official: She was a complete basket case. She needed an intervention, extensive therapy, and a short spell in a padded cell.

Outside, the turbulent conditions had calmed somewhat, with the sun sporadically and arbitrarily emerging from behind thick clouds. It was like the weather gods had grudgingly decided to take pity on their mortal playthings – ‘Peace, wee worms, there is hope still! Perhaps you truly shall see spring again someday.’

Hermione found herself approaching the quidditch stands, dimly remembering Ginny telling her that the Gryffindor team had practice scheduled sometime that afternoon. Perhaps she could watch them; maybe practice a few harmless non-verbal spells on McLaggen.........

......With the panicked haste of a small animal sensing a predator, she cast a disillusionment charm on herself and then ducked behind a post for good measure. In the near distance, two brooms touched onto the ground, and two figures gracefully leapt off them.

Hermione peered from behind the post, and watched Theo pull the bluegreen scarf she had so painstakingly woven out of his pocket and wrap it around his neck, while he grinned at Malfoy. They walked across the pitch in her general direction, both with windswept hair, shining eyes, and flushed faces.

Theo said something to Malfoy that caused the latter to toss his head back and laugh, his hair glinting as the sun made one of its random appearances. Then Malfoy said something back, which had Theo laughing as well. They were both chuckling and walking, as if they were just two regular young wizards in high spirits after an invigorating spin on their brooms.
Clinging tightly onto the post as they walked by her, Hermione could hear Theo talking: “...believe he actually thought it was a sound investment! For fuck’s sake, what kind of a sodding pillock would think that was a good idea? I mean, sure, pepper imps are plenty popular, but there isn’t a chance of them burning through the roof of your mouth, no matter how many you eat. And why on earth would –”

“Do you even realise you’re talking, Theo?” Malfoy asked with a smirk, “I swear you’d just go on nattering for-fucking-ever, if there was no one to stop you...”

And then they had gone past her.

Hermione stared at the back of their heads – caramel and spun gold – with profound discomfiture. This was the person Theo was so desperate to protect: the person who made him laugh, who laughed with him – his friend; his “brother”. This person was a complete stranger to her.

She had been, and always would be, an active opponent of the ‘everything is black or white’ worldview. Objective, she knew it wasn’t possible for Malfoy to be nothing beyond the snarling, hateful, dimensionless bigot she knew him to be. It was why, in spite of everything, she hadn’t stopped giving Theo books for him. The fact that there was some secret, miniscule part of him that was susceptible to the power of good literature gave her long-suffering idealism something to chew on.

Even so, the scene she had just witnessed gave her pause. It didn’t absolve Malfoy of anything, of course... but it worked to further strengthen her compassion for Theo. He was stuck in such a horrible, impossible position.

They were all stuck in such horrible, impossible positions.

She pictured grossly twisted, paralysed bodies. Frozen screaming faces. Pain and horror. A horse in agony... the head of a bull... Picasso’s Guernica.

Hermione was pulled away from her morbid musings with the arrival of the Gryffindor quidditch team. They appeared to be completely engrossed in strategising, not noticing her at all.

“Hi, Harry,” she said loudly.

Harry jumped about a foot in the air, and then spun around in a wild circle. “Whozere?!”

The rest of the team had similarly spooked expressions as they turned this way and that. Oh right. She was still disillusioned.

She undid the charm with a sheepishly mumbled word of apology. Harry gawped for a couple of strained seconds, before marching right up to her and angrily demanding, “Why are you constantly trying to give me a heart attack? Don’t you think there are enough people trying to kill me already?”

“I said I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I forgot I had disillusioned myself.”

Ginny popped out from behind Harry and asked, “Why the hell were you standing out here all by yourself and invisible at one-thirty in the afternoon?”

“Er... I was... thinking...” Hermione replied idiotically.

Harry and Ginny stared at her like that one sentence had robbed them of all their faith in her sanity forever.

“Anyway,” she said awkwardly, “I should get going. I have to –”

“Well, well. Look who it is! Come to watch me play, doll?” McLaggen strutted over to her side, flashing a disgusting half-grin.

“No,” she asserted coldly, and left.

Hermione was done with interacting with humans for the day. Quite thoroughly done. What she needed now was a deliciously complicated book, and six to eight hours of complete solitude. She checked her watch – thirty-five minutes till her Ancient Runes lesson. Best make the most of it.
As the newest couple in the castle, Padma and Anthony were causing quite a stir. Infinitely more dignified than Ron and Lavender had ever been, they cut through crowded corridors holding hands and seeming perpetually immersed in some riveting discussion or the other. They were both quite tall, and with her long dark hair and his burly build, they made a striking pair.

As it happened one evening, Hermione was climbing down the same flight of stairs that they were climbing up, and since preoccupation was a common affliction for all three of them, they only ended up locked in a silent and startled staring match around the middle of the staircase. Rather, it was Anthony who was silent, Hermione startled, and Padma was staring.

Five, six, seven, seconds passed.

Hermione offered them both a sudden, snappy nod each, then recommenced her decent. She didn’t look back, they didn’t say a word, and later, at dinner, she ate two large slices of chocolate tart.

Since only twelve sixth year students had opted to take Arithmancy that year, all four houses sat for lessons together.

It was eleven-thirty at night, and those twelve students gathered in the astronomy tower where Professor Vector waited for them with four glorious brass telescopes. She quickly divided them into groups of three, and launched what was undoubtedly one of Hermione’s favourite lessons of all time. Combining the laws of trigonometry with Hellenistic astrology was exhilarating – she sat with a piece of parchment doing rapid calculations, while Sue Li from Ravenclaw peered through a telescope, and Roger Malone from Hufflepuff neatly tabulated the results. They were a proficient team, and they had the entire Monomoiria charted within an hour.

Professor Vector checked their work and said, “Very well,” (which coming from her was praise beyond comprehension,) “By the next lesson, I expect ten predictions derived from these calculations. And read pages 45-78 from volume five of Valens’ Anthology.”

Once, in a transfiguration lesson years and years ago, Professor McGonagall had told her class to read the first ten pages of Early Transfiguational Arts. Eleven year old Hermione had turned to her neighbours and said, “Of course, I’ll be reading the entire book....” 

Seventeen year old Hermione nodded and said, “Yes, professor,” while thinking, of course, I’ll be reading the entire book.

Oh, how age mellows a girl down.

Professor Vector moved onto the next group. When Sue turned to Roger and asked him if he was excited about his house’s match against Gryffindor the next day, Hermione immediately tuned them out. She gently massaged her cramped fingers and walked over to the opposite side of the tower, where she leaned against the rampart and observed the rest of her classmates. Anthony and Padma had teamed up with Terry Boot. Next to them, Michael Corner, Wayne Hopkins, and Sally Smith were arguing heatedly over their calculations. The final group consisted of Tracey Davis, Lisa Turpin, and Draco Malfoy, and they seemed to have completed the assignment as well.

Lisa and Tracey, with their shoulders hunched against the wind, were pleasantly chitchatting. Malfoy’s posture couldn’t be more different – straight and impeccable in that ‘would you just look at how well-bred I am’ regal way, he stood apart at a distance; aloof. He wasn’t even wearing a cloak, as though the bitter chill wasn’t affecting him in the slightest. With his stark white shirt and his pale hair, he shone like a beacon against the dark sky, as he gazed out into the endless night. Clearly, no one had ever warned him about the dangers of getting into a staring match with the abyss.

“Hi.” Terry Boot had abandoned his partners and come to stand next to her. “Mind if I join you? I’m a bit sick of being the third wheel over there,” he gestured towards Padma and Anthony with a
Hermione forced out a laugh, “I hardly think they’d do anything to make you uncomfortable.”
“No, but they’re definitely giving out some serious please-leave-us-alone vibes. Makes a bloke feel really unwanted, you know?”
Her laughter was more genuine this time.
“So,” he continued, “Good lesson, eh?”
“Oh yes,” she replied enthusiastically, “Arithmancy keeps getting more and more fascinating.”
He grinned, running a hand through his hair, “It does. And you should know I’ve upped the ante. You might not have as easy a time topping this term. I reckon you’ll need to add a good three minutes to your daily study schedule to beat me.”
“Oh please,” she chided, simultaneously flattered and flustered. She’d only ever spoken to Terry a small handful of times... he always found a way to compliment her every time. She really wished she knew what to do with compliments.
“It’s true. You know it is. It’s bloody aggravating, alright? There are no less than six ‘I hate Hermione Granger’ clubs in Ravenclaw. They’ve even attached your picture on the dart board in our common room.”
“Oh really? How perfectly lovely. Um... you have a dartboard in your common room?”
“Sure. Everybody needs a good way to unwind. And we enjoy flinging small, pointy objects at your face. What do you Gryffindors do?”
Hermione bit her lip to stop herself from doing something atrocious, like giggling. “We have a gramophone, and tend to spontaneously break into dance.”
He laughed, and the spots of light from nearby candles danced charmingly in his hazel eyes. “You dance? I mean, do you dance?” He waited for her to nod in confirmation, “Well. Mark this moment as the only time I’ve ever wished I was in Gryffindor.”
She really hoped the sound she made was more of a chuckle than a giggle.

Things were so strange this year.
As she made her way back to the Gryffindor tower, Hermione pondered over the many ways in which her world had suddenly opened up. She couldn’t understand how she had gone from being lonely and unapproachable to... this... to... whoever she was now. Yes, whoever, whatever; she wasn’t going to spiral into an existential crisis over it. She only had a small window of time to just be, before grave and serious eventualities became her life.
For now, she would embrace this barmy new reality. The next time Terry came to talk to her, she might even flirt back.

“...oh my, Smith has lost the Quaffle again. That’s the eighth time so far. He isn’t a very good player, is he? I think he’s suffering from a terrible fit of Loser’s Lurgy... he does look quite sickly...”
Hermione guffawed and cheered along with the rest of her house while Zacharias Smith bared his teeth at Luna. Whoever had picked her to commentate was a genius. Hermione had never enjoyed a quidditch match more.

“...Cadwallader is flying towards the Gryffindor goal posts again... but look at that cloud behind him! Looks rather like a tap-dancing niffler...”
“She’s brilliant,” Neville yelled over the roaring crowd. Hermione beamed at him in agreement. She really wanted to see Theo at that moment. His grin was probably putting the Cheshire cat to shame.

“...Smith’s new hairstyle makes him look rather like a plimpy...”

Delightful commentary aside, there was little else good about the game. McLaggen was proving to be – predictably – an unmitigated disaster. He was everywhere except where he should have been. Hermione could tell, despite the vast distance between them, that Harry was absolutely fuming. Ginny, Demelza, and Dean were trying their best, but it was forty minutes into the game and the score was a dismal –

“Seventy-forty to Hufflepuff!” Professor McGonagall shouted into Luna’s megaphone. “Is it, already?” Luna wondered with mild surprise, “Oh, look! The Gryffindor Keeper’s got hold of one of the Beater’s bats.”

And indeed, McLaggen the lug had taken custody of Peakes’ bat, and was brandishing it about like a deranged showman. Harry was zooming towards him, yelling bloody murder... just as McLaggen swung the bat...

Hermione’s shriek of horror was drowned out by the various loud reactions emitted by the other spectators. The bludger had whizzed like a rocket and hit Harry straight on the head. The moment of impact was sickening; and then Harry fell off his broom. Hermione was on her feet in an instant, fumbling for her wand.

Luckily, Coote and Peakes caught him before he hit the ground. He hung limply in their arms as they floated him down and laid him on the ground. A stretcher was summoned, and Harry was promptly levitated to the hospital wing.

Bile sat suspended in Hermione’s throat. Seeing Harry pale and unconscious felt far too much like a premonition. For neither can live while the other survives. Hermione sat back down slowly, trembling, and the racket and clamour around her dimmed to a dull and endless whistle.

“Hermione? Hermione, come on... game’s over.”

She let Neville lead her through the swarm. Apparently, the Hufflepuff seeker had caught the snitch, and the whole lot of them was celebrating like it had been a fair win.

They met Ginny just outside the changing rooms, and she looked enormously furious. “Let’s go see Harry,” she barked, dragging Hermione along by the wrist. Neville got left behind somewhere among the sea of bodies.

“Er, Ginny... slow down?” Hermione broached tentatively.

“Sorry,” she grumbled.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m not okay! We lost the match. Harry let himself get hit like a prat. McLaggen knocked a bludger at him like a prat. And Dean thought the whole thing was funny, the bloody, bloody prat.”

Hermione held her tongue the rest of the way.

Harry was still unconscious when they reached him, and Ron greeted them with a cheery nod, all the while gorging on sweets.

“How’d it happen?” he enquired with a full mouth. Hermione felt her lip curl, but she dutifully retold the events of the past hour.

“So McLaggen really fucked it up...” Ron was tickled.

“Just hurry up and get out of here so that we can get rid of him,” Ginny groused, “Coote and Peakes tore him to shreds, but it didn’t affect him at all. Prat. Ugh. I just knew today was going to be an utter crock of shit. First McLaggen, then all this bloody wind, Harry barely making the game
on time, and then –"
"Wait," Ron barged in, "He barely made it? How come? He left here early enough."
"He was rambling on about Malfoy and a couple of girls... I’m not sure, I wasn’t really listening...”

Since Harry was showing no indication of waking up any time soon, and Ginny began complaining about crippling hunger, the two girls left for the Gryffindor common room, where post-match snacks would indubitably have been laid out.

They walked in silence, lost in their own thoughts till Ginny suddenly spoke up: “Do you think he fancies Malfoy?”
“Huh?”
“Harry, I mean. Do you think he fancies Malfoy?”
“What? ...I’m sorry... You’re joking, aren’t you...? What?”
“He’s so obsessed with him! I’ve never seen him like that about anyone else.”
“Ginny! He’s absolutely convinced that Malfoy is up to no good, that’s all! Not all obsessions are a manifestation of secret romantic feelings!”
“I know that,” said Ginny, with a pinched expression on her face, “It could simply be burning, burgeoning lust. And Malfoy seems pretty obsessed with Harry too...”
“Oh god. That is beyond twisted. They genuinely loathe each other. You honestly think it’s just a front and that they’re secretly having a roaring affair right in front of our noses?!”
Ginny shrugged sullenly, “Or it’s just denial.”
“Fuck. You’re batty. And you clearly have a seriously disturbed imagination. Honestly, the whole acrimony-masking-blazing-desire-leading-to-torrid-hate-sex is a clumsy and ignorant cliché,”
Hermione rolled her eyes exasperatedly, “On another note, have you seen the way Harry looks at you?”
She got another shrug in response. Hermione shook her head in disbelief, wondering about the harmful psycho-somatic effects of an overdose of absurdity.

Thing was, while Hermione firmly stood by her disdain for Trelawney’s fondness for envisaging doom, she couldn’t help her own staunch acceptance of Sod’s Law. Of course, Theo would be waiting for her on the third floor. They had planned to meet after the match, after all. Harry’s ordeal had made her forget about her Ancient Runes homework. God, that boy was going to ruin her.
“Hermione! Oi. Buddy!” Theo stopped short when he noticed the redhead beside her.
“Buddy?!” Ginny snorted. Hermione flushed.
“Weren’t we supposed to go to the library about now?” Theo asked Hermione with a frown.
“Yes, er, sorry... slipped my mind...”
“It’s okay, Hermione,” Ginny chirped, suddenly in high spirits, “You go on. I’ll just grab some food and join you both in a bit.”
Hermione and Theo gaped at her.
“What?” she asked innocently, “I think it’s time him and I got to know each other. We’re both your buddies, after all.”
Yes, too much absurdity was fatal. Hermione was sure of it. She was now a washed out ghost watching Ginny’s hair dance as she bounded away from them. She would presently go join Myrtle in her bathroom and pass the rest of her days wailing and moaning.

“Well. This ought to be interesting,” Theo quipped.
He spent the journey to the library raving about Luna’s dazzling commentating skills. Hermione nodded absently, not paying much attention. Her stomach was full of lead-coated knots, and it wasn’t because she was worried that Theo and Ginny wouldn’t get along – he was eminently likable, and she was buckets of fun. In fact, Hermione was sure that they’d get along fantastically... and that thought was what made her feel vaguely sick. The bottom line was this: she was not ready to share Theo. His relationships with Luna and Malfoy didn’t bother her; those were completely
separate dynamics at play. But Ginny could – and would – become his friend. She was exciting, much more so than Hermione, and what if... if Theo ended up preferring her company... Her insecurity was beastly and insuppressible. She had only just found her perfect friend. She was not not not ready to share him.
Nineteen

Disappointment plus self-pity plus fury was a frightfully distressing combination for one young witch to deal with.

It began with yet another abortive Apparition lesson. Hermione was simply not accustomed to failing; yet there she was, crashing over and over and over again. Even the partonus charm had conceded to her skill and resolve after no more than six tries.

And so, she stomped out of the Great Hall in a right temper, carrying with her the fourth ‘D’ (of which condescending old Twycross had spoken nothing about) – disappointment. Crushing, maddening disappointment.

She sat stewing by the lake, running her fingers through the luxuriant grass on the shore. Since it was a Saturday and the weather was almost pleasant, there were a fair number of students out and about. A few meters away, a group of seventh years – two boys, three girls – had bravely waded into the unquestionably cold water, and were splashing about like imbecilic toddlers. Hermione was quite sure that the primary motive behind that exercise was getting the girls’ shirts wet. A few minutes later, she spotted Theo and Ginny strolling along the edge of the lake and towards her. Together.

Her throat developed a dense, hard, pumpkin-sized lump.

Ginny was grinning in that saucy, teasing way of hers, and Theo was looking down at her, amused.

“Merlin, Herms,” Ginny exclaimed, settling down next to her, “We’ve been looking for you for ages!”

Ages, Hermione thought uncomfortably. Something close to panic was spinning within her.

“Hold on. Herms?!” Theo said with a look of wicked delight, “Herms? You let her call you Herms?”

“She does what she wants,” Hermione mumbled. They both ignored her.

“Fuck off,” Ginny said good naturedly, “You call her buddy...”

“And that was how self-pity came into the mix.

The night after they’d “studied” together in the library, Hermione couldn’t sleep. Ginny had come in fully determined to be Friendly (yes, with a capital F), and so she had been. Theo evidently suffered from obsessive compulsive charisma; Hermione watched with dismayed horror as he brought out the same flirtatious, playful side of him that he had used to charm her so many months ago.

Just like that evening, Hermione once again felt an overwhelming urge to cry.

Theo and Ginny were tossing wisecracks from one to the other like they were caught in an extremely intense tennis rally, and it was utterly wretched, the way she just wasn’t able to bring herself to break in and assert her existence.

Why had they sought her out in the first place? Clearly, she wasn’t needed here at all.

And then came fury, bringing with it an impulsive undercurrent of fuck it, which coerced Hermione into performing a small act of self-sabotage. She stood up and walked away.

“Wha – hey, where are you going?”
She glanced over her shoulder at Theo as he sat up from his semi-recumbent lounging. “I just remembered I have some Arithmancy homework left to do. I’ll see you later,” she said, her voice high-pitched and feverish. She’d only taken a few more steps before she felt his hand on her arm, and he turned her around to face him again.

“Are you okay, Hermione?” he peered at her with concern.

“Yes,” she replied, and when she saw he looked unconvinced, she added, “Apparition is getting on my nerves, I suppose.” He didn’t withdraw his hand, nor his frown.

Ginny, splayed out on the grass, laughed. “You have no idea how heartening it is for us ordinary people when you fail at something.”

Hermione smiled tightly. In that moment, she fully felt the collective weight of disappointment, self-pity, and fury. *Turn them out, knaves all three.*

She pulled away smoothly from Theo’s grip, tilted her head in farewell, and walked away as fast as she could without actually breaking into a run. She didn’t once look back, terrified of what the sight of the two of them might do to her composure; those two jolly ordinary people lazing by the lake, probably laughing over how neurotic poor, smarty-pants Hermione was about her homework, and her lessons.

She came to an abrupt stop as she remembered having this exact thought, nearly word for word, over five years ago. Except then, it was regarding Harry and Ron after they’d just finished with their first lesson on the levitation charm...

“You’re saying it wrong. It’s Wing-GAR-diun Levi-O-sa, make the “gar” nice and long.”

She’d regressed so far that she had reclaimed the broken psyche of an eleven year old social outcast.

So, she had abandonment issues. Diddums. When she was five, her aunt and uncle had forgotten all about her in middle of the farmer’s market in Orton, and she had wandered lost and in tears for over an hour before they finally remembered her. Plump and sweet Ruby Groves had abandoned her on the playground when they were eight, after the other kids made fun of her for playing with ‘Bossy Beaver Granger’. Harry had abandoned her over a broom; Ron abandoned her like it was his favourite pastime... Padma, her first and only partner in intellectual pursuits abandoned her... Pete was twined around her naked body one night and suddenly leaving the next morning...

Theo had made her feel cherished, understood, and completely *not* alone for a long stretch... she supposed it was about time he moved on with his life.

Golly gosh, but she was being pathetic. *Stop it.* There really was Arithmancy work to get done. She sniffed. *Stop it.* She’d neglected practicing wandless transfiguration for a week. Her eyes were stinging. *Stop it.* Of course, she needed to read at least six more books on potionering – the margin between Harry’s grades her hers was getting to be cataclysmic. She needed to look up some more protective enchantments. Her lower lip trembled.

*Stop it stop it stop it.*

Hermione spent the whole day in the restricted section of the library, after which she felt she could confidently claim to be fully capable of writing a top-quality dissertation on the *protego* charm. A Saturday well spent, all in all, if you were gracious enough to strike the ten minutes she spent sniffling from the record.

On standing up, she found her legs to be stiff beyond reason – she very nearly toppled right back into the armchair she had spent... well, shit... eight hours nestled in. It was nine o’clock at night. She’d missed dinner, tea, and supper. The moment she stepped out of the library doors, she
rummaged around in her bag in a desperate frenzy until she found a slightly crushed granola bar. She practically inhaled it all in one go. She didn’t feel like she could muster the energy required to visit Harry and Ron in the hospital wing... or to do anything besides hiking up to the Gryffindor tower.

Sometime later, she was leaning over the sink before a bathroom mirror, lethargically plucking stray hairs from around her eyebrows. Once satisfied, she straightened her spine and stared blankly at her freshly groomed visage.

She looked so terribly tired. Hours of unremitted reading had caused the vessels under her eyes to swell up, and the eyes themselves looked flat, strained, and dull. Her skin was alarmingly pasty. She slapped both her cheeks repeatedly, and soon they were stained pink in the most unnatural way. She had her hair pulled up into a high bun which was nearly the same size as her head. It made her already slender neck look ridiculously twig-like. She followed the gently curving column down to where it met her shoulder – harshly cut by the prominent line of her clavicle – and then back up. Her gaze landed on the mole a few inches under her left ear. It was more like a glorified freckle, really; but it stood out explicitly against her current pallor, like a coffee grain on ivory. Hermione sighed and splashed cold water on her face until it was numb.

When she was finally curled up in bed, she wrote a letter to her parents. It was six pages long, and suffused with a tone of light frivolity and cheerfulness.

By the time she finished all her pending work on Sunday, the clock struck had noon, and Hermione felt like she’d lived through the day six times over. It was proving to be one of the longest weekends of her life.

She heroically kept her mind from lingering on her fervent yearning to spend time with Theo, and instead chose to loiter around the upper corridors, thinking about the dark and sinister premonitions she’d extracted from her Arithmantic calculations. Most of the sixth floor was deserted – until she found Dean standing before a portrait with a frown on his face. Hermione walked over and stood beside him.

The picture was of one Philippe d’Orleans, a late descendant of some French aristocratic (pureblood) line, and he was fast asleep, completely oblivious to his audience.

“Fucking hideous, innit?” Dean commented disdainfully.

“IMPUDENCE!” Monsieur d’Orleans howled, suddenly wide awake, “I wood ‘ave you locked in an iron maiden fool of Bubotuber pus for zis!”

“Not you, you toff,” Dean barked, and then turned to Hermione, ignoring the indignant sputtering that followed, “Look at the brushwork. It’s terrible.”

It truly was. The shabbily applied paint was made all too obvious by the poor choice of colour and clumsy composition. Dean ducked his head and peered at the artist’s signature.

“Some Collins bloke. Nineteen Twenty. The height of the modernist movement and this is what magical people were doing. Can you imagine what incredible pictures they could be making? Their paintings fucking move, and all they’re using it for is to immortalise stuffed up geezers like old Philippe here.”

“CONNARD! VA TE FAIRE ENCULET!”

“Well, art in the wizarding world is sub-par across the board,” Hermione paused to cast an efficient silencing spell on the raving Marquis, and then continued, “I mean, look at the photography, the novels, the poetry, the music....”
“Oh fuck, the music,” Dean groaned, “You right. It’s all rubbish.”

They left d’Orleans miming furiously and continued to examine the paintings lining the wall.

“Tsk. Awful. I’d call it derivative, but the so-called artist probably didn’t even know he’d inadvertently butchered Velasquez’s style.”

Dean laughed, “We need to bring about a revolution, comrade Granger. It’s on us.”

“It ought to be really bloody easy in such a boring and conservative cultural climate.”

Eventually, they ran out of wall, and standing at the end of the corridor, Dean asked, “Have you seen Ginny, by the way?”

“Er, no. I haven’t since yesterday morning.”

“You and I have that in common then,” he said, bitterly, “She’s refusing to talk to me because I laughed when precious Harry fell off his broom the other day...”

“That wasn’t funny,” Hermione snapped.

“I know it wasn’t. Everything was going wrong that day, damn it. Everything. Then Harry gets bludgered, and Luna’s carrying on in her way... I just... It was hysterical laughter, alright? I wasn’t enjoying myself. And Ginny just jumped down my throat.”

“Okay, I understand. But you know she’s a bit hot-headed –”

“A ‘bit’?! Ha!”

“– and she’s sensitive about quiddi –”

“About Harry.”

Hermione didn’t know what else to say; her own feelings of resentment were blocking her from formulating a proper defence for Ginny’s case.

“She’s going to have to do it,” he continued angrily, “break up with me, I mean. She can’t just ignore me and expect me to do it for her. Bitch can’t have it that easy.”

Hermione stared at her feet, biting down hard on her lip.

“Sorry,” he offered after a few seconds.

“It’s okay. You’re... upset...”

Dean just laughed humourlessly.

She looked at her watch, and good grief, it was only twelve thirty.

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Things looked better on Monday. Hermione sat next to Harry, nibbling on scrambled eggs and toast while he absentmindedly sipped his pumpkin juice, probably preoccupied with thoughts about Ginny and Dean’s row, and his upcoming lesson with Dumbledore.

Ron was sitting with Lavender, both stonily ignoring each other. Hermione wasn’t feeling petty enough to gloat... even to herself.

 Barely had she set foot out of the Great Hall when she stood face to face (well, face to chest) with Theo. He raised an eyebrow at her startled expression and asked, “Off to class then?”

There was a subtle accusatory tinge to his enquiry, to his stance, to the very air surrounding him.

“Yes. Transfiguration.”

“Okay. I’ll walk you to it.”

“No!” she blurted, “You needn’t bother. I just...” she looked to her left, and to her right, and then called out “Harry!” and scampered away without another word of explanation.

She felt terrible and nauseous, wishing she hadn’t eaten anything just moments before. Still, there was a sense of calm that came with the knowledge that she was pulling away before he finally decided to.
“...when we came out of the memory, Dumbledore told me that Hepzibah Smith was found dead two days later, and her House-Elf confessed to accidentally poisoning her cocoa. Slytherin’s locket and Hufflepuff’s cup were gone. And the one everybody knew as Tom Riddle seemed to fall off the face of the earth.”

“Blimey,” Ron breathed.

“He framed the House-Elf?” Hermione demanded, shrilly.

Harry nodded, gravely and knowingly, “All worth it in his opinion. The only thing he cared about was getting his hands on those treasures. The next memory was Dumbledore’s, ten years later. Riddle came into his office and asked for a position on the Hogwarts staff.”

“He what?” Ron looked stunned. Hermione was still fuming over the fate of Hepzibah’s poor House-Elf.

“As the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Dumbledore turned him down, of course, and he was none too happy about it. By that time he’d established himself as the notorious Lord Voldemort, and had started calling his followers Death Eaters.”

“Godric’s gonads. Why was he so keen on teaching here?” Ron asked.

“Dunno. Dumbledore says it’ll all make sense once I’ve got that memory from Slughorn. Fuck. I really wish I knew how.”

“You’re going to have to be cunning and underhand about it, Harry. You know how starry-eyed he gets around you,” Hermione said, “You’ll need to butter him up just right...”

“I tried that, Hermione,” Harry whinged despondently, “He shoved me out of his office.”

Three pairs of eyes – blue, green, and brown – stared pensively at the Gryffindor hearth. Reflected firelight took on a different hue in each of their irises.

Hermione threw herself into assignments, work, and research with doubly redoubled gusto, which was more than a little extreme, even by her standards. When she wasn’t in class, she lived in the restricted section of the library.

Lavender scowled at her every time she saw her. Ron was perpetually agitated; Harry preoccupied. Parvati kept trying to talk to her about Padma, Dean kept trying to talk to her about Ginny. The only way to save herself from the talons of a menacing meltdown was to hide under a pile of tomes.

By mid-week, she looked like a forgotten member of the Addams family. She let her hair spill down her shoulders and back, silently willing the curls and spirals to be as outrageous as possible. Might as well go all out. ‘Electrocuted Morticia’ was her new aesthetic.

She walked to the greenhouses with Neville, unreservedly convinced that he was the only sane one among her group of peers. He was reading out a passage about the most effective methods of harvesting goosegrass from the latest addition of *The New Journal of Herbology* while Hermione listened. She remembered when his voice had squeaked and quivered continuously, when he had been the same height as her, when he meekly shuffled up to her and asked if she had seen his toad...

Feeling a surge of fondness towards him, Hermione smiled and asked, “Would you mind if I read your Herbology essays from now on? I’m sure they’ll be immensely insightful.”

Neville flushed with pleasure and agreed at once.
Theo sat within the range of her peripheral vision, and spent the entire potion’s lesson assiduously glowering at her. Hermione shook her hair down to hide him from view, but it didn’t help at all. She could feel his icy gaze.

Oh, hell. Cutting up chomping cabbages was hard enough without being completely distracted. Gingerly, she stole a glance in his direction... his mouth tightened, but the hard intransigence of his glare remained the same.

“Aaaaah!” Ernie’s unexpected shout commandeered everybody’s attention. He was clutching at his bleeding hand, and gnashing his teeth.... At her?
It took a perplexed Hermione a few moments to realise that her overzealous cabbage had taken advantage of her inattentiveness, clamped down on her knife and flung it at the unsuspecting Hufflepuff.

“Shit! I’m so sorry Ernie!” she wrung her hands tensely.
“Oho! What’s this commotion?” Slughorn waddled over, and seemed to find the entire situation rather humorous. He sent Ernie off to Madam Pomfrey, and laid a reassuring hand on Hermione’s shoulder, “Harmless accident, Ms. Granger. Happens to the best of us.”

She held down the demonic homicidal vegetable and hacked it into shreds.
It was only after she had put all the required ingredients into her cauldron and set it to simmer, that she risked another quick look at Theo. He shook his head hostilely.
The seat next to him where Malfoy usually sat was empty.

________________________________________________________________________

A tawny, speckled owl dropped a mint green envelope on Hermione’s lap, stole a scone off her plate, and flew away... all in a matter of seconds.

A broad grin broke across her face, and she fled from the crowded Great Hall, ignoring Harry’s “Who’s it from?” and Ron’s “Wheh oo tearin offoo?”
She raced through the castle until she found the perfect secluded nook with a lovely large window to settle by. And there, with a happy sigh, she opened up the long missive her parents had written to her.
They always wrote those letters together – two voices, one note – and when she read them she felt like she’d been transported back into their living room, seated on the settee, watching them as they talked to her and to each other.

... your father has decided to sew the most preposterously garish patches onto his jeans like some sort of delinquent teenager... ...old Mrs. Henley’s tabby somehow got trapped in our shed, and now she’s convinced we torture and kill cats in our spare time... ...your mother is baking again: SEND HELP.... ...Hermione, my brilliant girl, your thoughts about Kafka were so discerning.... ...Would you believe it, apparently Richey’s been spotted in Goa...
...We miss you...
...We love you...
...Hope you’re as excited as we are about this summer and our holiday in Australia.

Hermione clutched the letter to her heart and basked in its sweetness. She carefully put it between the pages of a book in her bag; in the evening it would join the thick bundle she kept in the bottom of her trunk.
She didn’t think she’d be going to Australia any time soon; not with the way everything seemed to be rapidly coming to a head.
She stood up slowly and looked out the window, detesting the way her joy upon reading her parents’ words was going up in smoke, leaving behind the ashy residue of despair.

There were two figures leisurely circuiting the grounds a few meters away from the Whomping Willow. Even though they were at a considerable distance, Hermione could tell that one had long red hair, and the other was wearing a blue and green scarf around his neck. The hair and the scarf were both flapping in the wind like banners.

Harry, Ron, and Seamus were talking and Hermione paid them no heed. She was a girl possessed: steadfast and resolute. She entered the Great Hall with just one thing on her mind – she would not, could not, let a silly wooden ring and a vaporous ministry lackey defeat her.

The brightest fucking witch of her age closed her eyes when Twycross began his countdown. She pictured the hoop, the whole hoop and nothing but the hoop (I swear before almighty Merlin)... “...3!”
She spun. Every molecule of air around her hardened like concrete and slammed into her with the force of a mallet, squeezing, constricting all her bones and organs tightly. She opened her eyes with a gasp, and she found herself standing squarely inside her hoop.

“Well done, Ms. Er...”
“Granger,” Professor McGonagall supplied with a glint of pride in her eyes.
“Yes,” Twycross droned, “Ms. Granger. Why don’t we see if you can manage that twice in a row...?”

She absolutely could, and did.
“Bugger!” Ron exclaimed in panic, his eyes fixed on a sign on the Gryffindor notice board. He looked green enough for Hermione to feel legitimately scared that the Sunday roast he had consumed not too long ago was going to make an ugly reappearance.

It was an announcement regarding the date of their Apparition test - the twenty-first of April (for those who would be seventeen years of age on or before the date).

“Bugger, bugger, buggering shite. I’m going to fail. There’s no way I’m not going to. Fred and George will never let me live it down!”

Ron agonised over the test for over an hour that evening. The common room was filled with sixth year students doing the same while simultaneously scrambling to complete their Defence Against the Dark Arts essay on Dementors.

Hermione had gotten hers over and done with three days ago.

She looked across at Harry who was sitting on the other side of the table and frowning down at an open book. He had decided that the solution to his Slughorn-predicament lay with the self-styled “half-blood Prince”. Irritated, Hermione wrinkled her nose and said, “You won’t find anything in there.”

Harry huffed, and looked up to scowl at her. “Don’t start, Hermione. If it hadn’t been for the Prince, Ron wouldn’t be sitting here now.”

“He would if you’d just listened to Snape in our first year,” she snapped. She waited expectantly for him to say something more, but he simply turned back to his book, silently dismissing her. So she spoke again, more irate than before, “I’m telling you, the stupid Prince isn’t going to be able to help you with this, Harry! There’s only one way to force someone to do what you want, and that’s the Imperius Curse, which is illegal—”

“Yeah, I know that, thanks,” Harry cut in glibly, not bothering to look at her again, “That’s why I’m looking for something different. Dumbledore says Veritaserum won’t do it, but there might be something else, a potion or a spell…”

“You’re going about it the wrong way,” she stressed, “Only you can get the memory, Dumbledore says. That must mean you can persuade Slughorn where other people can’t. It’s not a question of slipping him a potion, anyone could do that—”

She was interrupted again, this time by Ron: “How d’you spell ‘belligerent’?” He was feverishly shaking his quill, looking riled up, “It can’t be B–U–M –”

“No, it isn’t,” Hermione assured him, plucking his parchment away from his hands and examining his ungainly scrawl, “And ‘augury’ doesn’t begin O– R–G either,” She stared at him with bewilderment. “What kind of quill are you using?”

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“It’s one of Fred and George’s Spell-Check ones … but I think the charm must be wearing off…” he answered sulkily.

“Yes, it must. Because we were asked how we’d deal with dementors, not ‘Dugbogs,’ and I don’t remember you changing your name to ‘Roonil Wazlib’ either.”

Ron gaped at his essay – stricken. “Ah no!” he moaned, “Don’t say I’ll have to write the whole
thing out again!"
Hermione sighed at the pathetically aggrieved look on his face, and pulled her wand out. “It’s okay,” she said consolingly, “we can fix it.” She began tapping at all the faulty words, correcting them one by one.
Ron watched her for a moment, and then leaned back in his chair, covering his eyes tiredly.
“I love you, Hermione.”

She nearly threw his banal, badly written essay right back at him. Anger, sharp and scorching, speared its way up her spine and flooded her face with heat. How dare he… how dare he say that to her, now, so flippantly, as a way to thank her for helping him with his bloody homework, when she had spent over a year aching to hear it from him. With great difficulty she took a breath to calm herself down, and said as disinterestedly as could manage, “Don’t let Lavender hear you saying that.”
He continued to rub his eyes, radiating fatigue. “I won’t. …Or maybe I will… then she’ll ditch me…”

Arsehole.

“Why don’t you ditch her if you want to finish it?” Harry asked, saving Ron from her reaction.
“You haven’t ever chucked anyone, have you? You and Cho just–”
“Sort of fell apart, yeah.”
“Wish that would happen with me and Lavender. But the more I hint I want to finish it, the tighter she holds on. It’s like going out with the giant squid.”

It was clearer than ever, at that moment, that Ron and Ginny were siblings. Apparently, they employed the same shitty tactics when it came to ending relationships.

“Fooking no good, sallow, greasy wankstain!”

They watched Seamus stomp off to bed furiously, all the while muttering colourful adjectives to describe Snape.

Hermione felt vaguely angry with everyone and everything. She supposed it was the amalgamation of stomach cramps, fatigue, and dire Theo-withdrawal symptoms. Thankfully, Harry and Ron had fallen silent after Seamus’ departure.

“There,” she said eventually, and gave Ron his essay back. They were the only people left in the common room by then.

“Thanks a million,” he said, “Can I borrow your quill for the conclusion?”
Of course he could. She handed him the feather wordlessly, and sat back and observed his silhouette. He was too tall for the low table he was working on, so he was hunched awkwardly over his parchment. His hair hung over his forehead, glowing in the light of the fire. Her resentment towards him dissipated with the suddenness of a flame being doused with a bucket of sand. He distractedly bit the corner of his lip and furrowed his brow as he worked, looking for all the world like a dedicated scholar...

...A small explosion like a gunshot rang out, and she shrieked. Ron jerked wildly, sousing his essay with ink.

“Kreacher!” Harry cried.

Hermione stared in astonishment at the sour looking House-Elf, decked out in rags. He bowed deeply, and rasped, “Master said he wanted regular reports on what the Malfoy boy is doing, so Kreacher has come to give–”

Crack.

This time it was Dobby. He glared at Kreacher with his enormous eyes.
“Dobby has been helping too, Harry Potter! And Kreacher ought to tell Dobby when he is coming to see Harry Potter so they can make their reports together!”
Unacceptably baffled, Hermione demanded an explanation. Harry dithered, shooting her an uncertain glance, “Well… they’ve been following Malfoy for me…”

“Night and day,” Kreacher added waspishly. “Dobby has not slept for a week, Harry Potter!” Dobby chirped deliriously. “You haven’t slept, Dobby?” Hermione raged, “But surely, Harry, you didn’t tell him not to…” “No! No, of course I didn’t! Dobby, you can sleep, all right?” (— well, how benevolent of you, Harry!—) “But has either of you found out anything?”

She participated sparingly in the discussion that followed. Finally, Malfoy’s mysterious disappearances had been accounted for. She almost found herself smacking a book on her head like Harry, because it was so obvious. The Room of Requirement. Of course.

The second after he dismissed the two House-Elves, Harry turned to Hermione and Ron, and beamed. “How good’s this? We know where Malfoy’s going! We’ve got him cornered now!” Ron shrugged glumly, dabbing ineffectually at the puddle of ink on his essay.

With a long-suffering sigh, Hermione pulled it away from him and began draining off the ink off with her wand. “But what’s all this about him going up there with a ‘variety of students’?” she asked Harry, “How many people are in on it? You wouldn’t think he’d trust lots of them to know what he’s doing…”

“Yeah, that is weird. I heard him telling Crabbe it wasn’t Crabbe’s business what he was doing… so what’s he telling all these… all these…” Harry pondered silently for a minute… then suddenly – “God, I’ve been stupid,” he said quietly. “It’s bloody obvious, isn’t it? There was a great vat of it down in the dungeon… He could’ve nicked some any time during that lesson…”

“Nicked what?” Ron wondered.

Agitation had driven Harry to his feet; he paced madly as he rambled, “Polyjuice Potion! He stole some of the Polyjuice Potion Slughorn showed us in our first Potions lesson… There aren’t a whole variety of students standing guard for Malfoy… it’s just Crabbe and fucking Goyle as usual… Yeah, it all fits! They’re stupid enough to do what they’re told even if he won’t tell them what he’s up to… but he doesn’t want them to be seen lurking around outside the Room of Requirement, so he’s got them taking Polyjuice to make them look like other people… Those two girls I saw him with when he missed Quidditch – ha! Crabbe and Goyle!”

Ron threw back his head and cackled. “He’s got Crabbe and Goyle transforming into girls? Blimey… No wonder they don’t look too happy these days… I’m surprised they don’t tell him to go fuck himself…”

“Well, they wouldn’t, would they, if he’s shown them his Dark Mark?” Harry said like he was stating the obvious.

That was the point at which Hermione decided it was time for her to leave. “Hmmm,” she said dismissively, “the Dark Mark we don’t know exists…”

Harry gave her a superior sort of look. “We’ll see,” he said boldly.

“Yes, we will,” Hermione said. She stood up, picked up her bag, and gave him one final, solemn look, “But, Harry, before you get all excited, I still don’t think you’ll be able to get into the Room of Requirement without knowing what’s there first. And I don’t think you should forget that what you’re supposed to be concentrating on is getting that memory from Slughorn. Good night.”

She darted up to her dormitory, ignoring Harry’s look of annoyance.

She tossed and turned in bed for a long time that night. The disquietude she’d been feeling was a raging storm now – her very own Great Red Spot.
Dobby and Kreacher’s revelations had added fuel to Harry’s mania, and that was worrying enough in itself... yet, she found herself – *oh heaven forbid* – on the brink of espousing a similar obsession. If Malfoy was indeed the one behind the failed attempts at Dumbledore’s life, whatever he was working on in the Room of Requirement was sure to be extremely dangerous. Hermione seriously doubted he was going there to unwind, or to indulge in “poetic bouts of night-time brooding”, as Theo had once claimed. And speaking of... she had no option but to talk to Theo again. Now that she had this new bit of information in her arsenal, he wouldn’t be able to dismiss her all that easily. ...That is if he would be willing to talk to her at all...

Hermione grumbled to herself, and then flipped over to lie on her belly, pressing her face into her pillow.

“*Beauty, truth, and rarity.*
*Grace in all simplicity,*
*Here enclos’d in cinders lie.*”

Who was Draco Malfoy? If only he still derided her at every given opportunity... if only he had bombastically threatened to hex her when they’d nearly collided... She knew exactly who that person was. Who was this cold, haunted, evasive, and scheming shadow? Was he the trap, the trigger, or the hunter?

“...*Here enclos’d in cinders lie.*”

She wondered what he thought of Raskolnikov.

Hermione felt too wound up to stomach anything more than a cup of tea for breakfast. Harry was devising elaborate strategies to break into the room that Malfoy required, and she remained deliberately uninvolved, much to his displeasure. Ron was eating.

She shot a stealthy glance at the Slytherin table – Malfoy was notably missing; as were Crabbe and Goyle. It was fairly safe to deduce that they was currently up on the seventh floor, just as it was safe to presume that Harry was going to waste his entire morning pointlessly pacing before a wall.

She was shaken out of her ruminations with the arrival of an owl bringing her the *Daily Prophet.* However, before she could open it out, Harry laid his hand atop it and said, “Look, I haven’t forgotten about Slughorn, but I haven’t got a clue how to get that memory off him, and until I get a brain wave why shouldn’t I find out what Malfoy’s doing?”

She was very thankful that he took her reticence to be disapproval, rather than realising that she currently shared his fixation.

“I’ve already told you, you need to persuade Slughorn,” she said, “It’s not a question of tricking him or bewitching him, or Dumbledore could have done it in a second. Instead of messing around outside the Room of Requirement” – she yanked the newspaper out from under his hand – “you should go and find Slughorn and start appealing to his better nature.”

She left for Ancient Runes soon after, mentally adding layers of resilience to her skin with every step she took. She was torn between wanting the lesson to end as soon as possible, and for it to go
on forever.
All of last week she’d chosen to sit beside Terry Boot, so when she settled on her usual seat that
day, Theo looked at her in surprise, and then antipathy. Hermione kept her eyes fixed on Professor
Babbling; for once, she felt that the woman was living up to her name... but she supposed that was
mostly her own fault, owing to the fact that all her attention was focused on the boy sitting next to
her, dutifully taking down notes, albeit with a scowl on his face.

Finally, the lesson ended. Theo stood up to leave immediately, but Hermione reached out
frantically and grabbed the back of this cloak.
“May I have a word, please?”
Theo eyed the fabric held tightly in her fist until she slowly let go of it.
“Please,” she said once more, plaintively.
His aspect was one of cool detachment, the kind he bestowed upon the masses who didn’t know
him, and whom he didn’t care to know. “Okay,” he agreed coolly.
Hermione nodded, and led him out of the classroom to a secluded alcove behind an arras depicting
the goblin rebellion of 1752.
“Look,” she began... and then took a deep breath, bowed her head, and carried on, “We – that is,
Harry, Ron, and I – know that Malfoy’s been spending most of his time in the room of
requirement. We haven’t figured out what he’s doing yet, but –”
“You want to talk about Draco!?” he sounded furious and incredulous, and when Hermione lifted
her eyes to look at him, she found that his expression reflected the same.
“Er, yes,” she said timidly, “Harry is absolutely determined to find out what –”
“You want,” he snarled, “to talk about *Draco.*”
Hermione stared. “Er...”
“Fuck you,” he spat, ruthlessly.
And then he stormed away, leaving Hermione alone and unable to breathe.

She ghosted through the next two days in autopilot mode, going from one lesson to the other,
skipping meals, and dodging conversations.

She spent the nights curled up on the window seat, trying to read... plaiting and unplaiting her
hair...

*There was a man whom Sorrow named his Friend,*
*And he, of his high comrade Sorrow dreaming,*
*Went walking with slow steps along the gleaming*  
*And humming Sands, where windy surges wend:*  
*And he called loudly to the stars to bend*  
*From their pale thrones and comfort him, but they*  
*Among themselves laugh on and sing alway...*  

“You’ve really upset him, you know?”
Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. “I know.”

Approaching Luna had been her last desperate attempt to fix things, now that getting Theo alone on her own was no longer an option.

“I’ve just been so stupid, Luna. Stupid, and... and... thoughtless. I know I’ve done a lot of questionable, problematic, and vengeful things, but I’ve never felt like such a bad person before.” She morosely peered up at the cloudless sky.

“You’re not a bad person, Hermione,” Luna reproved gently, “You’re a little socially inept. So am I, I think, from what I’ve gathered...”

Hermione smiled sadly at the odd girl with her dirigible plum earrings and strings of cornflowers in her hair.

“...Theo is as well,” Luna continued, “We have to band together – there will be a time when the Ministry brings out its mind-controlling tweed caps – (you might remember seeing them in the Department of Mysteries last year) – and we’ll be the first ones they come after,” Luna leaned forward and tapped her temple, “the so-called eccentric ones.”

“He doesn’t want to talk to me, Luna.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll tell him to hear you out. He listens to me.”

Feeling a touch less burdened than she had in days, Hermione grinned. “That he does.”

Vicious hunger clawed at her insides. Hermione hadn’t eaten properly in ages, and on Thursday evening she felt the absence of every single meal she had passed over. She raced past lamps as they flared to life, eager to reach the Great Hall for dinner.

Suddenly, something latched onto her arm and pulled her into an empty classroom. Hermione yelped in panic, whirled around with her wand raised, ready to.....

“Theo?!” she gasped, “What the hell –”

“You wanted to talk,” he barked with a sneer, “Go ahead. Talk.”

“Oh,” Hermione tried to buy herself some time by making a great show of stowing her wand away and catching her breath.

Theo was having none of it. "Talk," he growled.

“Yes. Yes, okay,” Hermione wrung her hands and fixed her gaze on Theo’s knee, “I’m just... I’m really sor–”

“What did I do?”

“Huh?”

He turned his back to her and walked a few paces away. “What. Did. I. Do. Why did you suddenly decide to toss me out of your life?”

“I didn’t... that wasn’t...”

“Oh save it,” he snapped wrathfully, “Something fucking happened. I tried all week to understand... to get you to explain... and you just kept running away from me like I was infected with a particularly gruesome strain of Spattergroit. And now you want to talk? Lovely,” he doggedly kept his back to her, “Tell me what I did to suffer your disapproval.”

“NOTHING,” Hermione wailed desperately, “You didn’t do anything! I just... just...”

“Just what? I badgered Ginny endlessly, but she said you’ve been avoiding her as well. Fucking Potter said –”

“You spoke to Harry?!”
“– POTTER SAID that you’re perfectly fine, and are currently busy helping Weasley catch up with his coursework,” – He still hadn’t turned around – “Is that it then? You got your old chum back, so now you no longer need me around?”

“NO! Theo, no! That’s not remotely –”

“You want to talk about Draco? He bloody warned me. Told me you had no room in your life for anyone except your Gryffindor heroes. But I told him he was wrong. Told him that you... you...” Hermione looked woefully at the back of his head as he shook it, “...Fuck. I was even making an effort to get along with your friends. For you. And then what? I’m left to spend my afternoons moaning at sodding Ginny Weasley. Is she supposed to be my consolation prize? What exactly do –”

“I THOUGHT YOU WERE GETTING ALONG SWIMMINGLY,” she let drop, tears stinging her eyes.

Theo froze. His entire frame stiffened. And slowly... he turned around... and stared at her. He got it. He absolutely got it, and Hermione, terrified and shattered, wanted to run away. She wanted to escape the stifling tension in that room and his penetrating gaze. But he didn’t allow her that option. He marched towards her, stony-faced, and gripped her shoulders. “Have I not –” and then he shook her, hard, “– made it abundantly clear that I am not like those disgracefully flaky tossers you hang around?!” he shook her again, “Have I not proved that I won’t bloody abandon you for anything or anyone? Have I not adequately expressed –” another hard shake “– my regard for you? Is it not apparent enough that I –”

“I’M SORRY.” Hermione blubbered, crying in earnest. “I’m so... sorry... didn’t mean... sorry... just so pathetic... terrible person... I’m sorry, I’m sorry...” She wasn’t making any sense. She didn’t know how many words she was actually saying, and how many were getting lost among her sobs and gasps.

“Such a stupid girl” she heard, though it was barely above a whisper, and then she found herself being pulled towards him... against him... and he hugged her.

She bawled into his robes, maintaining an erratic litany of “sorry, sorry, sorry...” and he patted her back gently, saying “Shh... shush... enough...”

“Enough,” he iterated firmly, pulling away and grasping her shoulders once again, “Calm down.”

“Theo. I’m sorry...”

“By Salazar, I heard you the first sixty times, alright? Enough. It’s okay...”

“No it isn’t!” she sniffed, roughly mopping her cheeks with her fingers, “I’m just so sor –”

“Did I ever tell you exactly how my mother died, Hermione?”

Well, that shut her up. “Wha- what?”

“I was four. Just a couple of months short of five, actually... so one evening, I was sat in my room when I heard loud crashes and screams coming from downstairs...” Theo shuddered. He removed his hands from her shoulders, walked over to the nearest chair, and sat down forcibly. He looked far away into the distance; his eyes were unfocused. “It took me a while to find them – the old ancestral home’s rather whopping...” that was the point at which his voice began to quiver, “Father was standing in the dead centre of the parlour, yelling and waving his wand around like a maniac. Furniture was flying about, crashing against the walls... colliding against each other... My mother was cowering in a corner... pleading... I think... I might have called out to her... There was another really loud boom... and that’s all. The next thing I know, I’m in Malfoy manor... on Narcissa’s lap... in hysterics... My mother was dead,” he closed his eyes and sighed; Hermione slapped a hand over her mouth in horror. “They questioned me for hours and in many different ways... I just couldn’t remember anything. But... I must’ve... I had to have seen something, because I’ve been able to see Thesrals ever since.”

“Oh god,” Hermione whispered. He opened his eyes and nodded.

“Now, here’s the point: after that day, I spent most of my time with the Malfoys. They practically adopted me – I ate at least one meal a day with them. I was a part of family outings, picnics, trips to
Diagon... Narcissa taught me to read, Lucius bought me my first broom... they never missed a birthday... I went with them to Paris every summer...” he said with a tender smile, “And Draco – bratty, entitled Draco – didn’t for a second resent my presence, or the fact that I had claimed some of his parents’ attention. If I call him my brother, it’s because that’s exactly what he is. And yes, I know my brother is involved in something very grave indeed... He isn’t going to tell me, Hermione. I’ve... I’ve begged, but he just gives me that fucking smirk of his and says ‘plausible deniability’. We had a huge row over this about two weeks back. He said he really can’t tell me – for my safety, and his safety, and Narcissa’s safety. I did, however, make him swear he’d come to me if things got out of hand...

“And I’ve written to Narcissa eight times, five times to Lucius, interrogated Snape (got me a detention, that), and endured a soul-deadening conversation with Goyle... to no avail. All I can do is keep a close eye on Draco, and make sure he’s safe. I can talk to him and keep him sane. I can give him the books you so kindly contribute; I can make sure he eats and sleeps from time to time. And before you ask... No. I’m not going to Dumbledore, or Slughorn, or sodding McGonagall. I will not turn informer against him... not for anything; not ever. Surely you can understand that?”

She did. Completely.
For even if he had admitted to being in cahoots with Malfoy... she wouldn’t have turned him in. Just like it was when Harry was concerned; she would cast away her supposed morals for Theo, too.

“I do understand,” she murmured.
“My world... my family... consists of three people,” he said, and finally turned in the chair to look at her fully, “Well... four now, I’d say.”
He smiled, shrugged casually, and a sob tore its way out of Hermione’s throat, making her spine curve from the force of it.
“Oh come here,” he huffed, and when she only took a tentative step forward, he reached out, grabbed her hips, and tugged her closer. He wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his head against her lower ribs. She softly carded her fingers through his hair. He sighed. They stayed that way for a long time.

By and by, he slackened his hold.
“Let’s go eat,” he said while standing up and vanishing the tear-stains on his robes, “The noises your stomach is making are positively feral.”

The freshness of early spring lent a beautiful charm to the village of Hogsmeade. Trees sprinkled with bright green leaves gleamed under the resplendent sun, and all the shops had little pots of flowers adorning their windows.
Hermione and Ron strolled towards the square for extra apparition lessons. Ron was jittery with nerves, making him chatty, which was having a rather unfortunate impact on Hermione’s once-calm nerves.

“I’m so bloody glad to be out here! Lavender’s not going to be of age till late June... Means there’s no danger of her ambushing me for the next three hours. Whew!”
Hermione didn’t role her eyes – a remarkable show of restraint on her part. 
“Seriously, what more can I do? I break every plan we make, skip out on her over and over again... how thick can she be? Why can’t some people take a bloody hint?”
“Mmmmm.”
Hermione had been glad they were leaving Harry behind... even though it meant he’d be stuck in a self-inflicted exile on the seventh floor. At least she wouldn’t have to pretend to brush off the Malfoy issue by building up the Slughorn issue, (although it was obvious that the latter truly did deserve all of Harry’s attention at the moment,) but now she really wished he had come with them. “I don’t even let her snog me for more than a minute now –” oh good god “– but it’s like she’s decided it’s all some big challenge for her to overcome. Makes a bloke wonder, you know... what if all girls are like this? Clingy. Needy. It’s enough to make a permanent bachelor out of me for sure...”
“Oh look, that’s Theo. Hey! Theo!” she called out, waving.
“Huh?!” Ron choked, “What are you – No –”
“Hi, Hermione. ...Weasley.” Theo smiled tightly, shooting her a fleeting, questioning look.
“Hi,” Hermione said brightly, “Excited about the lesson? Think you’ll finally manage to pull it off?”
“Sure. After aaaaall this time we’ve spent together,” Theo slung his arm around her shoulders, “some of your brilliance must have rubbed off on me.”
Ron scowled severely with his hands deep in his pockets, and remained adamantly quiet the rest of the way.

* 

The lesson went rather well.
Hermione travelled from point A to B, no problem, all six times. Theo did it three times. Ron overshot – landing up outside Scrivenshaft’s Quill shop, rather than Madam Puddifoot’s. There was only one instance of splinching: Justin Flinch-Fletchley again, regrettably.

Later, everybody filled into the Three Broomsticks for a celebratory round of drinks. Hermione sat at a corner table with Theo, Ron, and Seamus.
“Bloody weird to be having a pint with you,” Seamus muttered to Theo.
“Likewise, er...”
“Seamus Finnigan, ya twat. I’m in four of your classes.”
“Right, right. Of course. Finnigan. Sláinte!”
With that, Theo took a long sip of his butterbeer. Seamus watched him with narrowed eyes for a second, before shrugging, raising his glass, and chugging it down.

Their strange little party was interrupted not much later.
“Ms. Granger,” Twycross said genially, “You were absolutely spectacular today. I’ve been conducting these lessons for years; never before have I seen any student grasp the D’s so promptly, so firmly –” Theo, Seamus, and Ron were sniggering behind their mugs, “– such fine technique! Your movement in particular is a stroke of genius...”
“Thank you Mr. Twycross, sir,” Hermione shut him down before he could inflict any real damage. Seamus was already a worrying shade of purple, and after the man had gone, he bent over laughing.
“Grasp... movement... stroke,” he wheezed.
“Very mature, Seamus,” Hermione rebuked, taking a dainty sip of her drink.

With a laden tray, Madam Rosmerta approached them, tacitly enquiring if they required refills. She looked dreadfully exhausted, just as she had around Christmas. Her usual coquettish effusiveness was completely lacking, and when they all refused refills, she nodded indifferently.

“Soooo, Rosmerta,” Ron spoke in a voice two octaves lower than usual, “Have you heard the joke about the blind healer?”

“No,” she replied vacantly.

“Well, see... there’s this healer, and he’s blind, yeah? One day he was going to perform a tricky boil removal spell on a patient, and –”

“How the hell was he allowed to do that?”

“Bugger off, Seamus. It’s a joke. So anyway, Rosmerta, the healer goes up to his patient –”

“This premise is a joke.”

“Shut up, Hermione. His patience’s a hag –”

“What?! There isn’t a hag in all the world who’d want any of her boils removed...”

“Nobody asked you, Nott! His patient, a hag, wanted her facial boil removed. Now, she had a mimbulus mimbletonia plant on her lap –”

“Why the hell –”

“She just did, alright? Shut. Up. She had a mimbulus mimbletonia plant on her lap. The blind healer reached out, feeling his way towards his patient –”

“That’s just ridiculous.”


The entire pub fell silent.

“That wasn’t funny,” Madam Rosmerta stated, and drifted away.

Ron grimaced in mortification. He could barely look at his three compatriots, but did manage to muster the pluck to demand: “Not. One. Word.”

In all fairness, they abided by that request. Not one of them spoke a single word. They did, however, laugh uproariously, until their faces were red and their eyes were watering.

On the walk back to the castle, Theo and Seamus broke into an improvised, largely nonsensical and explicitly lewd ditty about hags, healers, and boil covered D’s. Ron sulked, kicking up an unnecessary amount of dirt with every step he took.
The deserted passageway was a mesh of beguiling shadows; intrigue and conspiracy hung thick in the air like a rancid fog. The night was a quite one... the kind where all sorts of no good sinister creatures, great and small, came out to play. Hermione Granger, P.I., pulled her dark cloak tightly around her (impeccably disillusioned) frame, and she peeped around the corner leading into the seventh-floor corridor. Her mark – tall, slender, and so very blond – had just stepped out of what had been a solid wall, and was surveying his surroundings with great caution. He had such a strong aura of ambiguity about him – his fair colouring somehow able to scorch and chill at the same time. Beautiful, sure, but there ain’t never been no pretty face that had managed to lead Hermione Granger, P.I., astray...

Okay, NO. Draco Malfoy could NOT be a femme fatale. Er, homme fatale. Absolutely not.

The sound of soft footsteps brought back her focus: Malfoy was walking down the corridor, away from her. She hastily made to follow, silencing her own footfalls.

She wasn’t going to bother attempting to break into the room he had been using – she knew that it would be a completely pointless endeavour. To her grave disappointment, neither Crabbe nor Goyle were at hand, so she wouldn’t be eavesdropping on any potentially edifying conversation as she had hoped.

But she continued to trail him, half sprinting to keep him in sight; he really walked quite fast. There was a hypnotic quality to the way light bounced off his hair. He kept his spine absolutely straight, his arms swung just the right amount, and his chin remained self-importantly raised. From the back, none of his recently developed signs of weakness were evident.

He stopped suddenly, and Hermione got so involved in keeping herself from tripping over her own feet, that she didn’t notice the presence of another person in their midst.

“Pansy,” Malfoy stated, folding his arms across his chest and looking down his nose at the girl. “Oh, Draco! Where have you been? Sprout said you were supposed to report to her for detention two hours ago, but nobody had any idea where you were... and oh, you’re in so much trouble...” “Fuck,” Malfoy spat, “I completely forgot... that dumpy old bale of hay will probably double my punishment now.” “Where have you been, Draco?” Pansy asked miserably, “Where do you keep going...?”

Malfoy scowled. “None of your business. Now move; I’ve got talk to Snape and see if he’ll get Sprout to drop this ridiculous detention business...”

“No, Draco, Wait!”
Pansy grabbed onto his arm desperately, and he glared at her in disbelief. “Have you lost your mind, Pansy? Let. Go.”
“No first you listen, I –”
“Let go NOW.” He had a crazed, fearsome look in his eyes, and Hermione was quite impressed that Pansy stood her ground.
“NO!” she yelled, “No. First you tell me what you’re doing. I’ve barely seen you in months! You don’t eat, you’re rarely in class... you don’t even look at me! And you haven’t... we haven’t... in ages...”

Hermione always thought that if she ever saw Pansy Parkinson cry, she’d be rather... well, not gleeful... just perhaps filled with some well-deserved schadenfreude. But there was nothing enjoyable about watching her snivel while clinging onto Malfoy’s arm as he sneered at her contemptuously.

“Oh poor little Pansy,” he mocked, “Gagging, are we? Why don’t you go ask Higgs? You know he’s always up for it.”
“Stop it!” she wailed, “Please! I miss you, Draco. And I’m worried about you! Are you... is it... it’s him, isn’t it? He’s told you to do something, hasn’t he?”
“As I’ve said before, it’s none of your fucking business,” Malfoy said menacingly, bearing down on her, “And I don’t need you to worry about me. What I need is for you to let go of my arm, and leave... me... ALONE.”

With that, he tore his arm out of her clutches and strode away. Left by herself, Pansy pressed her fist to her mouth to muffle her sobs, and after a minute or two, followed in Malfoy’s still steaming wake.

Wretchedly ill at ease after that evening’s bit of sleuthing, Hermione Granger, P.I., shuffled back to her headquarters, a lone figure with a long shadow, brooding intensely.

En route to the Transfiguration classroom for her next lesson, Hermione spotted a familiar cascade of red hair and realised there was one more person she’d been treating less than fairly of late. She increased her pace to a trot to catch up with her.

“Hi Ginny,” she said guiltily.
“Well, hello! Long time no see, Herms of my heart,” Ginny said pointedly.
Hermione replied with a clever “Um.”
“Have you and Theo have made up yet?” Ginny demanded.
“We have...”
“Thank Merlin! I swear, if he had come up to me one more time to moan about you, I’d have hexed him... badly. He was driving me up the wall. Gah.”
“Er, I’m sorry about that,” Hermione mumbled.
“What the hell was it all about then? ...No, wait. Don’t tell me. I don’t want to hear another word about it. Between him and Dean I’ve absolutely had it with boys and their bloody whinging. Please tell me you’re free later? Let’s do something fun, Herms. Hermione. Please.”
“Of course,” Hermione agreed readily, “Come over to my dorm in the evening. You’ve got your OWL’s coming up; I can help you brush up on Muggle Studies...”
“Hermioneeeee,” Ginny whined in agony.
Hermione ignored her. “…I’m sure Seamus will let us borrow the gramophone. My dad’s sent me a
‘Best of the Seventies’ record – I will teach you some killer Travolta disco moves.”
Ginny’s eyes twinkled, “I have no idea what any of that means, but I’m sure it’s definitely something I need to learn.”

The sky was clear and powder blue, the sun was warm and golden, and according to the Daily Prophet, six people had been killed in the last twenty-four hours: A group of three muggleborns slaughtered and laid out under a looming dark mark, one member of the Wizengamot known for taking a strong stance against convicted Death Eaters, one young shopboy running errands in Diagon Alley, and one... fuck... one five year old boy who’d been brutally and fatally ravaged by Fenrir Greyback.

Hermione folded the paper and shoved it into her bag, as if the act of putting it away would somehow erase all the tales of horror it was loaded with. But when she closed her eyes to collect herself, the back of her eyelids presented her with scenes of gore and blood-soaked damnation.

In a note entirely unlike the usual, her parents had written to her about the wave of terror that had gripped the nation – the kind that hadn’t been seen since the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’ had been put away over a decade ago. There was a savage new serial killer on the loose, the Police claimed. “Don’t trust strangers... keep your doors and windows locked at all times...”

The Death Eaters had declared open season on muggles, and apparently the Prophet didn’t think that it deserved any coverage. Hermione ditched breakfast and went to the library, where she sat down to write a letter –

**Dear Tonks,**

It’s been a while since I last heard from you. I hope you’re doing well, and things are all under control. Harry mentioned seeing you in Hogwarts last week; I wish I had known you were visiting – it would have been nice to catch up.

However, the reason I’m writing to you now isn’t to exchange pleasantries. There has been an alarming upsurge in reports of unsolved homicides in muggle newspapers. Muggles are being mysteriously murdered all across the country, with no discernable pattern, and no viable evidence left at the crime scenes. I think you know full well who’s behind all this.

I need to know that the Auror department is taking this as seriously as it is the murders of witches and wizards. The Prophet hasn’t said a word about it... but I suppose that is to be expected.

*Hope to hear from you soon.*

*Love,*

*Hermione*
Her hand was trembling by the time she got to the end. She would give Tonks two days – if she didn’t get a satisfactory reply by then... well. She needed to formulate a game plan of her own, regardless.

In the summer before fifth year, Mad-Eye, Shacklebolt, and Tonks had placed a variety of protective enchantments on her parent’s home; but after all her research, Hermione knew that that wasn’t good enough by half. Her parents were essentially sitting ducks at this very moment.

The fidelius charm was out of the question... there was no way she could warn her mum and dad against giving out their address without them retaliating with a billion questions. And of course she could NOT tell them the truth without her dad rushing off to collect his ornamental kukri from the mantle, and her mum breaking into a rousing chant of “el pueblo unido, jamás será vencido”.

...Even if she found a spell powerful enough to keep her parents fully and wholly safe, her absence would draw them out. If she just disappeared, they’d be devastated beyond anything, and they’d organise huge search parties... almost certainly rope in that patient of theirs who worked for the MI6...

In the midst of this acutely upsetting, paralysing, demoralising, terrorising dilemma, a face appeared in her mind’s eye. It confused her at first; what the sodding hell was Gilderoy Lockhart popping up in her head for?

And then.

Oh, and then.

The quest for the perfect solution was absorbing enough to keep her from truly grasping the enormity of the consequences of that particular plan of action... The library contained over twenty-five books on advanced memory charms, after all.

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...my assignments are restricted to guarding Hogsmeade, or the occasional high level ministry official. I’m not in touch with anybody from the muggle surveillance unit, but I’m sure adequate measures are being taken. Sorry I couldn’t be of more help...

---

Hermione crumpled up Tonks' derisory response and chucked it into the common room fire.

“What was that?” Ron asked. Both he and Harry were watching her inquisitively.

“Nothing,” Hermione muttered.

Ron frowned, but Harry just shrugged and went back to watching the Malfoy-dot on his Marauder’s map, waiting for it to move towards the seventh floor corridor.

“Four muggles were murdered today,” Hermione whispered after a few beats of silence. Harry and Ron looked appropriately disturbed, but neither of them thought to ask her about her parents.
The shuffling of feet, grating of chairs, and a rapid intensification of chatter ensued the moment Flitwick dismissed the class. As students poured out of the room, Hermione turned to Harry and Ron and said, “You two go ahead; I want to get the first draft of my assignment looked over...”

They left, (Ron rolled his eyes dramatically) and soon, Hermione was alone in the room with the tiny charms professor.

“Is there something you need, Ms. Granger?” he asked curiously.

“Yes, professor. I came across a very interesting book on memory charms in the library the other day, and it mentioned this one spell... *omitto*... but it didn’t quite say what it did...”

“Ah yes!” Flitwick beamed, “It’s a rather nifty variant of the *obliviate* charm. It’s reversible, for one... as long as you know the exact memories that have been omitted. It’s also easier to target and replace memories with this spell. But absolute clarity is necessary – you have to cover every single detail of the memory being erased, as well as that of the memory you wish to plant. Extremely complicated stuff...” Flitwick paused to eye her for a moment, and then continued, “If you will accompany me to my office, I can give you a book that will explain it all clearly...”

“Oh, I’d really appreciate that, Professor!” Hermione gushed enthusiastically.

“Come along, then.”

It was settled.

An outward facing arc – *Fragments omitto* – and a sharp upward flick. That was the spell that would expunge her existence from the memories of the reasons for her existence.

It was settled, and she was so agonisingly unsettled.

One-thirty AM.

Hermione sat curled up on a window ledge a short distance from the door to the astronomy tower. Staring out into the night, she was sickened by her thoughts, and her plans, and herself. What kind of monster would tinker with such wonderful minds? What kind of reprehensible ingrate would obliterate her own parents’ memories? What right did she have to shred and patch up something as fragile and personal as that?

“How’s Hermione?”

She jumped, nearly tumbling onto the unforgiving floor.

“...Theo?! You gave me such a fright! What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?”

Hermione raised a brow at his sad attempt at deflection. “Thinking,” she averred.

He stared at her searchingly; it was the type of disconcerting scrutiny that saw through any facade she might try to put forth. Damn it, he knew her far too well.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, concern lacing his voice.

“Nothing.”

“No. Something is wrong.”

Hermione turned back to the blackness beyond the window and sighed. And then she told him everything. Saying it all out loud – putting the entire scheme in words and vocalising them – turned
her stomach in the most grievous manner. She couldn’t breathe properly.

“It’s the right thing to do, Hermione.”
Oh, how she had longed to hear that, exactly that, straightforward, direct, clear-cut...
“Is it?” she whimpered.
“Absolutely. I’d do exactly the same, if I had the option.”

Hermione pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes, hoping to send back the tears that were threatening to make an appearance.

“Come with me,” Theo murmured, pulling her hands down gently.
“Where to?” she rasped.
“Just come,” he stated simply, “But first...” he pulled out his wand, aimed it at her (the fact that she didn’t even flinch was a testament to how much she trusted him), and whispered a spell.
Feeling a trickle of magic shimmy down her body, Hermione asked, “You disillusioned me?”
“Yes. Now follow me.”

Silently, he led her down to the fifth floor, all the way to the music room.
“Stay in the shadows, and don’t make a sound,” Theo whispered. Then he walked inside, leaving the door open just long enough for Hermione to slip in. She crouched in a darkened nook beside a large shelf, as Theo settled on a chaise longue way off at another end.

In the middle of the room was a beautiful mahogany piano, behind which sat Draco Malfoy, giving Theo a look that was amused and exasperated in equal parts.

“You’ve followed me here as well? Merlin, Theo. Your persistence knows no bounds.”
“I just wanted to hear you play, you arsehole,” Theo replied superciliously, “It’s been a while.”
“You’ve been hanging around Gryffindor twats for too long. It’s decimated your ability to lie convincingly.”
“Just shut up and play, will you?”
With that, Theo closed his eyes and reclined against the arm of the chaise longue.

Malfoy smirked. And then he started to play.

It was one of Chopin’s nocturnes, though Hermione couldn’t say which one, exactly. From the very first note a sort of glorious resplendence usurped the atmosphere – the candlelit sepia tone of the room turned into enchanted golden dust. It was too forceful to be tranquillity... too powerful to be soothing... too overwhelming to be comforting. But it was a thing of beauty. It was fucking absolute beauty, and it suddenly, jarringly permeated through Hermione’s constricting hopelessness.

Beauty.

Malfoy’s eyes were intent on the keys. His hands danced over them elegantly, like his fingers were performing a perfectly synchronised dance. Hermione couldn’t look away from them as they skittered mesmerizingly.

Grace in all simplicity.

Who could object to melancholy when it tasted so sweet? Every crisp note performed the gentlest
twirl as it made way for the next... together they formed an effulgent wave of pathos... a molten swell of all-pervading melodious poignancy.

The impression of the final fragment of music lingered long after Malfoy had ceased playing. In those moments brimming with overpowering... somethingness, Hermione just breathed. She wasn’t who she was. Malfoy wasn’t Malfoy as he gazed expressively at the empty air in front of him. Theo wasn’t Theo, lying back with his eyes close. They were all just objects once all their meretricious masks and projections had been leached away by corrosive tendrils of true, rare beauty.

_Here enclos’d in cinders lie._

When the fugue had lifted, Theo and Malfoy dawdled towards the door with heavy steps. “How’s Pansy doing?” Malfoy asked hoarsely.

“What are you asking me for?” Theo asked, giving him an odd look, “I’m dead to her, remember?”

“Right. I just thought you might’ve seen her around...”

“Um, sure,” Theo replied, still wearing a perplexed expression, “She was in the common room this evening, blabbering on about some new robes she’d ordered from Milan.”

With a short, hollow laugh, Malfoy doused all the tapers in the room.

Hermione was left alone in the dark where she sat unmoving... still just breathing.

Three days later she was sobbing into her pillow after opening a package from home that included a collection of short stories by Kafka, a box full of tea cakes from her favourite bakery, ‘The Stone Roses’ on vinyl, and a two page comic hand drawn by her dad, titled, ‘When Evelyn McCowan-Granger Cooks: A bleak tale of Trepidation and Despair’.

There was also a copy of _The Telegraph_; ‘MYSETRIOUS STRING OF DEATHS CONTINUES... ANDERSON FAMILY FOUND DEAD IN THEIR DINING ROOM – CAUSE OF DEMISE UNCLEAR... SHOCKING: DECOMPOSED CORPSE FOUND FLOATING IN THE FOUNTAIN AT TRAFALGAR SQUARE...’

Hermione’s discomposure was at its peak on Wednesday afternoon.

She stood in a line between Gregory Goyle and Daphne Greengrass, bouncing on the balls of her feet, studiously ignoring the hulking boy and the sneering girl that flanked her. She was minutes away from her Apparition test, and she’d never been good at dealing with pre-examination nerves.

On top of everything, Ron had developed a new infuriating habit – he’d taken to diving behind her the moment he thought he spotted anything remotely resembling a girl. Each time, Hermione had to assure him that it wasn’t Lavender, and then he’d straighten up awkwardly. Was there anything more ludicrous than a tall, strapping lad cowering behind a scraggy girl, nearly a foot shorter?
...Oh yes there was: An overwrought half-giant expecting students to break curfew to honour the passing of a colossal, man-eating spider.

Students were being called, one by one, to the middle of the Great Hall, where Twycross and two other ministry officials stood waiting expectantly. One was a rather severe looking old woman with a clipboard in hand, and the other was a plump, shabbily dressed man with thinning ginger hair, who felt compelled to break into a round of applause whenever a student passed. He was presently engaged in one such bout after Hannah Abbot successfully went from point A to B.

Terry Boot passed. Mandy Brocklehurst passed. In fact, there were quite a few success stories... only Susan Bones and Justin Finch-Fletchley had failed so far...

Seamus whooped with delight on passing. Twycross tut-tutted dismally when Goyle bungled up his test. Hermione couldn’t suppress a smirk of satisfaction when he lumbered away, looking sour.

“Granger,” the stern woman called out.

Destination... Determination... Deliberation...

She didn’t take more than a couple of seconds to brace herself – and then she was being squeezed through oblivion... and crack! Victory!

“Excellent as always, Ms. Granger,” Twycross praised warmly.

The dumpy ginger man went berserk.

Hermione lingered by the edge of the hall, wanting to see how Theo and Ron fared. To her delight, Daphne Greengrass stumbled over her fine silk robes while attempting to spin.

“Oh come on! I tripped! Let me have another go!”

Her objections were duly ignored.

Theo disapparated flawlessly. When he reappeared, he was wearing a lovely, broad grin... aimed directly at her. She returned his gleeful expression in kind.

Finally, it was Ron’s turn. Hermione bit her lip in anticipation, more nervous for him than she had been for herself. Ron took a deep breath... closed his eyes... and spun.

He did it. Seconds later, he was standing within the circle of the wooden hoop, blinking in disbelief at himself. Mister Enthusiasm brought his hands together, primed to clap-clap-clap, but he was interrupted by Madam Hostility.

“Hold on. What’s this here?” she demanded while pointing at nothing. The two men peered closely at the tip of her finger.

“I believe,” Twycross drawled drolly, “that that is half of Mr. Weasley’s eyebrow.”

“Fail!” the woman barked, “Okay, next; Zabini!”

Outrage, indignation, and displeasure fulminated on Ron’s cherry-red face as he stormed out of the Great Hall. Hermione raced after him, catching him just as he was beginning to climb up the grand staircase.

“Ron...!”

“Half an eyebrow. Half a fucking eyebrow. Seriously? HALF AN EYEBROW?!”

“I’m so sorry...”

“Argh. I can’t believe they failed me over half an eyebrow!” he groused feverishly. Hermione attempted to temper his fury with consoling platitudes, and it worked to a certain extent – Ron’s weakness for mollycoddling was dead useful sometimes.
They were intercepted by Dean and Ginny outside the Gryffindor portrait hole, and Hermione left Ron to grumble at them.

“Harry!” she cried the moment she entered the common room, “Harry, I passed!”

Harry smiled widely and said, “Well done! And Ron?”

“He –” Hermione faltered, “He just failed. It was really unlucky; a tiny thing. The examiner spotted that he’d left half an eyebrow behind.” Harry grimaced sympathetically. “How did it go with Slughorn?” she asked, hoping he’d made some headway during the scantily populated potion’s lesson that afternoon.

“No joy,” Harry replied dully.

Ron slid in though the portrait hole then, and morosely plodded over and joined them.

“Bad luck, mate,” Harry offered bracingly, “but you’ll pass next time – we can take it together.”

“Yeah, I s’pose. But half an eyebrow!” Ron exclaimed for the nth time, “Like that matters!”

“I know,” Hermione consoled, “it does seem really harsh…”

Later that evening, Hermione, Harry, and Ron watchfully slinked up to the boy’s dormitory, after making sure that Neville, Dean, and Seamus were all otherwise occupied. It had been a while since Hermione had been there – nothing different about it, though. ‘Teenage boy clutter’ was a fairly constant phenomenon.

Harry plunged into his trunk, burrowing his arm all the way up to the elbow, and extracted a minuscule bottle from within its depths. Felix Felicis. Hermione still couldn’t believe that using it to finally gain the upper hand over Slughorn had been Ron’s idea.

“Well, here goes.”

Harry knocked back a careful gulp as Hermione looked on in awe, and he had only just lowered the bottle when she asked, “What does it feel like?”

He merely stared back at her for a few seconds, as if perturbed by how anticlimactic the moment had been… but then, slowly, a look of absolute, vivacious wonderment bloomed on his face. He positively beamed, hopped onto his feet spryly and spoke with uncharacteristic merriment, “Excellent. Really excellent. Right … I’m going down to Hagrid’s.”

“What?” Ron and she spoke at the same time, in matching astounded tones.

“No, Harry,” Hermione prompted, “You’ve got to go and see Slughorn, remember?”

Harry was the living, breathing, (raving) embodiment of self-assurance. “No. I’m going to Hagrid’s; I’ve got a good feeling about going to Hagrid’s.”

“You’ve got a good feeling about burying a giant spider?” asked Ron, thoroughly appalled.

The Almighty Chosen One pulled his supreme invisibility cloak out of his bag. “Yeah,” he expounded, “I feel like it’s the place to be tonight, you know what I mean?”

“No.” Ron and she once again spoke in harmony.

Hermione nervously examined the golden liquid glittering inside the tiny bottle Harry had drunk from. “This is Felix Felicis, I suppose?” she said fretfully, “You haven’t got another little bottle full of – I don’t know –”

“Essence of Insanity?” Ron offered.

Harry – well, Harry’s disembodied head – laughed. “Trust me,” he said as he walked towards the stairs while fixing his cloak and disappearing completely, “I know what I’m doing… or at least
Felix does.”

Hermione and Ron shared a brief distressed look, before hastening to follow him. The door was open – so presumably Harry had made it out; but before they could take another step, their path was cut off by Lavender Brown… Lavender Brown who at that moment could be called Scarlett Crimson.

“What were you doing up there with her?” she hollered.
“OH! Uh… Lavender… fuck, okay, look… this isn’t… it wasn’t… we weren’t…”

Ladies and gents, if you ever require top quality inarticulate spluttering during unfortunately awkward situations, Ron Weasley is your man!

“You weren’t what? Go on tell me!”
“We weren’t… weren’t… anything, alright?! It was nothing! Nothing!”

Hermione tried to intercede, “Lavender, Ron and I were just talking…”

“You shut the fuck up, you slag. You’ve been trying to steal my boyfriend from day one! You shameless hussy – you – you – ARE YOU HAPPY NOW?”

Well then. There were basically two ways to deal with this situation:

1. By responding in kind, i.e., screaming back righteously, raging at being called such vile names, having it out, unleashing a proper slanging match, et cetera.
2. By bowing out... Because fuck that; it so wasn’t her scene.

Hermione raised her palms in surrender, and escaped out the door, careful to avoid brushing against Lavender. The door slammed shut behind her.

She breathed deeply.

Then she realised that there was another loud argument occurring in front of the portrait hole.

“I didn’t fucking push you, Ginny! I haven’t so much as touched you in weeks.... not that you’d notice, of course…”

“Oh Merlin’s rod. Don’t start that again. Honestly, Dean... will you EVER stop complaining?!”

“Sure, when you stop nagging and biting my head off for no bloody reason…”

Good lord, Harry had left a trail of absolute destruction in his wake. Perhaps that was how Felix Felicis worked – it maximised its drinker’s luck while drastically diminishing the luck of those around them to maintain the general balance of fortune.

Hermione didn’t need to think twice before scampering out of the common room. The thought of passing the evening in the library made her soul sing, and the prospect of spending a good portion of that time in Theo’s company warmed her heart.

As she was walking past the Transfiguration section, angry loud-whispers seeped out from between the bookshelves.

“Do you even know what you’re saying?! That makes no sense – shit, you’re such an idiot.” That was definitely, undoubtedly Padma speaking.

A male voice retorted heatedly: “So I made one mistake! You don’t have to be such a harping bitch about it!”

“How dare you?! I don’t know what I ever saw in you…”
Shaking her head, Hermione quickened her pace. She was truly desperate to reach her oasis of serenity.

Half past midnight, and Hermione sat alone in the Gryffindor common room. Harry still hadn’t returned from the Felicis-trip. She gnawed at her lip in worry... the potion had to have worn out hours ago. Where could he be?

She curled up on at sofa, determined to stay up till he got back. Not that going to her dorm was an option – the collective scorn of Lavender and Parvati had formed an impenetrable force field at the door...

The next thing she knew, Harry was shaking her awake.
“Harry... Where were you? What time is it?”

“Dunno. Late. I was in Dumbledore’s office. I got the memory, Hermione! Fuck, I have so much to tell you... but... tomorrow, alright? I’m knackered.”
Human consciousness is immeasurably complex; the id, ego, and superego – for lack of better labels – come together to construct a complete sense of identity that make human beings one of the greatest examples gestalt. A cluster of organs, bones, and muscles, connected via various systems, encased in tissue... are turned into a person.

Hermione didn’t believe in the soul: not in the sense theological dictums had built it up to be. She didn’t believe in some divinely touched essence capable of outliving its mortal vessel. She certainly didn’t believe it was something that could be torn into tiny bits like a loaf of bread, and scattered around a forest.

Then Harry told her about Horcruxes.

She couldn’t wrap her head around the concept. Through an act of evil you could splinter your so-called soul and contain it in an outside object, and thus attain immortality of a kind. *What*? When in doubt, go back to the Greeks.

Aristotle didn’t believe the soul and body could be separated: that was no help at all. The Epicureans, however, considered the soul to be made up of atoms – just like everything else. That could work.

Say it *is* a fragment of your consciousness that you’re putting away... how did the absence of this fragment affect the whole? And this fragment... did it form a whole in itself? If not, the Horcrux would hold only a part of your essence – only a fraction of who you are...

“Hermione, why are you scowling at Dennis? Poor kid looks like he’s going to shit himself...”

She started, smoothening her expression and looking away immediately.

“Sorry,” she muttered to Ron, and flashed a rueful half-smile at Dennis, “I suppose got lost in thought.”

Ron grinned at her and shook his head, looking simultaneously bemused and delighted. It was the kind of wide and charming grin that ought to have set her heart racing and her cheeks flushing and her stomach twisting in on itself. Hermione waited and waited... but after nothing more than a feeble twinge in her gut, she simply smiled back at him.

She looked over at Harry, and he was, once again, engrossed in his damned potions textbook, probably looking for some secret spell that would help him break into the Room of Requirement. With Katie’s return, he was even more determined to catch Malfoy red-handed.

Hermione wanted to shake him. You’d think that after finding out that there were four pieces of Voldemort’s soul/essence/consciousness/ego(mania) left to be sought and destroyed, he’d be more focused on bigger things.

“Hullo, you lot,” Ginny chimed, skipping up to them and dropping down on the sofa between Harry and Ron.

The former dropped his book, ink, quill, and composure on the floor as he stuttered over a greeting in response. The latter beamed at his sister.

“Hullo yourself.”

The Weasley siblings were radiant in the wake of their respective split-ups, even while their ex-partners skulked around the place looking miserable and irate.
“Katie’s back!” Ron sang, “Did you see?”
“Yes!” Ginny trilled back, “No more McLaggen, no more Dean... The original line up is back, baby! We’re going to kick Ravenclaw’s arse in the next match!”

Ginny’s hearty proclamation was augment by a cheery hear, hear from the boys, and the three of them settled into an impassioned discussion about strategy and formation and what have you.

Hermione was bored to the soul.

Her hand was shaking like mad as she wrote: Your potions essay is between pages 16 and 17 of your textbook.

Taking a huge gulp of air, she summoned forth all her courage and concentration. Then she pointed her wand at herself.
She closed her eyes, sharpening her thoughts to one single point...

“Fragmen omitto.”

One. Two. Three.
Slowly, she opened her eyes, feeling horribly disappointed. The spell hadn’t worked. But it fucking had to work. It had to had to had to had to...
Get a grip.
A few shuddering breaths later, Hermione turned back to her potions essay, ready to give it one final look-over........ the parchment before her was not her potion’s essay. Huh.
It was empty, save for one sentence...

Oh. Oh.
The spell had worked.

A few more harmless experiments later, Hermione trudged out of the library, tired but fairly satisfied. While her parents would require an infinitely more complex version of the spell, the facility with which she had accomplished these minor trials put her at ease.

Her peace of mind was shot to hell the moment she entered her dormitory.
“I hope you’re happy,” were the words Lavender used to greet her, in a voice that was heavy with acrimony.
Hermione had nothing to say back – no words of solace, of contrition (not that she owed Lavender any), nor of reciprocated bitterness. She mutely walked over to her wardrobe, blindly took out the first pair of pajamas she could reach, and hurried towards the bathroom door.
Obviously – obviously – Lavender wasn’t finished.
“You stole him from me. It’s what you’d planned from the beginning, wasn’t it... you’re such a whore” –
“That’s enough, Lavender,” Hermione cut in sharply.
From the corner where she’d been timidly watching the show, Parvati entreated, “Come on, Lav... let’s go down to the common room and finish our divination homework...”
“You go!” Lavender yelled stroppily, “Little Miss Priss and I need to have it out.”

With flashing eyes, she marched right into Hermione’s personal space and hissed, “You just always get what you want, don’t you? What were you two really doing up in his dorm last night? You threw yourself at him, I’ll bet. Oh, I’ve been watching you dance around him for years like a total trollop. You couldn’t stand to see him with me, could you? ...Couldn’t stand to see him happy. Just you wait. He’ll come crying back to me soon, when he remembers how much your fucking nagging gets to him, and how horrid your hair is. You should have heard him go on about you; don’t fool yourself into thinking he actually likes you –”

To Hermione’s absolute horror, she felt her temper-sensitive tear ducts threaten to begin leaking. Quivering with anger and humiliation, she positively growled, “Listen here you gobby cow... Ron broke up with you because you were jealous, intolerably clingy, and all-in-all painful to be around. It has nothing, NOTHING, to do with me. Now get out of my face before I hex your hair into something so hideous that you’ll spend the rest of your life envying mine.”

Lavender backed away with an outraged gasp, clearing the path to the bathroom. As Hermione marched down it, Lavender issued her parting shot: “He really can’t stand you, you know. Thinks you’re a bit of a joke. If you didn’t help him with his homework, he’d have told you to fuck off ages ago...”

Hermione slammed the bathroom door shut, and leant heavily against it, rubbing her temples in exhaustion. Lavender’s hysterical rant permeated through the thick wood of the door and bounced off the tiles.

“...A boring, prissy swot with no figure to speak of...”

“How would you define the soul?”

It seemed as good a moment as any to strike up a philosophical discussion.

Spring was in full bloom – balmy weather, cloudless skies, fresh verdure, the works. Hermione and Theo lay side by side on the soft grass by the lake, staring up the vast expanse of clear blue above them.

“I wouldn’t dare to try.”

Hermione made a small reproachful noise and said, “Humour me, Theo. I’d like a pureblood’s perspective.”

He was quiet for a while, apparently attempting to piece together a lucid explanation.

“Well, I suppose it’s your... core essence. Where your magic resides.”

“So... some form of energy then?” Hermione asked, intrigued.

“Partly. But it’s also... well, it’s you. And not just your personality and morality and all that. I mean, it is all that, but more. It’s um... your heart...”

“But all that’s a construction of your own mind,” Hermione argued, “It’s still tied to you in a very real and physical way...”

“Not really,” Theo answered thoughtfully, “You can channel and part with your magic; the same is true for the soul. It’s a separate system, in a way. It’s what the Dementors suck out of you with a delightful little buss. I suppose your mind is a part of it, too.”

“So you’re saying,” Hermione began, half sitting up and resting on her elbow so she could face him fully, and pulled away the bluegreen scarf that he had draped over his eyes, “that the mind is
just a constituent of the soul, rather than the soul being a culmination of the mind’s perceptions?"
“That’s putting it better than I ever could,” Theo said and shrugged, squinting against the sun’s glare.
Hermione fell back down on her back, watching the glorious cobalt dome of the sky pensively.
“This doesn’t gel well with science.”
Theo let out a short laugh. “Aren’t you used to that by now?”
“Humph.”
“WHY are you burdening me with such deep theoretical conversation on a glorious, pleasant, lazy day like today? Lie back and bask in the indolence, Hermione.”
Hermione looked at him scornfully and said, “I don’t do that. Not ever.”
“Humour me,” he retorted fluently, “Just loaf about with your buddy –”
“Are you ever going to let that go?”
“No. Loaf about with your best buddy Theo, and soak up the sun. Don’t move or think for a whole blissful hour. It’s good for –”
“For the soul?” she asked with an arched brow.
Theo grinned. “Exactly.”

It was rather lovely, being stretched out languorously. Hermione let the torpor cloud her senses, and she felt wonderfully floaty.
Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore
Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;
O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.
She said those lines out loud, and her fellow Lotus Eater grunted in appreciation.

The hour ended eventually, as all hours do. Hermione grudgingly hauled herself up, dreading the long, long walk up to the Arithmancy classroom.

Before leaving, she placed a slightly ragged book squarely on Theo’s chest, not waiting to see if he’d acknowledge it. The Razor’s Edge. The epigraph was boldly printed on the inside cover — "The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path to ‘enlightenment’ is hard" — and she’d stuck a post-it under it, on which she had carefully written out a quote (...tit for tat, the bard for the bard...):

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

On putting the final full stop, she had thought… your move, Malfoy.
It was a rather audacious thing to do, she knew. He wouldn’t recognise her handwriting, but he would definitely ask Theo where he was getting all these books from… if he hadn’t already.
Hermione realised with a start that she hadn’t ever considered how Theo was justifying suddenly having access to such a vast bounty of muggle books.
But she didn’t turn back to ask. The boy lounging by the lake was relaxed, tranquil, and soothed. Mentioning Malfoy would bring an end to all of that.
It was dinner time in the Great Hall, and Harry and Ginny were flirting up a storm over ice-cream and sticky toffee pudding. Ron was entirely oblivious; all his attention was devoted to the ungodly pile on the dish in front of him. But from her vantage point of superior perception (well, it was true!), Hermione could clearly see that her two friends were working towards a definite coupling. She smiled to herself, and dug into her pudding with zeal.

The seven dwarfs sat around a table in the Hogwarts library, mining for diamonds among stacks of books for various homework assignments. Doc Granger thought she would have much preferred being in a damp and gloomy underground quarry.

Grumpy Weasley was muttering crabribly from behind *Creature’s of the Dark*, shooting frequent chary looks at Sneezy Nott – an absolute contrast to his amiable sister, Happy Weasley, who was the over-chipper force that had instigated the coming together of that motley crew. She was taking a break from *not* working on her essay by drawing out quidditch formations. She tugged at the sleeve of Bashful Potter’s robe and invited him to examine her doodles, at which Bashful flushed, chuckled, and said “That’s a really good plan!”

Sneezy... well, sneezed, for the zillionth time, and mopped at his red and swollen nose miserably. “For fuck’s sake, Nott,” groused Sleepy Finnigan, his tousled head emerging blearily from the cradle of his arms, “Would you stop that already?”


He sneezed again. Sleepy and Grumpy grunted irritably in harmony. Dopey Lovegood (who’d spent most of the afternoon silent and smiling serenely) took a pouch of tiny pellets out of her bag and offered it to Sneezy, who unhesitatingly took a handful and tossed them into his mouth. Almost instantaneously, the red splodges on his face disappeared. “Holy shit,” he said in wonder, “I feel fantastic! What were those?”

“Honey, shrivelfig leaves, and pepperup tablets. My mum’s old recipe,” Dopey replied, “I’m glad you’re feeling better.” She patted Sneezy’s arm softly. “I love you,” Sneezy told her fervently... and immediately his face turned red again.

“Awwww,” Happy squealed, “Are you two together?”

“NO!” Sneezy yelped... bashfully.

“Well, we’re all together right now,” Dopey countered, fairly. “And Theo and I are together at other times, too... But in a very different way. It’s just the two of us then. Theo doesn’t like other people to see us when we are together.”

Of course, Lu– er, *Dopey* hadn’t meant to say something so thick with innuendo, but it was enough to make Sleepy bury his head in his arms again... but this time to laugh. Happily. Happy – that is, the real Happy – was grinning wickedly, while Bashful and Grumpy had identical looks of distaste on their faces. Sneezy had surpassed bashfulness, and was teetering towards mortification...

Doc was annoyed. *Nobody* was staying in character. “Simmer down you all,” she whispered hotly, “Else the hunter and the wicked stepmother will find us!”
Six pairs of eyes stared at her in profound bewilderment.
“Um, I meant Fitch and Pince.”
A few seconds of silence later, Bashf – *Harry* grinned at her. “Don’t worry, Snow white,” he said jocundly, “We won’t let them get you.”
The remaining five looked between the two of them apprehensively.
...Actually, all except Luna, who twirled her quill between her fingers and said, “Being together is so wonderful. I love being together.”

Hermione flitted about the empty common room with a scrap of parchment in hand, a bit heady and delirious – both from her accomplishment, and the late hour.
It was three in the morning, and she had successfully made herself forget the location of thirty of her things, as well as convinced herself that she had somehow attended a non-existent Bowie concert at Brixton Academy that night. It had been a heavenly minute-and-a-half.
She began humming as she unearthed her scrunchie from under a heap of cushions on the floor, and then flew over to the curtains behind which she had hidden her schoolbag.
*It’s a God awful small affair*
*To the girl with the mousey hair,*
*But her mummy is yelling, ”No!”*
*And her daddy has told her to go,*
*But her friend is nowhere to be seen.*
*Now she walks through her sunken dream....*

Quidditch-mania had claimed the *souls* of all her housemates. Hermione mourned the loss over a light breakfast of tea and a blueberry muffin, and she attempted to drown out the excited buzzing by focusing her attention on an article in *The Guardian* about the newly elected muggle Prime Minister. Her parents had been warily optimistic about this Tony Blair...
“My, can I have the sports page, Hermione?” Dean asked from across the table, “I hope United were fucking hammered yesterday...”

A little while later, Harry and Coote came in, propping up a very sickly looking Ron between them. Ginny and Demelza trailed in after, looking amused.
“Ron!” Hermione exclaimed, “What happened?”
“Nerves,” Ginny answered when Ron merely shook his head, “He just spent an hour in the toilet, throwing up.”
Apparently, Ron’s anxiety-induced nausea had abated enough for him to shovel down bacon and eggs. And toast. And beans. And Pumpkin juice.
Hermione wrinkled her nose and turned back to her paper.

When she resurfaced, everybody around her was still talking about the upcoming match. She stood
up promptly, but just as she was turning to leave, she caught sight of the look on Dean’s face. He was staring at Ginny and Harry as they sat with their heads close together, talking enthusiastically. Something in his expression reminded her of herself... it was probably the exact look she had worn when she watched Ron and Lavender together.

“Hey Dean,” she called, “I was planning to go look at those massive war paintings outside the history of magic classroom; want to come with?”

Dean blinked at her in surprise... then understanding... and then gratitude.

“Yeah. Sure.” He popped the last bit of his toast into his mouth and smiled.

It was getting preposterously ridiculous.

Peakes got into a bloody brawl with two members of the Ravenclaw team; a verbal sparring match spiralled out of control, and ended with two bloody noses, and a fractured ankle. Professor McGonagall, beside herself with fury, had given all three of them detention for the next two nights.

As she dragged the battered thugs away, the crowd that remained wasted no time in rekindling a juvenile rap-battle.

An updated internal assessment marks sheet had been posted on the notice board, and Hermione noted with great satisfaction, that she was at the top of all her classes.

...Except potions.

The acidic bubbling of antipathy she felt when she saw that dissipated when she become aware of the name under hers in the Ancient Runes column.

She gave Theo the happy tidings when they met at the library later that evening.

“All thanks to you!” he said warmly.

“Not at all,” Hermione contradicted, “It’s all thanks to the work you put in. If I could pull up a person’s score so easily, Harry and Ron would be among the top students in our year.”

Theo made a face, “You know darling, I live for the day you’ll finally stop equating me with those arseholes –” Hermione levelled a look at him, “— er, those fine gentlemen.”

She rolled her eyes, and pointed down at his textbook, wordlessly telling him to get to work.

“Isn’t Potter topping potions?”

Hermione gritted her teeth. “Don’t remind me.”

When it was time for them to part, Theo gave her three of her books back. Hermione nervously ran her finger along the hardbound edges of *A Discourse on Inequality*, before finally harnessing the pluck to ask, “Where have you told him you’re getting these from?”

“Oh,” Theo’s smirk was far too loud, “I was wondering why you hadn’t asked me about that.”

“Well?”

He idly pulled at one of her curls until it was perfectly straight. “Truth is, he hasn’t asked.”

Hermione frowned in disbelief. She watched him watch her hair spring back into place when he let it go.
“Really?”
“Really,” he affirmed. He reached for that lock of hair again, and Hermione reared back to avoid his hand.

“He’s just unquestioningly accepting all these muggle books from you?” she demanded.
“I suppose he’s made his assumptions,” Theo replied, now twining pieces of her hair around his finger, “It’s not like I’m well acquainted with a lot of muggles or muggleborns.”
“You mean to say,” Hermione said slowly, “That he knows these books are mine?”
He closed his fist around the ends of her hair and used the tips to dust his robes, “I’m almost certain he does.”
“And... he’s still taking them. And reading them.” Hermione was floored. She slapped his wrist until he relinquished his hold on her curls.
“Evidently,” Theo confirmed, eyeing the top of her head speculatively. Hermione stood up before he could act on whatever he had planned next.
“Um. Wow.”
“Isn’t it just?”

He walked her back to her common room, always two steps behind so that he could keep flicking at her hair to make it bounce around wildly.

Hermione had missed dinner again, but it had been for a decent cause; she had saved herself from Professor Vector’s raised-brows-pursed-lips-utterly-unimpressed look of censure that she would have had to face had she not raced up to her office and asked to make a correction in her essay. That hadn’t taken more than a few minutes.
But then Hermione hadn’t been able to stop herself from asking the uncharacteristically harrowed looking woman what was bothering her, unknowingly opening up a can... nay, an intermodal container... of worms. She now knew too much – far too much – about Vector’s wastrel, ne’er-do-well husband, and the impossibility of arriving at a fair divorce settlement.

Well who’d have ever thought that a composed, put-together woman like that would babble in such an unhinged manner at her student?

She entered the common room chuckling incredulously to herself, and suddenly Ron leapt before her with his forehead puckered with worry.
“Seen Harry?” he demanded.
“Um, no?” she asked in trepidation, “What is it, Ron? What’s happened?”
“Dunno,” he replied, nervously tugging at a loose thread on his cuff, “He charged in here ‘bout half an hour back, drenched to the bone and covered in blood... asked me for my potions book and took right off again.”
“Covered in blood?!” Hermione spluttered, horrified. She then noticed Ginny sitting on a nearby armchair, white faced and tight lipped.

It would be fifteen more minutes before Harry returned. In that quarter-hour, Ginny didn’t budge or speak. Ron sat atop the table next to her, bouncing his legs fretfully. Hermione paced before the fireplace, tension making her motion almost robotic.

What oh what had Harry got himself into this time?
His face was ashen when he tripped in through the portrait hole.
“Harry!” All three of them cried at the same time, with Ron and Ginny shooting up to their feet.
Harry walked woodenly over to the chair Ginny had just vacated and eased himself into it.
Hermione knelt before him, softly but urgently asking, “Are you hurt, Harry?”
He shook his head. “Not my blood.”
Goose pimples broke down her arms and spine. “Whose... whose is it?” she croaked, while casting a silent, wandless *Tergeo* on his soaked shirt.
“It was an accident.”
“You’re scaring us, mate,” Ron said from behind her.

Harry inhaled deeply. He tapped his finger against his knee once... twice... and then –
“I... I think I... I... almost... killed Malfoy.”
The truest, weightiest manifestation of shock is complete immobility: being stunned into a state where your neurons sort of... disconnect... so thoroughly that you’re rendered mute and motionless; i.e., total mental and physical paralysis.

It was such a state that fell like a pall upon Hermione, Ron, and Ginny after Harry’s alarming admission. There were other people in the common room – it was only eight-thirty in the evening – but they all faded into irrelevance, and the din and chatter that they were generating was reduced to a stifled hum.

Ron was the first to recover.  
“You... almost... killed Malfoy? What?”
“It was an accident,” Harry repeated numbly, “I didn’t know... That spell... I didn’t expect it to...”
“You’re not making any sense,” Ron put forward plainly, “Why don’t you start at the beginning, yeah?”
“Yeah,” Harry agreed, nodding in appreciation of Ron’s astute suggestion, “Alright. I was on the seventh floor, checking for Malfoy on the Marauder’s map, when I saw that he was in a loo... with Moaning Myrtle, of all people. Erm, ghosts... ghost-people –” Harry shook his head at himself, “– Anyway. He... Malfoy... was crying over a sink –”
“Malfoy was crying?”
It was the barely-suppressed note of glee in Ron’s voice that revived Hermione’s vocal chords.  
“Then what happened?” she prompted urgently.

Bit by bit, Harry ran through the horrific tale. An impromptu duel... an unknown curse... an explosion of blood...

“Is he going to be okay?” Hermione asked shakily, after Harry was done.
“Snape burst in almost immediately,” he replied, “Like he’d been close by. He patched Malfoy up and took him to the hospital wing. He was still unconscious, though...”
“Blimey,” Ron breathed.
“What’s going to happen to you?” Ginny asked, perching herself on the arm of Harry’s chair.
“Detention,” Harry said glumly, “Every Saturday ‘til the end of term. It’s a good thing I was able to hide the Prince’s book; fuck knows what would’ve happened if Snape got a hold of it...”
“Where’d you put it?”
“Room of requirement.”
“Hold on,” Ron piped up in an unexpectedly loud cry, “Every Saturday...? What about the quidditch final?”
Harry’s face contorted, as he let out a devastated sigh. “I won’t be playing.”
“No!” Ron and Ginny gasped in unison.
“It’s the most important game of the season!” Ron spluttered.
That, Hermione decided, was the last straw. These people were falling into pieces over quidditch, summarily dismissing the near-manslaughter that had taken place no more than an hour ago. She felt sick... absolutely sick... and steeled herself to steer the conversation back onto a more significant path.

“I told you there was something wrong with that Prince person... And I was right, wasn’t I?”

The look Harry gave her was dangerously poisonous. “No, I don’t think you were.”

“Harry,” she said incredulously, “how can you still stick up for that book when that spell –”

“Will you stop harping on about the book!” he retorted irritably, “The Prince only copied it out! It’s not like he was advising anyone to use it! For all we know, he was making a note of something that had been used against him!”

Hermione felt her eyes go round with astonishment. “I don’t believe this. You’re actually defending –”

“I’m not defending what I did!” Harry cut in hastily. “I wish I hadn’t done it, and not just because I’ve got about a dozen detentions. You know I wouldn’t’ve used a spell like that, not even on Malfoy, but you can’t blame the Prince, he hadn’t written ‘try this out, it’s really good’ – he was just making notes for himself, wasn’t he, not for anyone else…”

“Are you telling me,” she asked while gaping at him, “that you’re going to go back –?”

“And get the book? Yeah, I am,” Harry said with a hardened look, “Listen, without the Prince I’d never have won the Felix Felicis. I’d never have known how to save Ron from poisoning, I’d never have –”

“– got a reputation for Potions brilliance you don’t deserve,” Hermione spat. She felt aflamed. She felt enraged. She felt...

“Give it a rest, Hermione!”

...She felt utterly perturbed and infuriated as she snapped her gaze unto Ginny at her sudden exclamation.

“By the sound of it, Malfoy was trying to use an Unforgivable Curse,” Ginny continued, “you should be glad Harry had something good up his sleeve!”

Hermione blenched. “Well, of course I’m glad Harry wasn’t cursed! But you can’t call that Sectumsempra spell good, Ginny, look where it’s landed him!” When she saw that none of her companions thawed at that declaration, she attempted to speak in a language they were more likely to respond to, “... And I’d have thought, seeing what this has done to your chances in the match –”

“Oh, don’t start acting as though you understand quidditch. You’ll only embarrass yourself.”

Her blood temperature shot way past its boiling point. Ginny’s jaw was set pugnaciously, and at that moment Hermione felt nothing but genuine hostility towards the girl. What if she were to start listing out all the things Ginny didn’t understand? All the many, countless things that not one of those upright cunts understood... not Harry, who was staring up at Ginny in wondrous gratitude, and not Ron, who was glancing between the three of them with a look of gormless discomfort on his face...

It was always her versus them. There she goes again! Hermione having a right flap about the wrong thing, as usual.

A deep, long breath later, Hermione addressed Harry.

“May I see the Marauder’s map, please?” Her tone was brusque, but polite. Well accomplished, she had to say.

“Why?” Harry asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

“I need to find Theo.”

“Oh, sure,” Ginny said nastily, “Run off to him, why don’t you?”

Hermione ignored her. When Harry grudgingly handed her the map, she wasted no time in activating it and began frantically searching for the appropriately labelled dot.

There – in an empty classroom near the hospital wing, dot-Theo was pacing up and down and up
Hermione returned the map, rose fluidly onto her feet, and stalked towards the portrait hole. She felt Harry, Ron, and Ginny’s eyes on her back all the way. They felt like three searing stab wounds.

By the time she got to him, Theo had stopped pacing. For a few moments, Hermione stood at the door and watched him. He was sitting on a desk, stooped, with his face buried in his hands. The room was awash in blueblack and dark violet hues, save for a few moonbeams that streamed in through high windows, one of which was delineating his silhouette in fine silver strokes, turning him into a heartbreakingly poetic picture of tragedy. He sat like Pathos on a monument... drowning in grief.

With a painful lump in her throat, Hermione shuffled over to him and whispered, “Theo.” He didn’t budge, nor make any sound of acknowledgement. Tentatively, Hermione placed a hand on his hunched shoulder, and said once more, “Theo.” “What the fuck, Hermione.”

His voice came out muffled from behind his palms, but the husky, broken tenor revealed to her that he was – or very recently had been – crying. Theo... crying. It knocked the wind right out of her. And she had no idea what to say. All that she could think to do was move closer and wrap her arms around him, resting her head between his shoulder blades. Proximity allowed her to feel the way he was shaking jerkily, the way his breathing was erratic and laboured.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m so sorry.” “What... the... fu...ck,” he gasped.

She held him tightly until the she felt the last of his juddering. In the stillness that followed, she cautiously asked, “How is he?”

“Theo replied throatily, “The wounds have healed, but he lost so much blood. They don’t know how long... how long... how...fuck.”

With that, Theo shook himself free of her arms, and strode across the room. He seemed, suddenly, to become possessed by some vehement agitation; the moonlight-aura around him appeared to ripple with the intensity of it.

“What the fuck,” he roared with this renewed vigour, “was Potter thinking?”

Hermione swallowed. “He didn’t know...”

“He didn’t know what?” Theo rounded on her.

It was the first proper look she’d gotten of his face, and the ashen pallor of it... his bloodshot eyes... were like another punch to her gut.

“He didn’t know what spell would do,” she replied quietly. He curled his lip vituperatively, and Hermione hastened to reaffirm her claim, “I swear, Theo. He had no idea... he panicked and shot the first thing he could think of. He didn’t know that it would... um...”

“That it would nearly kill Draco? Oh really? The spell just popped up in his head out of nowhere, eh?”

“He’d read it. Somewhere.”

The look that Theo gave her then turned the dreadful sickened feeling in her stomach into acid. Her insides burned.

“He’d read it,” Theo repeated bitterly, “Somewhere.”
“Yes,” Hermione pressed pathetically, “And Malfoy was about to use the Cruciatu curse on him...”

“Oh, so you’re saying he deserved to be flayed to death?!?”

“NO! It was an impossibly tense situation, and –”

“That Cruciatu curse wouldn’t have fucking worked anyway,” he muttered, scraping his nails through his hair.

Hermione was stumped. “What... what do you mean?”

Another abrupt change of demeanour struck Theo. It looked as though desolation had dropped from a great height straight onto his shoulders, and he sagged under the weight of it. He staggered towards the closest chair and fell into it.

“Draco wouldn’t have pulled off much of a crucio,” he sighed wretchedly, “You really have to mean it... to want to inflict the worst sort of pain imaginable... to revel in it...” Hermione made a small sound, and he looked up at her resentfully, “Yes, I know you think that just because Draco’s called you names and played mean tricks on you, he’s capable of torturing people. But I happen to think I know him better. At worst, your precious Chosen One would’ve felt a short spasm... a twinge... Not even that, given the state Draco was in...”

“Harry said he was crying... before...”

Theo closed his red-rimmed eyes, overpowered by ineffable grief. “Yeah,” he choked, “He’d gotten a letter from Lucius earlier today. Fucked him up real bad. It took me hours to get it out of him... apparently the Dark Lord had a bit of a temper flare-up and decided to take it out on Narcissa.”

A lone, pearly tear trailed down his narrow cheekbone. It caught the moonlight spectacularly. For the first time, Hermione felt that she was lucky, having the option to alter her parent’s memories to keep them safe. She slowly made her way towards Theo and gently wiped away the gleaming drop that had come to a precarious halt at the point of his chin.

“Are they here? Mr and Mrs Malfoy...?”

“No. Snape thought it would be best if we didn’t tell them. He’s probably right. ...Merlin, Hermione. I... I can’t... I cannot deal with this anymore. D-Draco... The way he looks right now... bloodless... still... so still... it’s one of my worst nightmares made real. I just... I...”

His head fell back into his hands, as he sobbed in earnest.

Every bit and component that Hermione was made of turned stone cold in despair. She realised that there were very few things that disturbed her as much as the sight of Theo crying. It tore at her, viscerally. Helplessly, she reached out to touch him...

“Theo?”

The lilting, dulcet call came from the door, and both Hermione and Theo started. Clad in her purple, fuzzy robe, Luna glided into the room. She kept her eyes on Theo and came to an uncertain stop a few feet away, directly in the path of a particularly sharp moonbeam.

Standing bathed in that luminous shaft of light, Luna seemed to have realised her true purpose; she was made to be drenched in such milky brilliance. Everything about her – her dirty blonde hair, her pale skin and eyes, her peculiar persona, and her very name – was specifically designed to come into its own when illuminated in such a manner. She was ethereal; she was mesmerising.

A strangled gasp from Theo had Hermione tearing her eyes away from the spectacular vision before them. He looked devastatingly awestruck. Luna’s radiance seemed to have magnified some of his attributes as well – Hermione had never seen him so raw, so unmasked.

In a flash, he was on his feet, and he charged towards Luna. His face was determined and set, his
stride was almost menacingly purposeful... It was quite alarming...

...Until he cupped Luna’s face in his hands and kissed her.

She barely hesitated; her arms encircled his waist almost straight away, and she returned his kiss.

They were somehow contrary and harmonious all at once. Theo was the personification of urgency – he was exigent, fuelled by desperation and anguish. On the other hand, Luna was patience. She was gently coaxing calm and fortitude; tender, but potent enough to be more than a match for Theo. They were like two supplementary sinusoidal waves, weaving together and undulating fluently.

It was nothing like the clumsy, frenzied teenage snogging on frequent display in shadowy nooks and quite corners of Hogwarts. This was fierce. It was real. It was adult.

It took a faint moan from Luna to make Hermione realise that she was intruding on an extremely private moment. As quietly as should manage, she crept out of the room, reeling, but comforted by the knowledge that for the time being at least, Theo was going to be just fine.

At breakfast the next morning, Harry, Ron, and Ginny were pointedly friendly towards her. Congenial. Like they were being so gracious by taking the highroad and letting bygones be bygones.

She grit her teeth returned their kindness with interest.

Harry could take off on a perilous horcrux-related escapade with Dumbledore anytime soon; Ginny needed help studying for her O.W.L.s – Hermione couldn’t afford to sulk.

Over the next two days, passions and emotions ran higher than ever, quidditch mania peaked, and Hermione got stuck with a permanent migraine.

Thanks to Pansy Parkinson and Moaning Myrtle, the entire school had learnt about Harry and Malfoy’s bathroom face-off. (Both girl and ghost had run rampant, wailing and howling at an identical pitch, serving as a very efficient – and shrill – public announcement system).

The Slytherin students were, as expected, aggressively cutting towards Harry. The Gryffindors were extremely put out at well... simply because their captain and star player had been banned from the final. That was it. Strict house rivalry rules dictated that they weren’t allowed to feel any sort of horror towards Harry unintentional act of violence against the scum of Slytherin.

Hermione spent nearly all her time in the library archives, scouring through records from the past ten decades. Her mission was simple: Find the Prince.

*The Prince*, she scoffed to herself. The way Harry said it, as though it was both a grand title and an affectionate nickname, was utterly ridiculous. This Prince was probably a repressed sociopath – one that even Machiavelli would’ve distanced himself from.

She had put aside a pile, eliminating everyone from the year 1920, and pulled pile 1930 closer.

First up: Kenneth Abbot... quite a fit one, he was...

After an hour went whizzing by, Theo joined her and caught her in a chokehold that could maybe, possibly be considered a hug, if you were just short of completely mental.

“My brilliant, beautiful, bestest buddy Hermione! How long I have wondered among these blessed
old tomes in search of you!”
Hermione squirmed until he let her go, and stared him with concerned befuddlement. “You seem... cheerful?”
“Why wouldn’t I be? It’s a glorious summer day! The sun is shining, the birds are singing; I just took the most dee-lightful stroll through the forest.”
Theo beamed. He beamede. Clearly, he hadn’t gone alone for this stroll... and clearly he and his companion hadn’t done a whole lot of actual strolling.
“Sound’s charming,” Hermione replied with a dee-lighted smile.
“Draco woke up.”
“Oh?” she breathed, “When?”
“Today morning,” he said as he shoved aside a few stacks of paper so that he could seat himself on the table Hermione was working at (she narrowed her eyes at his careless treatment of the ancient crumbling parchment), “He’s snarky, acerbic, and cranky... prime Draco, really.”
“So that explains why you’re so...” Hermione flailed her hand about as she re-straightened her carefully stacked piles.
“So what?”
“So damn sanguine.”
Theo laughed. “I told you, darling. It’s a dee-lightful day, and –”
“Did you bring Malfoy up to speed then? Apprise him of all the latest developments? Let him know about your lovely new girlfriend?”
“Erm, yeah. I did.”
“Did that send him right back into a coma?”
Theo scowled. “He... laughed. A lot.”
“...And then?”
“And then he asked me about Potter’s punishment for shredding him. Which is criminally lax, by the way. Detention. Honestly.”
“That’s it?”
“Right?! Anyone else would’ve been expelled –”
“No. I mean... he just laughed? He didn’t... um... pitch a fit?”
For five entire seconds, Theo regarded her with a small half-smile. “You remember how during that glorious time when we were getting to know each other, I kept surprising you?” he asked.
“You still keep surprising me,” Hermione answered honestly.
He reached out to squeeze her arm affectionately, and said, “Well... expect the same from Draco.”
She protested (“I’m not getting to know him!”), and he just grinned (“Aren’t you though?”)

“NICE ONE, DEAN!” Seamus roared, as the lanky substitute chaser scored another goal for Gryffindor.

They were nearly two hours into the final – Ravenclaw was in the lead by... well, some number, and the consequent clamour was deafening. Sandwiched between Neville and Seamus (and some shapely fifth year girl whom Seamus had somehow cajoled onto his lap), Hermione was terribly distracted.

“Bradley scores!” the nameless Hufflepuff commentator yelled, “Hundred and ten to Ravenclaw, putting them at a twenty point lead!”
Cue: more hyperactive screaming.
She could have been practicing memory charms. She could have been finalising her Transfiguration essay. She could have been practicing wandless shield charms. She could have been painting her fucking toenails.

“ANOTHER TEN TO RAVENCLAW!”

Harry would be devastated if Gryffindor lost. ‘Inconsolably dejected’ is how she would’ve described his expression as he had left for detention with Snape earlier that day.

“That was a close shave for Bell! The Ravenclaw beaters are particularly ruthless today...”

O young Lochinvar is come out of the west,
Through all the wide Border his steed was the best;
And save his good broadsword he weapons had none,
He rode all unarm’d, and he rode all alone.
So faithful in love, and so dauntless in war,
There never was knight like the young Lochinvar.

“...CHANG AND WEASLEY ARE NECK AND NECK BEHIND THE SNITCH...”

Everyone around her had gotten to their feet. Hermione leapt up promptly, just in time to see Ginny shoot forward with an astounding burst of acceleration and close her fingers around the tiny golden ball.
The world exploded. The stands were a dam that burst, and people gushed onto the pitch in a thick deluge, all the while screaming... screaming...
If Neville hadn’t grabbed her and kept her steady, Hermione would’ve been tragically crushed to death in that deranged stampede.

Eventually, the party moved into the common room, and since every single eardrum was still on quidditch-match-mode, the shouting and hollering come along too. It all reached its zenith when the team made their grand entrance, holding up a big silver cup.
All of Hermione’s jaded indifference disintegrated the moment she saw the pure jubilance on Ron’s face. She bounded towards him, and he pulled her into an impossibly tight embrace, lifting her off her feet.
“We won!” he cried “WE FUCKING WON!”
Pumpkin fizz and meat pies were passed around. In one corner, a group of seventh years broke into an old victory song. And that was when the portrait hole sprung open and Harry was pulled into the throng. His mouth hung open in disbelief as he attempted to make sense of the commotion around him. Helpful as ever, Ron hurtled towards him, trophy in hand and yelling, “We won! We won! Four hundred and fifty to a hundred and forty! WE WON!”
Hermione looked behind her to exchange a grin with Neville, when the entire room fell into a sudden, nonplussing silence. As ear-splitting as the preceding uproar had been... this was somehow louder.
Somewhere a glass shattered.
Slowly, Hermione turned her head, and the scene before her left her gasping.

Harry and Ginny’s kiss was nothing like the one she had witnessed between Theo and Luna. This here was a meeting of oh fucking finally and oh my god is this real. It was a synthesis of sheer ecstasy and amazement.
Hermione’s grin nearly split her face in half.
When they broke apart to the sound of giggles and wolf-whistles, Harry’s eyes roamed once across the crowd, before he took Ginny’s hand and they skipped out of the portrait hole. They left behind a rather large group of people who didn’t know what to do with themselves.

“Did you know about this?” Ron demanded, once some semblance of normalcy had been regained. Hermione, sidetracked by the sight of Dean’s back disappearing behind the door leading to the boy’s dormitories, didn’t answer. “Oi,” Ron tried again, “Did you know?” “Huh? Oh. Yes. Of course. You must’ve to be blind not to have seen that this is where they were headed.” “You’re joking! When... How... he’s my best mate... she’s my sister... nobody told me!” She rolled her eyes, knowing it was best not to say anything when Ron was being so dramatic. “What do I do?” “What do you mean what do you do? You don’t do anything!” “Do I allow this?” “...Allow?! It’s none of your business!” “She’s my sister!” “She’s a person – an individual – who makes her own decisions.” “Why do mad things keep happening?” he grumbled with a scowl. Hermione bumped his shoulder with her own. “I think, Ronald, that that would make an excellent epigraph for our collective memoir.” A surprised chuckle later, Ron clinked his glass against hers and said, “To madness, then. The one thing we can count on.”
As someone who was self-aware enough to be reasonably well acquainted with her own insecurities, Hermione believed that she was rather adept at picking them out in others, too. As a case in point, you could look at her accurate assessment of one Ronald Weasley: inconsistent friend and waning love interest.

The subject was temperamental in the extreme – easily aggravated, highly sensitive, thin-skinned, and known to hold grudges for inordinately long periods of time. As it happened (and armchair psychologists world over rejoiced) the floodgates could well and truly be opened by uttering the words ‘so tell me about your mother’.

Ron, unfortunately, faded into near-irrelevance when put beside his dynamic group of siblings – the charismatic curse-breaker, the forceful dragon-tamer, the able bureaucrat, mad and clever inventor uno y dos, and finally, the beautiful and vivacious little sister who was basically her mother’s dream come true.

“They fuck you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do.” Therefore, when Ron managed to win the enduring friendship of Harry Potter, it became his proudest accomplishment. It didn’t matter that the rest of the Weasley clan was quick to adopt him, and vice-versa... Harry was Ron’s friend. And Ron was Harry’s friend. Ron mattered to Harry, the person he’d miss the most, as the Triwizard Tournament had revealed.

When Ginny invaded that equation, the balance was thrown off completely.

They were sitting out on the grounds, Hermione, Ron, Harry, and Ginny, during a brief and rare shared free period. They’d all ditched their robes, swaddled instead in the perfect warmth of May. Harry was leaning against a tree with Ginny’s head on his lap, idly twirling a lock of her hair. He was also guffawing – with gusto – at Ginny’s quite frankly mean imitation of Ron talking with a mouth full of food.

This was how they chose to bond: by taking the mickey out of Ron. The fact that it was probably because Ron was their most easily accessible commonality was neither here nor there – Hermione could foresee it becoming a thing. Inside jokes, a shared nudge-nudge-wink-giggle... Ron was not made to withstand such frequent blows to the ego; certainly not from Harry, his supposed safe haven.

...His frown was deepening by the second...

“Why don’t we go for a walk, Ron?” she asked, her voice unnaturally high, “Give these two some time alone.”

Harry and Ginny both shot her grateful looks, and Ron nodded in sour agreement. He arose, and surprised Hermione by offering her a hand to help her up. She couldn’t fight the flush that spread across her cheeks as she accepted his overture.
They walked, for a long while, in uncomfortable silence that eventually got too tense for Hermione to deal with.

“Are you alright?”

“Dandy,” he grunted. And then – “those two are a bit sickening, aren’t they?”
Not in the least, actually. Sickening was what she’d use to describe what Ron and Lavender had been. Dear Prudence advised her against voicing that opinion.

“Ruddy potions homework is doing my head in,” Ron continued.
Surprisingly, it didn’t take much to tamp down the urge to offer to help him out with it.
“Let’s go visit Hagrid,” she said instead, “It’s been a while since we’ve seen him. And it’s been long enough since Aragog’s passing... hopefully he’ll only bring it up half a dozen times.”
A reluctant, sort-of-smile twitched its way across Ron’s face.

“Yeah, okay...” And he looked down at her in a curiously timid way, before hoarsely adding,
“...You, um, look really nice today.”
Hermione self-consciously fiddled with a pleat of her skirt. “Thank you,” she said softly, not elated, not indifferent, but on the shaky cusp between the two.

According to the most recent, highly distressed letter from her parents, three young women, students of the university of Gloucestershire, had been found in a... “state”... very close to her dad’s favourite camping spot in the forest of Dean. Authorities suspected that they were victims of brutal torture, and the trauma had robbed them of all their mental faculties. They were like empty shells; dead on the inside.

The *Daily Prophet* spoke of dementor attacks occurring all across Britain; having your soul sucked out of you could definitely be considered “brutal torture”... if you wanted to play it down.

Hermione was wrestling with her hair while reading Neville’s latest Herbology essay as it levitated in front of her. She’d stopped being surprised by his level of discernment by that point. There was a legitimate Herbology savant living inside that shambling young man...

She sighed in relief once she’d finally managed to pin up every last strand. But then a very disdainful voice spoke from behind her –

“No need to look so pleased. It still looks like shite.”
And with that, Lavender marched out of their dormitory with a smug grin on her stupid face.
Hermione rolled her eyes, bending to pick up her bag from the foot of her bed. It had been over a month since Ron and Lavender’s breakup, and still, the stream of disparaging remarks didn’t seem remotely close to stemming.

When she looked up, she saw Parvati lingering awkwardly by her bedpost.

“Listen, Hermione... I’m sorry about the way she’s been –”

“You don’t have to apologise for her,” Hermione cut in as courteously as she could manage.
“I know. But still...” Parvati hedged, running a finger along the carved wood of the post, “She’s being really nasty, but she can’t help it, you know. She really loved Ron.”
It was an honest to god struggle to not roll her eyes again. “I understand.”
“Um... also... actually... I was wondering if you could do something for me...”
And there it was. The whole reason for that phony apology.
“What is it?” Hermione asked wearily.
“It’s Padma. Ever since she split up with Anthony, she’s been... well, really depressed, see? And
I’ve never seen her like that before. I think there’s something she’s not telling me. Nobody else
seems to know anything... believe me, I’ve asked around. But you’re wicked smart; I’m sure you
could find out...”
“No,” said Hermione, shortly.

Padma-related guilt had been relegated to a fairly low position on Hermione’s List Of Things To
Angst About in the past couple of months, ever since she’d gotten involved with: A– Project
Desecrate Mum and Dad’s Memories But Don’t Let It Tear You Down (DMDMBDLITYD), B–
Project What The Fuck Is Draco Malfoy Up To (WTFDMUT, also known as, Harry’s Sanity And
Theo’s Happiness Are Hereby Declared Protected Species), C– Project Holy Shit, We’re Going To
Have To Go Spelunking for Soulbits (HSWGHTGSFS), and most recently, D– Project Exhume
The Unholy Prince (ETUP).

“Why the hell not?” Parvati spluttered.
“Because it’s none of my business.”
“You’re friends, though! And she’s... she’s my sister, Hermione. I’m worried.”
“If you’re so worried ask her yourself.”

Hermione didn’t want at all to be a part of that conversation for even a second longer.
“I’ve tried!” Parvati keened, “she won’t say anything. It’s killing me!”
“So that’s what it’s really about, isn’t it?” Hermione snapped, “You’re an incessant busybody who
needs to know everything about everyone.”
Instantly, Parvati’s mouth twisted with offense. “Ugh, you really are a stuck up bitch, Hermione.
I’m so sorry for bothering you.”
She spun around and stalked away, her long black hair swinging like an indignant pendulum.

Breathing hard, Hermione sat heavily down on her bed, wondering why she just couldn’t stop
rubbing people the wrong way.

“...so really, western art owes so much to Manet. He’s the one who punched the first hole in the
wall that led to modern movement...”

Hermione was babbling. Next to her, Dean nodded absently... sullenly... and she knew he wasn’t
really paying attention to a word she was saying.
She’d watched him furtively over breakfast; he had been visibly fuming as Harry and Ginny
engaged in incrementally flirtatious banter. In the climax, Ginny kissed a bit jam off the corner of
Harry’s mouth, and Dean threw down his toast and stormed out of the Great Hall. Feeling an
irrepressible tug of compassion, Hermione had followed, and then proceeded to try and lure him
into conversation over the next half hour.
Needless to say, it didn’t go well.

“...the next great pathbreaker, would have to be Cezanne, I suppose –”

Hermione gasped as she was unceremoniously spun around, and her subsequent shriek was muted
on account of her lips being smothered by another pair of lips.
Dean’s fingers dug into her upper arms as he hauled her closer, continuing his assault on her mouth
all the while. It took Hermione another moment to regain her bearings... and then she shoved him. Hard.
“What the fuck,” she spat, wiping a furious hand across her mouth.

Dean stumbled back, panting, and he just gaped at her wordlessly.

His expression morphed from staggered to horrified in slow motion – every detail of the transformation was documentable.

“Shit,” he exhaled.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Hermione demanded wrathfully.

“I... I’m so sorry, Hermione! Oh fuck. Holy fuck. I’m so so so sorry!”

“You’re sorry?!! Tell me why I shouldn’t hex you ‘til you’re nothing but a pile of ash on the floor!”

“Oh god, I don’t know what I was thinking!”

“I’ll tell you what you were thinking,” she supplied spitefully, “Revenge.”

Dean’s eyes went round with dismay. “You’re right. Shit... you right. I was just... I am a fucking mess. I’m so sorry, I –”

Hermione held up a hand to halt his useless faltering. “Just stop. I’m going to walk away now, and don’t you dare come after me. In fact, don’t say another word to me until I’ve decided I want to hear from you again.”

She went straight to the library – the only place that she believed would keep her from bursting out with rage-induced, uncontrolled magic. There were more than an adequate number of precious books around to keep her in check.

In the fleeting interlude between potions and ancient runes, Theo handed her a towering pile of books.

“That’s all of them,” he said, “And... it stops now, okay?”

“How come?” she asked, deftly shrinking the lot and dropping them into her bag.

“He says he can’t afford any more distractions right now.”

Theo had a chillingly haunted look in his eyes when he said that. Hermione swallowed, and nodded.

“Okay.”

On any other evening when twilight was just fading into night and the moon and stars had claimed their posts, Hermione would’ve been found either in the library or in her common room, deeply absorbed in some scholarly pursuit.

On this particular evening, however, she was perched on that well-secluded window ledge by the Astronomy tower, doing nothing – absolutely nothing – besides staring outside and sighing weakly. There was only one person she would’ve wanted with her then, and he was most likely ensconced in some sheltered corner of his own, enjoying a few blissful stolen moments with his girlfriend. Not that she grudged him that... oh no. Theo deserved every second of peace and happiness that could come by. But it was a fine summer evening; the sky was sapphire blue, the moon was a slim, delicate, gorgeously curving crescent like a powder-white eyelash, and Hermione felt utterly,
trenchantly alone.

Alone, desolate, and terrified. It was that time of the year again: they were just a day away from slipping into the final month of the school year, and that was generally when shit hit the fan. Terrible, awful things happened, and Harry came close to dying. Every bloody year, with no exceptions, ever since they’d enrolled in that mad school. Suddenly, the moon looked scythe-like; the grim glint at the edge of the reaper’s lethal blade.

She wanted a welcoming set of arms to fold into. She wanted to be held against a warm body, to rest her head against a beating heart, to feel a gentle palm stroke her hair...

God, she felt so alone.

So desolate. So terrified.

The menacing calm before a storm was meant to last only for a short while, but Hermione felt like she had spent several lifetimes suspended that ominous stillness.

Her thoughts led her to pull *The Razor’s Edge* out of her bag. Her cheeky post-it was still there...

*Oh*! But her writing had been erased, and in its place, written in vaguely familiar cursive was: *Away, you three-inch fool!*

In spite of herself... in spite of *everything*... Hermione leant her head against the cool window pane and laughed out loud.
Twenty-Five

Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue here has been directly lifted (errrr, borrowed) from HBP.

“Ginny and I are meeting for a study session in the library tomorrow. Would you like to join us?”
“Not in the slightest.”

They’d just finished up another (great in Hermione’s opinion, baffling according to Theo) Ancient Runes lesson, and were spending the fifteen minute break after soaking up some sun in the courtyard.
“Why not?” Hermione asked.
“I don’t think I can be around Potter without succumbing to the urge to give him a taste of his own vicious spell.”
Hermione fished around in her bag to hide the awkward flush on her cheeks. “Harry isn’t going to be there.”
“That’s immaterial. Ginny’s his girlfriend now – she’s sold her soul to the devil.”
The devil.
Hermione huffed, and popped open a box of butterscotch fudge that her parents had sent her. At once, Theo apprehended the whole lot, and then offered her one.
“You haven’t forgotten that Harry and I are still friends, have you?”
“Pshaw. As far as I’m concerned, you’re my friend above everything else. I know you’ll never say it out loud, but you love me more.”
She focused on maintaining the blankest look she could manage... but it didn’t matter. He could read her too well. Sure enough, he looked irritatingly pleased with himself.

“I’m going to be busy tomorrow anyway,” Theo continued, as the last residues of his smirk faded away, “It’s Draco’s birthday.”
Hermione frowned thoughtfully; “I thought he was opposed to any distractions?”
“Don’t care,” he replied flippantly, “It’s his birthday, and I’m going to ensure that he gets totally shitfaced.”

Their conversation was briefly interrupted by the sound of desperate yelling... followed by the source of it: Three Ravenclaw boys tore across the yard as Peeves, who had somehow procured one of Fred and George’s Fanged Frisbees, chased after them, cackling maniacally.

After an extended period of munching and sniggering, Theo mused, “By the way... Ginny and Potter... I still can’t wrap my head around it.”
Hermione turned her eyes heavenwards and said, “It’s been like... two weeks, Theo.”
He waved off her response, swallowed his fourth piece of fudge, and continued, “It’s just so bizarre. So...” he grimaced, “incestuous.”
“What!?” She choked on her (still first) piece of fudge.
“It is! It’s like she’s the closest thing Potter could get to the Weasel-King without being called a poof.”
Hermione’s jaw dropped, and she stared at Theo for a few gobsmacked seconds.
“That’s warped and completely ridiculous,” she sputtered, “And don’t call Ron that.”
“I know you secretly agree with me,” he replied pertly, while biting down on piece number five.
“You’re an idiot.”
He shot her a grave, meaningful look. She narrowed her eyes.
“You’re going out with Luna,” she reminded him, “Blond hair, grey eyes... was she the closest thing you could get to Malfoy without being called a poof?”
It was Theo’s turn to choke then, much to her great satisfaction, and she let that reflect in her tremendously smug smile.
“That’s... that’s just... Luna’s hair is at least four times darker than Draco’s!” Theo rebutted in outrage.
“Oh, have an in-depth knowledge of hair colour shades, do you?”
“Shove off, Hermione.”
She grinned, “Bet you really regret bringing the word _incestuous_ into play now.”
Something that looked frighteningly like determination stole over his face. He studied her with hard eyes, like Perry Mason about to deliver a clincher.
“You know, if I really wanted to date a female Draco, I’d be with you, not Luna.”

For a moment, Hermione thought he had actually petrified her, non-verbally. She felt frozen.
“Excuse me?” she demanded indignantly.
Now that he had regained the upper hand, Theo reverted to his leisurely disposition. He picked up yet another bit of fudge and tilted his head serenely.
“Hmm. The same forcefulness... that holier-than-thou conceit...”
Her ears felt like they were on fire. “Shut it, you prat –”
“...that unparalleled wit... the _annoying_ plethora of insecurities... the insane need to prove yourself...”
“How DARE you?!”
“That’s exactly what Draco would’ve said.”

Hermione leapt off the banister they were sitting on and stood with her hands on her hips before the insufferable bullshit-spewing, mendacious treat-stealer, glaring in righteous fury.
“You wanker! Give me back my fudge.”
“Nooo please! No more! We’ve been at it for hours and hours!”
“Do I need to remind you that you have your O.W.L.s in two weeks? Look, I know History of Magic can be a little dry –”
“A little? I think Binns’ plan is to bore us all to madness and then death so we can all be barmy blathering ghosts like him. Come on Herms... let’s call it a day.”
“Call me that once more and I’ll keep you here all night,” Hermione warned, but at Ginny look of superlative panic she relented and said, “Fine. Half an hour more. I will release you once we’ve
gone over the final years of the Giant Wars.”

They walked into the common room forty minutes later, with Ginny looking significantly perkier. Ron beckoned them over from a table by the window, while Harry grinned widely, with eyes for Ginny alone. She plonked herself next to him and curled into his side, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Had a productive evening?” Harry asked, smiling into her hair.

“Hermione is a slave driver,” Ginny replied around a yawn.

Hermione stuck her nose up in the air, “You’ll thank me later. They all come around... eventually... **Always.** It says a lot about human nature that people haven’t made *Just Listen to Hermione Without Moaning* an adage to live by.”

Harry and Ron laughed. Ginny stuck her tongue out, and then unattached herself from Harry just enough to grab a copy of the *Daily Prophet* that was lying on the floor.

“I’m now going to busy myself with important things like the news, rather than wasting my time mugging up irrelevant facts about wars that happened centuries ago.”

If Ginny hadn’t been Ginny, and Harry and Ron hadn’t been Harry and Ron, Hermione would’ve loved to take that opportunity to initiate a debate on the merits of historical awareness, and the pivotal role it played in understanding and contextualising the present. But, alas... they were Ginny, Harry, and Ron. Not that she really knew anyone else who would’ve been able to give the issue its due consideration.

(Her sub-supersub-subconscious mind whispered a name, and she squashed it down with the force of a sledge hammer.)

“Oi,” Ron yelled suddenly, “Don’t you berks have better things to do than stare?”

The group of half a dozen odd students that had been standing nearby, staring at Harry and Ginny while giggling and whispering, scattered in different directions; a live demonstration of the process of nuclear fission.

“Damn nosy tossers,” Ron grumbled, “I can’t believe they’re still in a twit about you two.”

Harry scratched his nose, looking faintly embarrassed. “Yeah, I’m actually considering keeping the invisibility cloak on for the rest of the year.”

“You’d think people had better things to gossip about,” Ginny said nonchalantly, “Three dementor attacks in a week, and all Romilda Vane does is ask me if it’s true you’ve got a hippogriff tattooed across your chest.”

“What did you tell her?” Harry asked, the edges of his mouth twitching.

“I told her it’s a Hungarian Horntail; much more macho.”

“Thanks. ...And what did you tell her Ron’s got?”

A setup if there ever was one. Both the lovebirds were wearing their impish, conspiratorial grins.

“A Pygmy Puff, but I didn’t say where.”

Hermione tittered nervously, and Ron’s face was like thunder. He pointed a threatening finger at Harry and Ginny, and growled, “Watch it. Just because I’ve given my permission doesn’t mean I can’t withdraw it—”

“*Your permission,*” Ginny said with a heightened sneer, “*Since when did you give me permission* to do anything? Anyway, you said yourself you’d rather it was Harry than Michael or Dean.”

“Yeah, I would,” Ron admitted stingily. “And just as long as you don’t start snogging each other in public—”

Ginny balled up the newspaper in her hand and lobbed it at her brother’s head. “You filthy hypocrite! What about you and Lavender, thrashing around like a pair of eels all over the place?”

Harry let out a shocked laugh.

Ron’s scowl didn’t recede for hours.
Slughorn set them the uncomplicated and tedious task of preparing a muffling draught, and buried himself in a book and an armchair in the corner of the room. That had become his modus operandi ever since Harry had sidled his shameful memory out of him.

Hermione left her asphodel to simmer in diluted syrup of hellebore, and set her chin in her hand, bracing herself for half an hour of idle waiting.

Ten minutes later, Theo shuffled into the room.

“Where have you been for the past two days?” Hermione whispered harshly as he listlessly slid into the stool next to hers.

“Dying,” he rasped, rubbing his eyes. He seemed to think that that was an adequate answer to her question.

Hermione arched a brow at him.

“Bleh, alright, I was hungover. Terribly hungover. Near-fatally hungover. A hair’s breath away from dying from severe alcohol poisoning.”

“I see,” Hermione replied loftily, “You celebrated Malfoy’s coming of age with great abandon, hmm?”

“Bleh.”

“And I suppose he still hasn’t recovered? That’s why he’s missing right now, and why you’re sitting here with me?”

“What are we supposed to be brewing?” he asked with evasive faux-curiosity, “Oh... Oh shite... that smells repugnant. I’m begging off today’s assignment. Not happening.” Theo took the bluegreen scarf (that could now be called a permanent fixture around his neck) and wrapped it around his mouth and nose.

“How much did you drink exactly?” Hermione asked trepidatiously.

“You don’t want to know.”

“Oh god, Theo.”

“Isn’t that a bit redundant? ‘God’ and ‘Theo’...? I didn’t think you were all that fond of tautology, Hermione,” he garbled through the scarf.

She stared blankly at him.

He stared right back, with equally vacant (and bloodshot) eyes.

“Are you saying that you are the supreme, divine creator of the universe and all its creatures, great and small?” she asked.

“Well... yeah. You did say it’s called Theology.”

Hermione was speechless. She maintained her impassive stare, but something was bubbling in her stomach. It ascended up her chest... her throat...

She threw back her head and laughed.

She squeezed her eyes shut, and basically howled with laughter... and people were probably gawking... and she didn’t know why she’d found that so hilarious... but dear... god... she couldn’t stop.

She did eventually, though; stop, that is.

Wiping her eyes and gasping, she said, “You’re ridiculous.”

She didn’t dare look around her, knowing that she’d encounter the scandalised stares of a classroom full of people. Her cheeks burned.

A soft chortle from Theo had her glancing up; the scarf had slipped and left his mouth uncovered. He was beaming at her, eyes dancing with amusement, and all the physical signs of his debilitated state had vanished.
Pristine blank parchment laid out in front of her... check.
Inkpot to the right of it... check.
Perfectly sharpened quill in hand... check.
Text by Agrippa... check.
Book of Hebraic numerological translations... check.
Ascribed Arithmancy textbook... check.
Gaelic Methodology...... missing.
With a world-weary sigh, Hermione scraped back her chair and disappeared amongst the shelves.

When she returned to her seat, there was a piece of paper sitting on top of her parchment. On it was a very well rendered drawing of a tall, lanky male figure with close-cropped, tightly curled hair, sitting in the pose of Durer’s Melancholia. When she looked up, she saw Dean peeping out timidly from behind a bookshelf.
“Sorry,” he mouthed.
Hermione blinked, bit her lip, and then nodded once – sharply. He loosened, his shoulders relaxed and he breathed deeply...
With a small grateful smile, he turned around and walked away.

Hermione had struck gold.

After weeks of frustrating fruitlessness, she’d finally found a plausible resolution to Project ETUP (*Exhume The Unholy Prince*). Clutching an old newspaper clipping in her hand, Hermione stepped in through the Gryffindor portrait hole and made her way towards the corner where Harry and Ron were straining themselves trying to complete their Herbology homework.

Settling on the chair between them, she spoke in her best *I-mean-business* voice, “I want to talk to you, Harry.”
Harry made a small moue at her tone. “What about?”
“The so-called Half-Blood Prince.”
“Oh, not again,” he cried out in annoyance, “Will you please drop it?”
She squared her shoulders. “I’m not dropping it until you’ve heard me out. Now, I’ve been trying to find out a bit about who might make a hobby of inventing dark spells—”
“He didn’t make a hobby of it—” Harry cut her off hotly.
“He, he—” she countered, her own temperature rising, “Who says it’s a he?”
“We’ve been through this! Prince, Hermione, Prince!”
“Right!” said ground out. With a bit of a flourish, she slammed the newspaper clipping down on the table before them. “Look at that,” she gestured wildly towards it with her hand, “Look at the picture!”

Lifting it up to eye-level, Harry gazed coolly at the picture of Eileen Prince, Captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones Team. Ron leaned over to have a look as well, and immediately his nose scrunched up in distaste; Hermione presumed he was reacting to Eileen’s appearance, which, admittedly, defied all criteria of conventional beauty.
“So?” Harry’s eyebrows were rising higher and higher as he read the article accompanying the
photograph.
“Her name was Eileen Prince,” she replied slowly, “Prince, Harry.”
He looked up and at her for a long moment, processing what she’d just said. And then... then he
burst out laughing.
“No way.”
“What?”
“You think she was the Half-Blood...? Oh, come on.” Harry, still chortling, placed the paper back
down on the table dismissively.
“Well, why not? Harry, there aren’t any real princes in the Wizarding world! It’s either a nickname,
a made-up title somebody’s given themselves, or it could be their actual name, couldn’t it?” Harry
snorted, and she gnashed her teeth, “No, listen! If, say, her father was a wizard whose surname was
Prince, and her mother was a Muggle, then that would make her a ‘half-blood Prince’!”
“Yeah, very ingenious, Hermione...”
Surely, surely, there was steam coming out of her ears. “But it would! Maybe she was proud of
being half a Prince!”
“Listen, Hermione, I can tell it’s not a girl. I can just tell.”
Oh. Oh. So she was up against some transcendental bond of brotherhood here. Harry’s lad-radar
had sounded off – he could just tell.
“The truth is that you don’t think a girl would have been clever enough.”
“How can I have hung round with you for five years and not think girls are clever?” he said
witheringly, “It’s the way he writes, I just know the Prince was a bloke, I can tell. This girl hasn’t
got anything to do with it. Where did you get this anyway?”
“The library,” she replied, ignoring the way he rolled his eyes, “There’s a whole collection of old
Prophets up there. Well, I’m going to find out more about Eileen Prince if I can.”
“Enjoy yourself,” Harry grouched.
“I will,” she snapped, “And the first place I’ll look is records of old Potions awards!”
She left quickly, not allowing him the opportunity to snark at her any further.

On reaching the library, she put together a teetering pile of old records and newspapers — and then
stopped dead (almost spilling paper everywhere) when she got to her usual table.
“Sweet Dagda!” Seamus exclaimed the moment he saw her, “Hermione... you’re here! Fantastic,”
he promptly stood up and began packing his things, “You can take over – I’m officially off duty
now. Fucking finally. I’m leaving. I’m off. Slán.”

Hermione turned to the two remainders.
“Theo, Luna, hi. Er... what’s going on?”
“Well, Finnigan kindly agreed to sit here so that it wouldn’t be just the two of us. No need to set
the rumour mills going, you know,” Theo replied with an easy smile.
“Ah.” Hermione took the seat Seamus has just vacated before tentatively asking, “You asked
Seamus to be your cover? Of all people...?”
Theo shrugged, “He’s a laugh. I like him.”
“Seamus. You like Seamus.”
“Yeah. You know, Hermione... I don’t know why you force yourself to hang around with Potter
and Weasley when you have him around.”
Before she could retort, Luna chimed in, “Harry’s perfectly lovely.”
Aghast, Theo gaped at her in betrayal so she clarified, “Yes, he does unpleasant things sometimes,
but I don’t think that’s him, really. I think there’s something foreign and insidious in his head that’s
messing him up... I see it in his expression sometimes,” she lowered her head gravely, “Probably an
army of malicious wrackspurts.”
“Love,” Theo said disdainfully, “You know I think you’re the most intuitive and perceptive witch
in the world, but if you start defending Potter, I’m going to get terribly mardy.”
Luna smiled seraphically; “That’s alright. I know how to cheer you up.” 
A grin, a leer, and a purred, “That you do...” from Theo had Hermione snapping her fingers twice in warning.

“Reign in it, you two. I may have agreed to be your scapegoat, but I did not agree to a peepshow.”
“Oh, shut up,” said Theo. 
“I suppose we won’t be inviting you to celebrate Beltane with us next year,” said Luna. 
A statement of finality if ever there was one. 
They each fell into their own work (though Hermione suspected that Theo and Luna were holding hands under the table) and sat in uninterrupted silence for a long while.

Hermione’s mouth was thinned in annoyance. Eileen Prince hadn’t been awarded a single prize of academic excellence. It appeared that her only claim to fame was being a competent gobstones player. 
She poured over *Prophet* after *Prophet*, and found nothing remotely useful. Desperate, she even skimmed through papers from years later. Nothing in the minor accomplishments pages. No mention in the Page Three high society drivel. In the wedding announcements pages... 
Oh fuck.

*The engagement is announced between Eileen, daughter of Reginald and Eimear Prince of Ballycastle, and Tobias, son of Abner and Rachel Snape of Cokeworth, England.*

She scrambled through the remaining *Prophets*, hunting, hunting...

*On 9th January, 1960, to Eileen (nee Prince) and Tobias Snape, a son, Severus Snape.*

“Oh fuck,” Hermione groaned out loud. 
Somewhere in the background, a voice that sounded like Theo’s asked, “What is it?” 
Hermione ignored the voice. 
Severus Snape was the Half-Blood Prince. It made sense – it made complete sense. He had known how to counter the Sectumsempra curse... immediately asked to see Harry’s potion’s book... And, well, there was no denying that he was exceedingly clever... a dab hand at potions... 
She stood up, sending the prophets back in place with a careless wave of her hand. 
“I’m sorry,” she rushed, “I have to go.”

“Oh. Hey... Hey,” Theo caught hold of her wrist, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Hermione stated firmly, “I just need to speak to Harry. Don’t worry, I promise it’s nothing serious...”

“You look spooked,” Luna added, “Something has rattled you. But she doesn’t want to tell us, Theo. You should let her go.”

He did not relent. “Hermione~” he frowned up at her, then at Luna, and then back at her, “Ugh, fine. Go. But you will tell me what this is about yeah? Later?”

He released her wrist, and she nodded, and without delay tore out of the library. Her footfalls thumped loudly against the stone floor; if there was *any* piece of information that could convince Harry to give up the book... this was it.

When she finally stumbled into the common room, Ron was sitting alone and Harry was nowhere in sight. She raced over to him and panted, “Where’s Harry?”

He looked at her with anxious eyes. “Dumbledore sent for him. He’s been gone a while now...”

All thoughts of Snapes and Princes evaporated right out of Hermione’s mind. She gasped. “You... you don’t think he’s found...”

“Donno,” he muttered, rubbing his hands together uneasily.

Yet again, Hermione and Ron were left to stew in worry and disquiet, wondering what had become of their friend.
Countless minutes later, Harry could be seen running across the room. Hermione shot up to her feet; “What does he want? Harry, are you okay?” she demanded fretfully.

“I’m fine,” Harry called over his shoulder, as he dashed up the stairs and disappeared into his dormitory. She sat back down robotically and exchanged a startled look with Ron...

...and then Harry was back, carrying a variety of indistinguishable things in his hands.

“I’ve got to be quick,” he wheezed, dropping down onto his haunches in front of them, “Dumbledore thinks I’m getting my Invisibility Cloak. Listen... he’s found a horcrux –” Hermione and Ron both gasped, but Harry paid no heed to their amazement, “I’m going with him to get it–”

“Where–” Ron began.

“It’s hidden in a cave on some distant coast... the cave in which Riddle once terrorised two children from his orphanage –”

“But what about –”

“I don’t have time to get into the fucking details! I ran into Trelawney on the way... she was trying to get into the Room of Requirement, but was thrown out by somebody already in there. Somebody who was whooping triumphantly. So you see what this means? Dumbledore won’t be here tonight, so Malfoy’s going to have another clear shot at whatever he’s up to.”

Hermione opened her mouth, but Harry foresaw her interjection. “No, listen to me!” he growled furiously, “I know it was Malfoy celebrating. Here–” He thrust something into Hermione’s hands... an old, yellowed bit of parchment: the Marauder’s Map, she realised.

“You’ve got to watch him and you’ve got to watch that bastard Snape too,” Harry continued frantically, “Use anyone else who you can rustle up from the D.A.; Hermione, those contact Galleons will still work, right? Dumbledore says he’s put extra protection in the school, but if Snape’s involved, he’ll know what Dumbledore’s protection is, and how to avoid it – but he won’t be expecting you lot to be on the watch, will he?”

“Harry–” she tried again, her voice shook with tension.

“I haven’t got time to argue,” said Harry tersely. “Take this as well–” He dropped a pair of socks onto Ron’s lap.

Ron stared down at them. “Thanks. Er – why do I need socks?”

“You need what’s wrapped in them... it’s the Felix Felicis. Share it between yourselves and Ginny too. Say good-bye to her for me. I’d better go, Dumbledore’s waiting–”

Ron extracted the tiny bottle, and Hermione jumped to the edge of her seat, “No!” she half-yelled, “We don’t want it. You take it. Who knows what you’re going to be facing?”

“I’ll be fine; I’ll be with Dumbledore,” said Harry with a shake of his head, “I want to know you lot are okay... Don’t look at me like that, Hermione, I’ll see you later...”

And suddenly, he was a blur, dodging the students milling about the common room, before finally vanishing from sight.

“Bloody fucking hell,” Ron breathed.
One small sigh for calm, one giant heave for equanimity.
“Okay,” Hermione said to herself bracingly. Then she began rummaging around in her bag.

“What are you looking for?” Ron asked.
“My DA Galleon. I’m quite sure it’s in here somewhere...”
Ron grunted and shook his head, “What good will that do, really? I hardly think anyone will still be carrying theirs around with them. I’m going up to the dorm to wake Neville, Dean, and Seamus. That’s the best we can manage right now.”
She hummed perfunctorily as he got up and left, still caught up in her search. Finally, after much fumbling and scrambling, her fingers closed around the elusive coin. She tapped it gently, altering the engraving on the facet to read, ‘7th floor corridor ASAP’.

A sigh had barely escaped her lips when the portrait hole swung open and Ginny traipsed in tiredly.
“Blazing buggering fire crabs,” she groaned, falling onto the sofa next to Hermione, “I’m exhausted. My brain has melted. It’s like a puddle of thickened slime in my skull. I can’t wait for these O.W.L.s to be... what’s happened to you?”
Hermione met her concerned frown with consternation.
“Um... Ginny,” she began, worrying her lower lip with her teeth, “Harry’s... gone. With Dumbledore.”
Ginny’s spine straightened as she was - almost involuntarily - lurched out of her slouch. “What do you mean gone?!”
“He... they... Well, they’ve gone to do something. I don’t really know what...”
“You don’t really know. Right,” Ginny said with scathing disbelief, “Is it dangerous? Oh, wait. Don’t bother. Of course it’s bloody dangerous.” With all the colour drained from her face, she suddenly stood up. “You just let him go off like that?”
“He’s with Dumbledore, Ginny—”
“And he couldn’t even bother to tell me? Just a ‘hullo little girlfriend, I’m off to be a valiant hero again, tara’ would’ve been nice. Oh Merlin. WHY does he keep pulling these stunts?”
“He told you, though. Had time enough for that.”
“I just happened to be here when he was leaving, and he—”
“Of course you were. You always happen to be there for him, don’t you?”
“Ginny...” Hermione whispered imploringly.
And just like that, the agitated, ashen-faced girl before her deflated. “I know,” she said in a pained voice, “Sorry. I didn’t mean that. I’m just... scared, Hermione.”
Hermione rose, stood in front of her, and put a comforting hand on her arm. “So am I.”

That was when Ron came back down from his dormitory, followed by Neville, Dean, and Seamus, each wearing bewildered looks of varying intensities.
Tousle-haired and bleary-eyed Seamus was the first to speak: “Alright, Mister Weasley sir. We’re downstairs now. Will you please tell us why the sodding fuck you dragged us out of bed?”
“Stop being so bloody shirty, Seamus,” Ron snapped (Hermione, in her twitchy state, struggled to contain a giggle and suppress the urge to challenge Ron to say Shirty Seamus five times, rapidly),
“This is important. Dumbledore’s not in the castle tonight, and there’s a very good chance that something bad is going to happen—”
“What d’you mean something bad,” Dean asked anxiously.
Hermione cleared her throat, “We have reason to believe that Draco Malfoy has... something planned. He’s been working on it in the room of requirement all year. Snape’s involved too, in some capacity. And since Dumbledore’s away, we think that they’re going to... act... tonight. We need to keep an eye on them...”

There was a brief interlude in which the three newcomers digested her words.

“Malfoy and Snape have... something... planned,” Dean clarified.
Hermione and Ron both nodded.
“What exactly is something?”
“Donno,” said Ron with a shrug.
“But you’re sure it’s something.”
“Yeah.”

Neville, whose face was a mask of apprehension asked, “Where’s Harry?”
“He’s gone with Dumbledore,” said Hermione.
“And where have they gone?” Seamus demanded.
With another flippant shrug, Ron replied “Donno,” once again.
“Basically, you know sweet fuck all,” Seamus grumbled, “I’m going back to bed.”
“Don’t be a tool, Seamus,” Dean entreated at the same time as Ron said, “Settle your arse down!”
“Well, I’m sorry,” Seamus barked, “But this whole thing is mad as a box of frogs. We’re in Hogwarts for fuck’s sake – Dumbledore or no Dumbledore, it’s as safe as safe can be...”
“I’d have said the same thing about the Ministry before last year,” Neville countered, before looking over at Hermione, “How’re we doing this then?”

She gave him a grateful nod, unfurled the Marauder’s map, and muttered the activation phrase. Scrutinising carefully, she searched the map from corner to corner.

“Malfoy isn’t showing up on this,” she announced, “So he’s obviously still in the Room of Requirement. Snape... is in his office. We’ll split up and stand guard at both those locations...”

Dean and Seamus peered over her each of her shoulders.

“Cool map,” Dean said in awe, “Where’d you get it?”
“It belonged to Harry’s dad...” she replied absently.

“Anyone else from the DA show up?” Ron asked.
“Um... Luna.”

Ron whickered, “Brilliant. Just the person you want around in a time of crisis.”
“Shut up, Ron,” Ginny snapped, “So how are we splitting up, Hermione? ...Er, Hermione?”

Hermione, however, was already halfway across the room. Without turning, and with her eyes still glued to the map, she said, “Theo is outside the portrait hole for some reason. I’ll be back in second.”

He was on her the moment she stepped out.

“Thank Merlin,” he exclaimed, “I’ve been standing out here for twenty minutes trying to get this puffed up pink Fwooper to let me in.”
An offended wail tore out of the fat lady’s mouth. “Well I never...”

Theo took hold of Hermione’s elbow and dragged her a few feet away.
“What are you doing here?” Hermione asked nervously.
His hair was all over the place, looking like he had run his hands through it a billion times.
“Hermione, listen,” he began fervently, looking down at her with turbulent eyes, “Something’s going to happen tonight.”
She pursed her lips and frowned, “Why would you say that?”
“Because Draco told me expressly that under no circumstances am I to leave the common room tonight, and point-blank refused to give a reason for it. Then he left, and I have no idea where he’s gone. He looked... he looked awful. Like he was going to be sick. I didn’t get---”
He stopped talking abruptly, staring at something behind Hermione. She spun around and saw her housemates spilling out of the common room.

"’the fuck are you doing here, Nott?” Ron demanded.

“I don’t have to justify my whereabouts to you, Weasley.”

“Look here you plonker–”

“Oh, save the pissing contest for another time you two,” Hermione rebuked, “Theo’s just confirmed our suspicions about Malfoy. Now let’s quickly get to the seventh floor before Luna gets tired of waiting...”


He charged away like a boy possessed. The rest of them watched his receding back, gobsmacked, for a few seconds... and then they followed, tearing down the corridor, their cloaks billowing out behind them like Lethifolds.

It took ten long minutes for them to settle on how exactly they were going to divide themselves into two groups.

“Luna, Hermione, and I will wait here for Draco,” Theo declared authoritatively.

“You’ll be distracted if we’re with you, Theo,” Luna rejoined.

Hermione spoke before he could open his mouth to argue, “She’s right. You wait here; you’re the only one who might be able to talk Malfoy out of his designs. Ginny, Neville, Dean... You can disillusion yourselves and stand at a distance. That leaves Ron, Seamus, Luna, and I to wait outside Snape’s office.”

“No, that’s –”

“Don’t be difficult, Theo. Luna and I will be fine.”

He snapped his mouth shut and loured at her.

“Er – Hermione...” Ron ventured, “D’you think I can stay here with Ginny? Mum will kill me if I let something happen to her–”

“Ha! Fuck off, Ron,” Ginny scoffed, “I’m better with a wand than you are, any day of–”

“That’s not the point, you daft cow–”

“Don’t call me a da–”

“ALRIGHT,” Hermione bellowed, “Theo, Ron, Ginny, and Dean will wait outside the Room of Requirement; Luna, Seamus, Neville, and I will–”

“Hey, at least let me have Finnigan!” Theo begged.

“Aww, Nott! Knew you had a glad eye for me, you rawny dah’lin...”

“Hardy har, knobhead–”

And so it was decided; Ron, Ginny, Seamus, and Theo went to stand outside the room of requirement, and Hermione, Luna, Neville, and Dean headed down to the dungeons to station themselves outside Snape’s office.

That had been forty minutes ago.

Three jittery Gryffindors, and one unnervingly composed Ravenclaw sat in a row against the wall by Snape’s door. Hermione had cast a quick Muffliato around them, taking buckets of pleasure in using Prince Severus’ own spell against him.

“I think I’m going to have to agree with Seamus now,” Dean said, “This is stupid.”
He’d tilted his head back to rest against the wall and had his eyes closed. Hermione fiddled with a loose thread on her cloak, unable to come up with something to contradict that proclamation. “Hermione,” Neville broached tentatively, “You’re absolutely sure about all this, yeah?” “Yes. That is to say... Harry’s been keeping a close eye on Snape and Malfoy all year, and—” “No. I mean... are you really sure? Harry was certain that Sirius Black was being held prisoner at the ministry, too... And well, you know how that turned out.” Hermione bit her lip. “Neville, you know that that whole fiasco at the ministry was a trap. This... this is different...” She tugged and tugged at the loose thread, but it refused to break. ...She really wished she hadn’t given the Marauder’s map to the other group.

“Is it really different?” Dean asked, opening one eye to look at her, “What, besides Harry’s conviction, has brought us here? Do you always just do what he says?” Hermione bristled, half wanting to tell him that he was welcome to fuck off. Instead she said, “Absolutely. Ours not to make reply, Ours not to reason why, Ours but to do and die.” “Oh brother,” Dean huffed, and settled back into his reposeful pose. Hermione glared daggers at his profile.

“Look,” she tried again after a spell, speaking more to Neville than anyone else, “I am absolutely certain that Malfoy has something sinister up his sleeve-” “Theo says that he isn’t really a bad person,” Luna interjected. Dean and Neville expelled identical noises of disbelief. Hermione wound the thread around the tip of her finger till it was bloodless and chalk-white. “Theo’s a bit biased,” she said. “Maybe,” Luna allowed, “But you trust his judgement, don’t you?” Hermione didn’t answer - she simply stared down at her anaemic fingertip. “...don’t you?” “Yes,” she confessed, grudgingly.

That admission marked the end of their surveillance-time chitchat. They just sat there quietly (in a row against the wall by Snape’s door); Hermione played with her thread, Neville blinked at a crack on the opposite wall, Dean kept his eyes closed, and Luna tapped her wand repeatedly against her shoe, changing its colour with each strike: blue, green, purple, maroon... ...Hermione found herself partially mesmerised by the flickering hues, thinking about bright neon signs at Piccadilly...

“What’s that?” Neville exclaimed urgently, “Someone... someone’s coming!” They were all on their feet in a flash, squinting their eyes to see through the shadow-heavy corridor; a tiny figure was vaguely discernible in the distance. They stood in tense anticipation, each holding tightly onto their respective wands, poised to attack if necessary... As the figure came closer, Hermione realised that it was Flitwick. He ran wildly past them, not even sparing a glance in their direction, and burst into Snape’s office, leaving the door open behind him. Neville let out a shaky sigh, “What the he–” “Shhh!” Hermione hissed sharply. She pressed herself against the door jamb, straining to hear what was going on inside. “...Death Eaters... the castle!” she picked up fragments in Flitwick’s high voice; he sounded desperate and panic-stricken, “Severus... with me... Astronomy.... outnumbered...” Then there was a heavy thump, and four seconds later, Snape was standing before them. His eyes travelled from Hermione to Luna to Dean to Neville, his curled lip becoming more and more
prominent along the way. Hermione, expecting interrogations and detentions, set her jaw defiantly. “Professor Flitwick has collapsed in my office – he appears to have over-exerted himself. Go in and look after him... and if you meddlesome children want what’s best for you, you’ll stay inside for the rest of the night.” And with a thoroughly uncharming sneer in lieu of a ‘by your leave’, he marched down the corridor. The meddlesome children watched him till he melted into the shadows, and then looked at each other with wide eyes... on your mark, get set, go!... They hurtled into the office.

“Oh!” Luna gasped miserably, “Poor Professor Flitwick!” He was unconscious and spreadeagled on the floor. Hermione knelt beside him, and pressed her wand to his forehead. “Rennervate,” she whispered. Flitwick stirred feebly, and his previously shallow breathing evened out, but he did not wake up. She removed her cloak, bundled it up, and placed it under his head like a pillow. Luna and Neville draped theirs over him like blankets. “Is he going to be alright?” Neville asked Hermione uneasily. “I think so. He should wake up once his nerves recover...” “At least he’s warm now,” said Luna. She took one of her strange Gurdyroots out of her satchel, and placed it next to his head. “There. That’s perfect. Now the Gulping Plimpies will stay away too.”

“Pardon me,” Dean cut in loudly, “But if you’re all done playing Florence Nightingale, maybe we could talk about the fucking Death Eaters that are supposed to be in the castle?” “Right!” Hermione squeaked, “Damn it, I really wish I had that map with me...” She stepped away from Flitwick’s... floorside, “We should go back up to the seventh floor and reconvene with the others. Come on.” “Death Easters,” Dean yelped in distress as he swooped in front of her to block her path, “Death. Eaters. In the castle. What if we run into a couple of FUCKING DEATH EATERS?” Hermione raised her eyebrows, “You have your wand don’t you?” He looked towards the other members of their quartet pleadingly. Neville shrugged. “Isn’t this why you joined Dumbledore’s Army to begin with?” asked Luna. Defeated, Dean nodded stiffly.

Screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we’ll not fail.

They crept silently through passageways and up staircases, clinging to the walls and the darkness that pooled under them. They needn’t have bothered. The castle appeared to be completely deserted; No patrolling sentries, no murderous psychopaths, no irascible caretakers, nor their mangy cantankerous cats. Even the paintings lining the halls were eerily vacant. “I don’t understand,” Hermione murmured, “There were supposed to be Death Eaters... extra security–”

She stopped speaking and all four of them froze, listening in terror to the escalating sound of sprinting feet coming from somewhere ahead of them. Immediately, they got into their defensive stance: alert, prepared, with wands held aloft. “...Luna...!...Hermione...!...Dean...!”
Almost as if they’d materialised out of thin air, Theo and Ginny were suddenly just there. Ron and Seamus came after, crashing into the other two and nearly knocking them onto the ground.

“Oh!” Ron huffed, “Are you all okay?”

“We’re fine” Hermione assured him hastily, “But what on earth is going on?”

“Death Eaters have infiltrated the castle,” Ginny averred grimly.

“But...” Hermione stuttered, “How... how...?”

“It was Draco’s doing,” Theo said in a gravelly, haunted voice, “I don’t know how, but—” he seemed to choke on his words, and Luna took his hand in hers.

“Shit. Fuck!” Dean swore.

“That’s what I said too,” Seamus muttered frivolously.

“What happened with Malfoy, though?” Hermione asked keenly, “Did he—”

With a muted screech of impatience, Ginny exclaimed, “We don’t have time to faff about and explain! We need to go help out!”

“Oh. Oh yes,” Hermione mumbled penitently, “Yes...”

“Um... look here...”

“...Check the map, Ron – find out where everybody is...”

“Yeah. There’s also this,” he pulled the tiny bottle of Felix Felicis out of his pocket, “One little sip each, alright?”

“...Um, guys...”

“What is that?” Seamus asked, eyeing the bottle suspiciously.

“Liquid luck,” Hermione and Theo said simultaneously. They looked at each other, and in the deep groove between his furrowed brows, Hermione perceived the full brunt of his despondency.

“...Oi, look here, guys...”

“They,” she whispered to him as the Felix Felicis was being circulated, “You don’t have to do this. You don’t have to fight.”

“Are you mad?” he asked, looking aghast, “Of course I bloody well will fight.”

Taking the tiny bottle from her hand, he took a bold swig. Luna watched him with immense pride; a sentiment that Hermione shared whole-heartedly...

“...WILL YOU FUCKING COME OVER HERE?”

They all spun around in alarm to stare at Neville. He stood a little distance away, staring outside a window while wearing the most blood-curdling look of horror.

“What is it?” Luna asked cautiously.

“Look,” he said hoarsely, pointing outside.

Hermione’s internal sparks of Felicis-induced euphoria and confidence fizzled into nothingness as they moved towards Neville in an anxious huddle, gathered around the window, and looked out into the night.

And there it was, looming repulsively over the astronomy tower – toxic green and glittering – the Dark Mark.

Of course, they instantly knew what that meant. Someone had been killed.

Ginny clapped her hands to her mouth.

Luna and Dean gasped.

Ron let out a strangled groan.
“Oh fuck,” Seamus whispered.  
Theo’s mouth thinned into one straight line.

This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but...

Hermione whimpered.
Twenty-Seven

Streaks of light, bursts of colour, sparks flashing and whizzing hither and thither: a battle scene like a laser lighting display.

Hermione wielded her wand like a conductor’s baton, throwing hexes towards the gaunt, vulture-like Death Eater she was locked in a duel with. She wasn’t fully aware of the spells she was using, and yet they continued to stream out of her wand fiercely and judiciously – it was pure adrenaline-driven automatism. Some primal survival instinct was guiding her, momentarily suspending fear and hesitation.

“STUPIFY!” she roared, and the resulting spell was so forceful, her rival flew back at least ten feet.

She spun around, half-crouched and resolute... Neville was being brutally beaten down by a dumpy female Death Eater, injured as he was after attempting to charge through the mysterious, invisible barrier closing off access to the Astronomy Tower. She surged forward to help him and –

“HERMIONE! LOOK OUT!”

She dived just in time to avoid a jet of green light – the killing curse no doubt – and crashed onto the floor just adjacent to Bill Weasley’s mangled body. A startled sob tore out of her throat, raw and guttural. She kicked her legs out as she sprung back onto her feet, accidentally but unremorsefully kicking a dead Death Eater in his dead dead face.

“Okay, Hermione?” Tonks hollered, even as she valiantly continued to restrain an enormous blond-haired Death Eater who was on a hyper rampage, shooting Avadas willy-nilly. “Fine!” she called back, and aimed a body-binding curse towards the brute.... which was deflected by one of his peers.

“Now that wasn’t very nice of you, was it, little runt? A punishment is in order... Crucio!” Hermione jumped to the side to dodge the curse, and immediately retaliated by shooting a torrent of arrows out of her wand.


Thick flames from a scorching spell grazed by him, and he yelped and staggered back. Suddenly, Theo was by Hermione’s side. Smoke trailed out of his wand as he glared mutinously at the Death Eater.

“What’s this?! Nott Jr.?! the Death Eater thundered, appalled, “You... you treacherous... slimy... fuck. If only your father could see you now.” Quick as a viper, he non-verbally disarmed Theo, “Avada –”

“Petrificus Totalus!” Hermione shouted, and finally the wretched sod was defeated. He fell back, stiff as a board and wide-eyed.

“Are you alright?” she asked Theo urgently.

“Yeah,” he breathed, massaging his wrist... and then he abruptly pulled her down with him into a squat as yet another stray Adava sailed over their heads.

They scattered in opposite directions, Theo scrambling to retrieve his wand, and Hermione resuming her mission to help Neville.

He was sprawled on the floor, propped up by no more than an elbow, intrepidly but tiredly trying to stun the woman who was bearing down on him...
Hermione circled around them so she could get a clear shot... “Everte Statum!”... and the Death Eater made a pitchy squawk as she was thrown high into the air. Neville nodded gratefully, and collapsed onto his back panting.

Hermione skittered to her left, catching sight of a green streak of light just in time to narrowly avoid being hit.

“EVERYBODY, SHIELDS UP!”
It was Lupin’s voice that tore through the chaos and calamity, all across the dark and narrow combat zone. Hermione leapt to Neville’s side, and put up a powerful shield charm over both of them...

And that’s when half the ceiling caved in – a shattering downpour of rock and rubble – and everything disappeared behind a thick cloud of dust.

It was jarring – unnervingly so – the absolute quiet that fell upon that weakly lit corridor as it filled with brume and puffs of fine grey powder.

Hermione slowly lowered her wand, and the shimmering blue dome encompassing her and Neville fizzled out. A low trembling breath left her lungs, and she heard it like it had fallen directly onto her ears through a loudspeaker. Every subsequent breath was similarly amplified.

She peered around through the haze in a state of total stupefaction... and watched it gradually clear. Little by little, silhouettes of other people stirring and unfurling became sketchily visible.

After coming to her feet, she offered a hand to Neville, helping him up. He kept his hand wrapped around hers, reflexively, and they waited in suspense for the dust to settle.

The dust always settled.

“Lacarnum Inflamarae!” – It was a feral, throaty intonation, following which, a giant blazing orb of fire tore down the length of the corridor like a comet, forcing everyone to leap towards the walls.

As if she hadn’t ever been interrupted, vicious Lady Bellona staked her claim once more: the battle recommenced.

Having lost Neville during the fireball-ruckus, Hermione found herself facing two Death Eaters all on her own.

“Well, well,” said one (a ragged, rangy looking fellow), “It’s Potter’s mudblood sidekick innit, Amycus?”

“It is,” the other (stout, lumpy) one wheezed with a smirk, “Little mud-rat thinks she has the right to play around with magic. How about we cut her to size... Diffindo!”

Hermione deftly flicked her wand, causing his curse to go flying right back to him.

“Oh! Oh,” he panted after ducking to dodge the rebound, “You damn well think you’re clever, don’t you, you filthy little...”

“Confringo!” Hermione shouted, slicing her wand to include both Death Eaters in the resulting explosion.

They got their shields up in time.

“THAT’S IT,” the rangy Death Eater growled, “Crucio!”

She scarcely managed to avoid being hit. “IMPEDIMENTA!” she cried, brandishing her wand like
a blade. Except, she wasn’t the only one to cast the spell. From either side of her, Seamus and Ginny had thrown the exact same jinx at the exact same time. Seamus and hers hit the first Death Eater squarely in the solar plexus, and he was thrown back into a heap on the floor. The second, Amycus, chased after Ginny with a furious roar.

Before Hermione could so much as think about following, she was distracted by the sight of Snape and Malfoy, as they came charging out of the door leading to the Astronomy tower. With his wand in one hand and the scruff of Malfoy’s neck in the other, Snape adroitly navigated through the raging skirmish. He swept past Lupin, who was holding up a shield in front of Tonks... past Professor McGonagall who was energetically exchanging hexes with a Death Eater... past Dean, who cast a powerful Reducto on a pile of rubble, drawing out the Death Eater who’d hidden behind it... past her... and just as he reached the far end of the corridor, he paused.

“It’s over,” he called, “Time to go.”

The moment he and Malfoy disappeared around the bend, the Death Eaters began detaching themselves from their various duels, and followed.

Hermione blinked. Once.

Amycus was still adamantly trying to annihilate Ginny... The big, blond Death Eater was still in the business of arbitrarily and insanely shooting spells...

He set off a series of golden yellow jets of light, and they went and crashed against walls, shattered windows... demolished a suit of armour just a few meters away from where Ron was locked in combat with a brick-like Death Eater...

Hermione leapt back into the fray, and aimed hex after hex at the blond menace, hitting him once in the knee, once on the shoulder. How this chap was still standing was beyond her. But her concerted attack seemed to strengthen Tonks’ resolve. She redoubled her efforts, and between the two of them, (“Three... Two... Now, Hermione!”) they finally took the savage down.

He fell on all fours, howling in pain and –

“Harry, where did you come from?”

At Ginny’s shocked cry, Hermione spun around – bizarrely, gracefullly, a fouetté, a pirouette – just in time to see him sprint by her.

“Harry,” she whispered into the gust of wind he left behind in his wake.

From somewhere behind her, she heard McGonagall shout victoriously, “Take that!” and more Death Eaters broke away from the fracas. The big blond one, too, seemed to have recovered enough to make an escape.

Halfway across the corridor, Harry tripped over Neville’s prone form, and lay winded on the ground. Seizing the opportunity, Hermione broke into a run... but alas, Harry was back on his feet no more than seconds later, and he resumed his chase.

Harry ran on, and Hermione followed. Not knowing where to... not knowing what for...

Harry ran, and Hermione followed.

Harry was a sportsman. He was built to seek, he had long legs, and he was accustomed to the hardships of quidditch training. It was no wonder that he had a good distance over Hermione as
they raced down the Hogwarts castle. She was always at least a hundred steps behind.

On the third floor, she stopped, succumbing to the most excruciating side stitch. She stood before a large embroidered wall-hanging, gasping and clutching at her stomach.

And then she was brusquely, unceremoniously pulled into a dingy alcove behind the tapestry.

A strong, wiry arm wrapped around her midsection, pinning her against a hard form. Her shrieks were muted by a palm pressed firmly against her mouth. Hermione fought madly. She kicked her leg back, but her captor wrapped one of his own around her ankles, locking them in place. She jerked wildly; she jolted and she juddered... she screamed and screamed in vain into the palm that was silencing her...

“Stop it. Granger. Stop.”

Fear iced up her spine, and it froze her movements. That voice. She knew that voice.

A few fleeting moments after fear and recognition came determination. She intensified her thrashing, her desperate convulsing...

“A few fleeting moments after fear and recognition came determination. She intensified her thrashing, her desperate convulsing...”

“STOP,” Malfoy snarled, “Stop fucking fighting.”

She could feel his breath against the shell of her ear. Even as she struggled, she became all too aware of him... of his presence, the physicality of it. His arm wrapped around her like a vice... his body, tense and unyielding, pressed against her back...

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he rumbled into her ear, “Stop. Fighting.”

Oh, not a chance in hell, Malfoy.

“...PLEASE.”

She was immobilised once more, but this time in disbelief. It wasn’t so much the word (one which he had never deigned to use in her presence before) rather the way he’d said it. It was desperate, rasping... and it was sincere. He was pleading with her. Draco Malfoy was pleading. With her.

In that dim alcove they stood, still entangled, learning to breathe at a regular pace again.

“Look,” he muttered, “I’m unarmed, Granger. I just need to talk to you.” And then he paused, as though waiting for her to fully internalise that declaration. “I’m... going to let go now.”

He paused, once again, giving himself time to imagine her nodding her head, or saying, ‘sure thing Malfoy’, or what you will. Then slowly, he loosened his hold... just a fraction... just enough for her to wriggle free, twist around, and hurl an effective, non-verbal Incarcerous spell at him.

Bound tightly from his shoulders to his ankles, Malfoy stared at her, open-mouthed and seething.

“What the fuck... UNTIE ME, YOU TWAT,” he fulminated, “Untie me AT ONCE.”

Hermione, not quite able to form words owing to the awfully startling turn her night had taken, gave him a look, in the hope that the general sentiment behind the phrase, ‘Ha, not happening, idiot,’ was sufficiently conveyed.

“You despicable little bitch... UNTIE ME,” he raged, “I fucking told you I wasn’t going to hurt you! Let. Me. Go.”

He looked more than a little worse for wear. In fact, he looked entirely drained (behind all that vehement rage of course) and it made Hermione desperate to know what exactly had happened up in the astronomy tower.

“What is wrong with you? Are you just going to stand there watching me like a total sodding moron--”

“I believe you said you wanted to talk,” Hermione managed to rasp out at last. Her throat felt
flayed from the inside after all her futile screaming.
“Untie me, Granger.”
“Talk, Malfoy.”
“First you untie – Oh Merlin’s fucking shit-smeared pants. Is this a game to you, you stupid mu – girl? Think this is some jolly little diversion? Don’t you realise that–”
“That what?” she snapped, incensed, “That you somehow brought Death Eaters into Hogwarts? Yeah, they were kind of hard to miss seeing how they’ve been trying their damnedest to kill me for the past hour or so–”
“– for fuck’s sake–”
“– have been engaged in a full-on battle up there–”
“– not interested in explaining myself to you of all people, bleeding sanctimonious–”
“– and then, after unleashing absolute hell, you drag me into this hole and say you want to talk?
What on earth do you–”
“SHUT UP,” he thundered, so loudly, so fiercely that Hermione took a step back, “Just shut up! I don’t care about your inane self-righteous bluster. You–”
“How dare you,” she shrieked.
“Shut the fuck up–”
“– even realise what you’ve done?! You horrible, shitty excuse for a human being, you–”
“JUST PROMISE ME YOU’LL KEEP THEO SAFE, ALRIGHT?”
Her jaw snapped shut. She stared at Malfoy as he fumed and panted and glared back. It was strange that in a space so dark, where the only source of illumination were thin shafts of candlelight that had penetrated through the stitching of the tapestry, his eyes managed to glow, as though they carried their own in-built light. Like two pieces of backlit rock crystal, they shone turbulently.
“What...?” she breathed.
“Keep Theo safe, Granger. After all this... after tonight... they’re going to be out for his blood. They’re going to want revenge. His beast of a father is going to want revenge. Promise me you’ll hide him away somewhere.”
“I... what are you–”
“Gah, my sainted aunt, are you incapable of giving a simple answer to a simple question? The way you go on during lessons, one would think you’d be able to manage that at least!”
“Malfoy– ”
“I don’t have time to indulge your bullshit, you idiot! Just tell me you’ll make sure–”
“Of course I’ll make sure he’s safe!” Hermione rushed out incredulously.

And yet again – again – they came to a standstill, staring each other down.
“Alright,” Malfoy conceded eventually, “Now untie me, Granger. I’ve already wasted more time than I could’ve afforded.”

Hermione wished she could bring herself to scoff. She wished she could’ve laughed scathingly, abrasively, and told him to go to hell. She wanted to be able to bring herself to parade him through the school, all trussed up and bound as he was, and deposit him right onto Dumbledore’s lap. And yet... all she could see in her mind’s eye was Theo. Theo hunched over in anguish, bathed in moonlight... crying because he thought Harry had killed Malfoy.

Helpless against the pull of that memory, she waved her wand and let him loose. The cords fell away and after giving himself a light shake, he wasted no time in storming out of the nook... jostling her shoulder as he went.
Hermione allowed herself a minute or two to regain composure, with her head bent and her hand grasping a nearby wall for support. Then she sighed deeply, nodded briskly to herself, and stepped back out into the hallway. It was completely deserted. She could hear the low hum of commotion emanating from somewhere below, but she ignored it, choosing instead to mount up the stairs and return to the scene of the battle. It got quieter and quieter as she climbed, and soon the only thing saving her from going mad from deathly silence were the sounds of her footsteps and her breathing.

The seventh floor was the absolute pinnacle of extravagant devastation. The floor was strewn with chunks of rock, glass, and debris. Not a single painting or sculpture had survived. The fallen ceiling like a gaping wound revealed the first signs of dawn – pinky-purple and blossoming like a newborn rose. Hermione thought it was outrageous and appallingly inappropriate for the firmament to present such promise and prettiness when the scene below was so tragic.

In the dead centre of the corridor, Madam Pomfrey was helping Neville onto a stretcher. The rest of them – the battered soldiers of Dumbledore’s Army – stood to the side, watching. Theo had his arms around Luna as she leant heavily against him. Her leg appeared to be bleeding profusely. Dean was perched on a stout boulder and had his hand pressed against a gash on the side of his head. Theo, Ron, Ginny, and Seamus appeared to be largely unhurt. Hermione took a step towards them, and accidentally kicked a small chunk of concrete. It skittered raucously across the ground, bouncing off larger pieces of detritus. The noise alerted her comrades to her presence, and they all looked at her in dumbfounded relief.

“Where the hell have you been?” Theo demanded, exhaustion preventing him from suffusing his tone with the kind of fervour he’d been aiming for.

“I went after Harry,” she answered in a low voice, “but he outran me.” She came to a halt by Neville’s stretcher, frowning down at her blood and dirt smeared friend. “You okay?” she asked tentatively.

Madam Pomfrey replied before he could – “Nothing I can’t fix in a jiffy. Now you all please follow us down to the hospital wing. Professor McGonagall’s orders.”

With that, she levitated Neville’s stretcher and steered it down the corridor.

With a low groan, Dean lifted himself onto his feet.

“Shall we?” he ventured, gesturing towards Pomfrey’s back with his free hand.

“I’ll go find Harry,” Ginny murmured.

“Wait,” Hermione requested. “What happened to... I mean... Bill...”

“He’s alive,” Ginny answered, but not without a tremor in her voice, “He’s alive...” she paused, looking at Hermione through a thin film of tears, “Greyback messed him up really badly. But... he’ll live.”

She walked away before Hermione could offer any words of relief or consolation. And that was good, since she really couldn’t think of any.

“Come on,” Theo muttered. Keeping his hold on Luna, he led the way to the hospital wing. Hermione lagged at the back of the group, examining the backs of the heads in front of her. It seemed as good a way as any to keep from thinking... she was too too too fucking tired to think. Tiredness was as real and material inside her as her blood, her bones, her muscles and sinews... Luna’s dark blond tresses where matted with filth; and yet, they caught the candlelight at strange moments, gleaming as though burnished. Theo’s light brown mop looked uncharacteristically stiff – most likely caked in sweat and dust. Seamus’ short sandy brown hair was tufty and clumpy. Dean’s cropped jet black curls were soaked in blood. Hermione turned to her right to look at Ron’s fiery red locks; they were slicked back. Dirt and sweat worked as well as any hair gel or potion in the market. Ron looked back at her, and she hated
the cloudy patina that sorrow and fatigue had lathered onto his usually brilliant blue eyes.

When she staggered slightly, he put a supporting arm around her waist.
Chapter Notes

First, let me direct you to this aesthetic made by the lovely ElleMartin:
http://dramione-fanfiction-forum.tumblr.com/post/170023200665/wip-were-obsessed-with-d%C3%A9traqu%C3%A9e-by-hystaracal
Beautiful, isn’t it?

Some of the dialogue here has been directly lifted (errrr, borrowed) from HBP.

Bill’s face was gruesomely marred, as though it had been deliberately deformed and distorted. His face was a Francis Bacon portrait.
Madam Pomfrey, along with a senior healer from St. Mungo’s who’d flooed in not too ago, had tried every healing spell in their sizable combined arsenal. Nothing had worked.
(“I’m sorry,” Healer Masterson had mumbled regretfully before leaving, “There really isn’t any known cure for werewolf bites.”)

All that there was left to do then was to stop the bleeding and close the wounds. Pomfrey was slathering a pungent green salve onto Bill’s face in that regard, and the rest of them (with the exception of Neville, who was fast asleep on the next cot, heavily doped up on various restorative potions,) gathered around his bed to watch sorrowfully.
“Poor lad,” Tonks whispered. Ron made a low, gruff sound; he hadn’t looked away from his brother for even a second. There was a distressed, beseeching semblance about his stare, like he might be imploring Bill to just please, please get miraculously healed.

Hermione tore her eyes away from Ron’s vulnerable countenance, passed over Bill’s mangled one, and let her gaze travel down his duvet covered body. She looked at his toes, at the grill at the foot of his bed, at the fingers that curled around the top bar, at the palm and arm attached to those fingers... the shoulder... the neck – Luna’s neck – bent with exhaustion. She looked at Luna’s face, and her eyes that were blinking long and slow in a struggle to stay awake. She looked at the chest Luna’s head was laid upon, at the throat above, swaddled in the scarf she had painstakingly weaved so long ago...
She looked at Theo, and he was looking right back at her.
Their eyes stayed locked for an unquantifiable extent of time. He wore no expression, and gave no sign nor indication to betray what he may have been thinking or feeling. His eyes, blank but steadfast, met Hermione’s stare... and did no more. She felt her breathing accelerate. Her mouth fell open, just a trifle, to provide a better outlet for her quickened breaths.
Just promise me you’ll keep Theo safe, alright? The intense and impassioned plea echoed in her mind, over and over again, gradually losing its urgency the longer she stared into Theo’s unreadable eyes. The pitch got deeper, richer, lilting, monophonic, haunting... And soon enough, it was a Gregorian chant: Just promise me you’ll keep Theo safe, alright? Just promise me you’ll keep Theo safe, alright? Just promise me you’ll keep Theo safe, alright? Alleluia Amen. It was a perfect companion to the austere, church-like atmosphere of the hospital wing.
Without interrupting his scrutiny, Theo tilted his head until it was resting atop of Luna’s. His nostrils flared unobtrusively. There were so many, many different ways the past year could have
gone, and so many of those possibilities ended in a scenario where she didn’t have the trust, support, and friendship of this astonishing, unwavering, wonderful boy; even the thought of those hypotheticals (though their probability now was zero) made Hermione’s stomach turn. Oh, she would keep him safe alright – at any cost. She would make sure not a single overlong hair on his head would be touched.

As her resolve strengthened it must have become apparent on her face, because Theo’s brow furrowed questioningly. She blinked at him once: a gentle gesture of reassurance.

The doors of the hospital wing were pushed open, and the low and lengthy creak that came with it broke the poignant connection between Hermione and Theo. She looked up and felt all the air leave her lungs. *Harry.*

She sprung off the stool she’d been sitting on and ran over to throw her arms around his neck. He smelt of smoke and sea salt and cold sweat; and though his arms came around to hug her back, they felt stiff and mechanical. They... he... felt wrong. She pulled away, falling back onto her heels to get a look at his face. It was covered in soot and dirt, upon which were clearly visible two narrow trails leading from his eyes to his jaw. Dried up tear tracks. She swallowed thickly.

Lupin came to her side to peer at him as well. “Are you all right, Harry?”

“I’m fine,” he answered hoarsely, looking over her shoulder, “How’s Bill?”

Hermione turned and walked back to her seat. Nobody seemed to be able to answer Harry’s question. Ginny, who had come in with Harry, took hold of his hand and pulled him closer to Bill’s cot, from where he frowned sombrely at Pomfrey and asked, “Can’t you fix them with a charm or something?”

“No charm will work on these,” the matron responded, “I’ve tried everything I know.”

“But he wasn’t bitten at the full moon,” Ron counteracted, throwing an unsure glance at Lupin, “Greyback hadn’t transformed, so surely Bill won’t be a – a real –?”

“No, I don’t think that Bill will be a true werewolf,” said Lupin, “but that does not mean that there won’t be some contamination. Those are cursed wounds. They are unlikely ever to heal fully, and – and Bill might have some wolfish characteristics from now on.”

Ron dragged a hand down his face despondently. “Dumbledore might know something that’d work, though,” he said, “Where is he? Bill fought those maniacs on Dumbledore’s orders, Dumbledore owes him, he can’t leave him in this state –”

“Ron,” Ginny interposed sharply, “Dumbledore’s dead.”

The sound of roaring wind erupted in Hermione’s ears. She felt her entire body break into goose pimples; it was a horrible, horrible feeling, like a prolonged internal shudder.  “No!” someone (Lupin?) cried. She saw Harry nod faintly at Ron, confirming Ginny’s statement.

“How –” Seamus and Tonks began at the same time. They both stopped and exchanged a look, and Seamus lowered his head, signalling Tonks to continue.

“How did he die?” she asked softly, “How did it happen?”

Harry wet his lips, pulled his shoulders back, and gravely proclaimed, “Snape killed him. I was there, I saw it –” (...Hermione had to bite her lip to hold in a gasp; her focus was riveted on Harry...) – We arrived back on the Astronomy Tower because that’s where the Mark was... Dumbledore was ill, he was weak, but I think he realized it was a trap when we heard footsteps running up the stairs. He immobilized me, I couldn’t do anything, I was under the Invisibility Cloak – and then Malfoy came through the door and disarmed him –” (...This time, she had to clap her hands to her mouth to keep mute, and beside her, Ron groaned...) – more Death Eaters arrived – and then Snape – and Snape did it. The Avada Kedavra.”

Harry clenched his jaw after that, unable to speak any further. His fists were balled up tightly. Madam Pomfrey let out a distressed wail, and was immediately shushed by Ginny. “Listen!” she pressed, and pointed towards the window at the end of the ward.

Against the pearly pink hue of the early morning, a phoenix was streaking across the sky, its
scintillating plume rippling and dazzling even from a great distance. It was singing a melodic requiem of such terrible beauty that they all sat quietly with their ears pinned back, letting the powerful, heart-rending song wash over them... pour into them... letting it convey the awful grief of a moment that no human articulation could adequately express.

Hermione’s eyes swept across Ron... Harry... Ginny... Lupin... Tonks... Seamus... Dean... Luna... and landed once again on Theo. His head was bowed, weighed down by horror, disbelief, fear, sorrow, and who knows what else.

When Hermione was in her third year, and she’d had a falling-out with her friends over the appearance of a dodgy Firebolt, she would often go up to the astronomy tower in the evenings to watch the day end... and to wallow.

Zipping back and forth through time was more exhausting than she’d ever anticipated. She was lonely, miserable, and terribly jealous of Harry’s special Patronus lessons with Lupin. She had tried the spell herself multiple times, but had had to contend with the shock of failure every time. So she invented a consolation prize – a modification to the bluebell flames charm allowed her to conjure a silvery blue mist from her wand; not remotely as iridescent as a Patronus, but by then Hermione was getting used to things falling short of her expectations. She sat on the podium which held a giant ever-moving model of the solar system, and gazed at the tangerine sky while conjuring a myriad of radiant shapes: a wonky owl, a serpentine dragon, Bavarian gentians, a perfect Fibonacci spiral...

“That’s very clever spellwork, Ms. Granger.”

Hermione jumped and dropped her wand with a clatter. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Dumbledore watching her. With a small smile, he walked over and sat down next to her.

“What are you doing here, Professor?” she asked him as though he were an absconding miscreant, rather than the bleeding headmaster of the school. She flushed immediately, and attempted to stutter out an apology which Dumbledore waved away with a chuckle.

“I came here to contemplate... much like you, I imagine. Great minds really do think alike –”

Hermione flushed even harder at his casual equating of their minds, “– Quite a view from up here, isn’t it?”

The universe was drenched in contrasting hues of copper and ultramarine. “It’s beautiful,”

Hermione agreed softly.

“How have you been coping with the Time-Turner?” he asked inquisitively.

“Just fine, Professor. Thank you.”

“I’m sure you are. I wouldn’t usually have allowed something so potentially dangerous in the hands of any student, let alone a third-year. But it was easy to make an exception for you. A student of such unparalleled aptitude deserves to be aided in every possible way in her quest for learning.”

Hermione didn’t think she’d ever regain her usual colouring again. She nearly pressed her hands to her cheeks to help cool them down. “I... um...” she said oh so intelligently.

Dumbledore smiled down at her indulgently, that permanent twinkle in his eyes surpassing the faint flickering stars that had begun to dot the sky. “I don’t claim to be a seer, but I am an old man. Age brings with it experience, refined perspective, and the ability to foresee the outcome of certain things. You will do wonderful things, Ms. Granger. You already have – and I am sure it will only get better. Harry is lucky to count you among his closest friends.”

Her lip wobbled at Harry’s name, and of course, as with everything, Dumbledore caught it. He continued, “He has a lifetime’s worth of hardships ahead of him... and you... you, Hermione, are going to prove to be of inestimable value to him. As a friend, yes... but also as an extraordinarily gifted witch. You will do wonderful things; of that I am sure.”

She breathed in, slowly, deeply, staring up at him in the hope of conveying her gratitude through
her eyes. Her throat was too choked up with emotion to allow any sound to pass through.

As the darkness of night spread across the vista, he smiled at her kindly and said, “I believe supper will have been laid out by now. Do make sure you eat well – time travel can be most draining.”
“‘Yes, professor,’” she whispered, and stood to leave.
“One more thing,” he called.
Hermione paused at the door and turned around. “Sir?”
“If you would be so kind as to divulge the intonation for that delightful spell of yours? It will be a welcome addition to my daily contemplation regime.”
Hermione glowed, and with a wide grin, she told him.

The phoenix’s threnody rang on till the sun finally broke over the horizon – a subdued smudge of gold.

After Harry had left with Professor McGonagall, Hermione hadn’t lingered for much longer in the hospital wing. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were sitting distraught by a son’s bedside for the second time that year, and everybody who wasn’t a Weasley (or a Delacour) left to give the family some privacy. They walked together solemnly up to an open courtyard, and there they stopped for a few strained moments, each looking from one face to the other, as though grappling to find the right words to disperse with.
Then suddenly Seamus exclained, “What is that?!”
He was gaping at the sky above, looking astounded. Every head present tilted upwards reflexively, and Luna provided the answer in a shaky murmur, “It’s a Thestral, Seamus.”

It was simple after that. Theo turned away first, half-carrying Luna up to the Ravenclaw tower (he squeezed Hermione’s arm as he passed by her,) and then Seamus and Dean made to walk away... but stopped, looking askance at Hermione who hadn’t moved.
“You two go on,” she told them in a low voice, “I’ll just be a moment...”
Once they’d left, Hermione looked up at Lupin to find that he was regarding her curiously. “What is it, Hermione?” he asked.
“Professor Lupin –”
“Call me Remus, please...”
She breathed a half-hearted laugh, “Okay. Remus. It’s... It’s about Theo. We need to find some place safe – some place perfectly safe – for him to be until... until...”
Until when? Hermione had no idea how to finish her sentence. Thankfully, Tonks came to her rescue.
“That boy’s a hero,” she asserted, “Saved me from a very vicious severing spell.”
“I’m sure we can set something up for him. Somewhere unplottable and protected by the Fidelius Charm...” Lupin smiled gently at the appreciation on Hermione’s face, “I was best friends with a boy who turned away from his family’s dark predispositions, Hermione. I understand the danger Theo’s in.”
“He’ll want to be with Luna,” Hermione added, “I don’t think he’ll agree to anything otherwise.”
He frowned thoughtfully. “I... I can speak to Xenophilius... Luna’s father, that is... I don’t think he’ll object to having his home turned into a safehouse...”
“Thank you, Remus,” Hermione said meaningfully. Tonks stepped forward and hugged her.

With a nod, Hermione turned and began her trek up to the Gryffindor tower. Just as she reached the foot of the staircase, she looked back over her shoulder. Lupin and Tonks were still rooted in the middle of the courtyard, hand in hand.

The common room was chock-full. Students of all ages were sitting, standing, pacing around in their pajamas, and the monotonous buzzing of sotto voce conversation had filled the air. It came to a stop the moment Hermione was spotted standing by the portrait hole. A few of them came rushing towards her, questions poised on the tips of their tongues, but Hermione held up her hand waringly. She marched determinedly towards the stairs leading her dormitory, eyes stonily fixed on her destination. The sea of students parted for her.

Once in the dorm, she gathered some clean clothes and went straight into the bathroom. Turning the shower to its hottest temperature, she stood under an inundation of scalding water and just respired. The liquid swirling around the drain was red and brown... her blood and dirt... dirt and her blood... Mudblood... She brutally scrubbed her skin with a sponge saturated with body wash, until the smell of oranges was so prevalent, it was cloying. She breathed in the aroma desperately, seeking comfort... but all in vain.

Dumbledore was dead. Sagacious, brilliant, powerful, seemingly indestructible Dumbledore... was dead. And so Hermione cried. She dropped the sponge, wrapped her arms around her waist and doubled over.

Dumbledore was dead. Murdered by Snape – whom she was supposed to be keeping a watch on, but instead had just let slip past her.

Dumbledore was dead. An assassination orchestrated by Draco Malfoy – whom she had had at her mercy just a few hours ago, but she had set free. She had just let him fucking go, with barely any hesitation. Hadn’t she surmised, after the poisoned-mead incident, that this was exactly what Malfoy was planning? Hadn’t she known full well that he was on the dark side? How could she have let him go? The only reason Malfoy wasn’t paying for his crimes right now was because she had let him go.

She cried until her lunges ached. Then she reached out to turn the water off, and with that motion, commanded her tear ducts to shut off too.

In the world outside, the sun had risen fully, birds were chirping, and Parvati was packing up all her belongings while Lavenders sat on her bed and watched with red-rimmed eyes. Hermione looked between the two girls in confusion.

Parvati glanced at her edgily, and cleared her throat. “My parents are here to take Padma and me home,” she mumbled as she continued to fling her clothes into her trunk. Lavender sniffed loudly.

“I see,” Hermione said, “Well... goodbye.”

Parvati stopped and faced her fully, fidgeting anxiously with a blouse in her hand, “Are you okay, Hermione?”

“I’m fine,” she affirmed, “Take care, Parvati. ...Lavender.”

Weariness was a strange intoxicant. Unfocused and dazed, she shuffled over to the boys’ dormitory, coming to a standstill at the door. Seamus lay sprawled on his bed, evidently asleep. Dean, with a bandage around his head, was sitting on his, resting against the headboard.

“Ron’s in the bathroom,” he said.

“Ah,” she replied, slowly strolling over to lean against his bedpost, “How’s your head?”
“Sore,” he shrugged, “Pomfrey’s given me a sleeping draught to get through the pain but... I don’t feel like sleeping.”

Hermione sighed, and sagged just a little more.

“Are you still kicking yourself for letting,” he said with accompanying air-quotes, “Snape go?”

“We could’ve... We should have stopped him, Dean –”

“Don’t be mad. You heard Lupin, yeah? He would’ve killed us all if we had tried to stop him.”

“There were four of us! We could’ve –”

“It’s Snape, Hermione. Dark wizard extraordinaire.”

She bit her lip, tormented and guilt-ridden... and that was when the bathroom door opened, and Ron emerged amid clouds of sweet smelling vapour.

“Hi,” he said, and seated himself on Dean’s bedside table.

“Bill woken up yet?” Hermione asked gingerly.

“Not yet. Mum and Fleur are in wedding planning mode though – making a right racket. Loud enough to wake the dea–” he changed track with an abrupt look of horror, “...Is Harry still with McGonagall?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you could check on the Marauder’s map?”

Ron went over to his bed upon which lay a pile of dirty clothes, and pulled the map out from somewhere within.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” he avowed. “Hmm... Harry... Harry... Nope, not in Dum – er, the headmaster’s office... not in the hospital wing... Oh. Oh fuck.”

“What?!” Hermione and Dean demanded simultaneously.

Ron lowered the map grimly. “Astronomy tower,” he said with an air of absolute bleakness.

“Come on,” Hermione urged, and they left Dean looking gobsmacked on his bed.

The moment they burst in, Hermione and Ron encountered Harry’s back at the far end of the tower, where he stood with his elbows on the railing. His black-robed form stuck out sharply against the powder blue sky.

They approached him cautiously, but Harry’s heightened instincts must have alerted him to their presence, for he turned around. Hermione stopped; Ron stopped... and they both looked at Harry.

For the next few moments, they did simply that – they considered him across the expanse of a dozen or so feet that lay between them.

“He was right here,” Harry said suddenly, “Standing right where I am when it happened. And Hermione... you’re standing exactly where Malfoy was.”

With a startled whimper, she took a few hurried steps back.

Harry went on, “Then Snape...” he walked towards them, stopping about midway and spinning around to face the railing, “Snape stood here. And from here... while Dumbledore begged and pleaded with him... he... he...” Harry raised his wand.

Hermione went over to his side and saw that his hand was trembling dreadfully. She took hold of it in both of hers, pulled it down, and divested him of his wand. She then led him to the central podium and gestured for him to sit. Parking herself beside him, she kept his hand in hers. Ron joined them, dropping down on Harry’s other side.

“I’m not having a meltdown, you know,” he informed them, “I just came here to get the Invisibility Cloak.”

Of course, Hermione didn’t bring up the fact that he could’ve summoned it from anywhere in the castle. It was obvious that coming here had nothing to do with the cloak. The three of them silently contemplated the bright and balmy summer morning...
...summer mourning... some are mourning...

She tightened her fingers around his hand and said heavily, “Harry... I’m so, so sorry... about the whole Malfoy... thing.”

She knew he’d assume that she was apologising for apparently not believing his ‘Malfoy is a Death Eater’ theory... and she wasn’t going to correct him on that. She wouldn’t ever be able to tell about what happened in that shady alcove – but she just had to voice her regret.

Harry squeezed her hand back, “I...” he swallowed, “I feel sorry for him.”

“What?!” Ron exploded.

“What d’you mean?”

“After he disarmed Dumbledore, they talked... for a long time. I think they both were stalling. Anyway... apparently, Malfoy had tried to come clean to Dumbledore twice.”

Hermione gasped, and Ron spluttered.

“Yeah,” Harry muttered, agreeing with their reactions, “Once after the Christmas hols and once after... after the, um, bathroom incident. But Dumbledore turned him away – wouldn’t even look at him – said it was to keep him safe, in case Voldemort used legilimency against him. You know... the way he was with me during fifth year. I thought he’d admitted that that tactic didn’t bloody work...” He finished with a sigh.

“Then what happened?” Hermione implored.

“Then Dumbledore offered him an out; said he’d give him and his family a place to hide. Malfoy lowered his wand... and that’s when the rest of the Death Eaters broke in, and... and it was too late.”

“Oh god,” Hermione whispered.

“This whole thing’s still his bloody fault,” Ron countered mulishly, “He still –”

“I know what it’s like,” Harry cut in, “Not having a choice.”

A gust of pleasantly cool breeze swept across, and the sound of leaves rustling carried up to the tower.

“So?” said Ron eventually, breaking the fresh bout of silence, “Did you find one? Did you get it? A – a Horcrux?”

Hermione started. The Horcrux! She had actually – honestly and seriously – forgotten all about it.

Harry shook his head.

“You didn’t get it?” said Ron, deflated, “It wasn’t there?”

“No. Someone had already taken it and left a fake in its place.”

“Already taken –?”

Harry dug into his pocket, pulled out a lacklustre gold locket, and held it out to Hermione. She finally let go of his hand, and examined its plain, inornate surface.

“Open it,” Harry said dully.

Inside she found a crumpled scrap of parchment, and after smoothening it out, she read aloud: “‘To the Dark Lord, I know I will be dead long before you read this, but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more.’ Signed, R.A.B.”

“R.A.B.,” Ron repeated, “but who was that?”

“Dunno,” Harry replied.

“Hermione...?” Ron asked, shooting her a perplexed look.

“I... I can’t think of anybody with those initials...”

“It was all for fucking nothing,” Harry rasped heatedly, “Dumbledore weakened himself for nothing.”

“What happened out there, Harry?” Hermione questioned tentatively.

“Later,” he said firmly, “Just... not now. Please.”
It was late in the afternoon. The dreamy, smouldering heat brought to mind sticky, bittersweet marmalade on warm toast. The soughing wind, freshly escaped from Morpheus’ box of dreams, carried an oscitant drowsiness that it liberally deposited on all that it touched. The constant susurration of leaves (“...shh...shhh...shh...”) was the sound that Hypnos’ wings made when they folded around an unsuspecting Zeus and lulled him into a deep sleep. The Astronomy Tower was made of ebony and poppy seeds. Harry reclined slowly till he lay flat on his back, and told the wretched tale of a bootless quest, a yawning cavern, an insidious black lake swarming with Inferi, and the absolute horror of having to force a debilitating liquid down Dumbledore’s throat while fighting to ignore his anguished protests.

Hermione hugged her knees to her chest as she listened with her heart in her throat. That was no way for a man as great as Dumbledore to go. She still believed that there could be dignity in death, and Dumbledore had been entirely deprived. Destabilised by a vile potion, forced to relive his worst memories, and then murdered by a man he not only trusted, but had tirelessly defended time after time...

No. It was hideously unjust.

When Harry came to the end of his account, he let out a shuddering sigh and closed his eyes. Ron levelled a tense look at Hermione, silently urging her to say something. She pinched her lips between her teeth; oh but what could she say?

“Shh shh shh shh,” the wind and the treetops whispered.

The angle of the sun was such that a few rays fell directly onto the shiny bronze telescopes that lined one side of the tower. The light that bounced back, brilliant and blinding, scattered haphazardly across the floor.

“’m sorry, mate,” Ron said weakly.

From between her knees Hermione mumbled, “You were there with him... to the end. He must’ve been comforted by that.”

“Yeah,” Ron seconded awkwardly.

Harry said nothing, didn’t move, didn’t even open his eyes.

“Um, Harry?” Ron asked uncertainly. He scrunched his face and looked once more at Hermione.

“Harry?”

She leaned over to peer at his face, and...

And it appeared that Harry had fallen asleep.

“Shhh shh shhh shhh...”
He then turned to the fat lady, “Quid Ag–”
“Oh, I wouldn’t go in there.”

They turned to watch Dean saunter over with his hands in his pockets. “Alright, Harry?”
“Yeah,” Harry replied, “But what’s going on?”
Dean shrugged casually. “Seamus and his mum are having a row. It’s been going on for a while... and it’s loud and bloody ugly.”
“What’s it about then?” Ron demanded.
“She wants to take him home. He’s not having it. So they’re going to yawp at each other till one of them caves.”
“Bloody hell. My money’s on his mum,” said Ron, “She’s really er...”
“Forceful,” Harry supplied expressionlessly.

And not a second later, the portrait hole swung open, and an extremely frazzled looking witch in deep plum robes charge forcefully out, tore through the crowd and down the corridor. Hermione shared a startled, nonplussed look with the three boys next to her, and then they all clamoured into the common room in a rush.

Seamus was sitting coolly on a plush armchair with a box of Honeydukes’ mini chocolate nougat cakes. “What some?” he offered. Ron practically dived into the box.
“Um... what happened with your mum, Seamus?” Hermione broached.
He yanked the box away from Ron and gallantly held it in front of her. “She’s getting a room in Hogsmeade,” he said smoothly.
“Let me?!” Seamus spluttered, “Ha boy, of course I’m staying.”
He said it like he was genuinely offended that they’d even considered any other outcome to be a possibility.

Ginny appeared out of her dormitory a few minutes after with eyes full of sleep.
“What the fuck was all the yelling about?” she groaned, falling onto the sofa next to Harry.
“Finnigan family reunion,” Ron said around a yawn.
“And you know what the Irish are like,” Dean added.
“Rambunctious,” Hermione finished with a nod.
“Piss off,” Seamus grunted.

Conversation died out as they passed the box around, suddenly aware of how long it had been since they’d last eaten. The cake was divvied and gobbled up with singular alacrity, and everything else melted away. They had cake... and that, Hermione (and perhaps the ghost of Marie Antoinette) thought was plenty good enough.

The next morning, Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Ginny visited the hospital wing to see Bill and Neville. The atmosphere there was the exact opposite of what it had been the day before.

“Look sharp, Longbottom!” Fred barked as he tossed a rather fluffy looking purple ball at him. Neville caught it, and threw it over to George.
The twins, Bill, and Neville were playing catch in the hospital wing, and Hermione wondered what Madam Pomfrey would do if she happened to just step out of her office. Her eyes darted to the closed door...
“We’ve put an alarm on it,” said George, giving Hermione a knowing look. He threw the ball
Feeling okay, Bill?” Ron asked.

“Absolutely,” he answered, neatly flinging the ball at Fred. The wounds on his face were now mostly dry and much less swollen, and his fantastic bone structure was once again beginning to show through.

“What about you, Neville?” said Ginny.

“Oh, I’m perfectly fine,” he replied after completing his turn of catch-and-throw, “Dunno why Pomfrey won’t let me leave.”

With a painfully artificial gasp, Fred began, “Strapping young lad like you? She probably just wants to –”

What she wanted, they would never know. Hermione interrupted Fred with a horrified shriek:

“EXCUSE ME – is that a Pygmy Puff?!?”

“Mmmhm,” Fred hummed, undeterred by her vocal intrusion, “Say hello to Argus.”

Argus sailed through the air between Fred and Neville.

“You named your Pygmy Puff after Filch?” Harry asked with a disbelieving chuckle.

“We found we really miss the blighter,” said George. Argus was in his possession, and he tossed him from one hand to the other rapidly, before throwing him at Bill... from under his leg.

“He’s a living creature, you maniacs!” Hermione spluttered, even as around her, Harry, Ron, and Ginny were laughing.

“Give us some credit, Hermione,” Fred reproached, “We aren’t going to drop him. Two very well trained quidditch players here... and one chappie with keen animal instincts –”

“Careful, brother-mine,” said Bill with a toothy grin, “The animal instinct knows nothing of familial sentiment.”

Argus flew from Bill to Fred like a bullet. “Honestly!” Hermione cried.

“Y’know,” Ron sniggered, “You’re forgetting that the fourth person in this little game of yours is Neville...”


“Cool,” said Ron as he caught the Pygmy Puff with ease, “Here, Harry...”

Harry caught Argus with one hand. “Enough now!” Hermione moaned, and Argus went from Harry to Ginny to Bill to Ron to Fred to Harry to Neville to George to Ginny...
Dumbledore’s funeral set to be held the next day.

Fixing her eyes on the marching bureaucrats, Hermione said quietly, “He was trying to protect him, Theo. You know... if Voldemort –” Theo barely flinched at the name – “decided to use legilimency on him, he’d –”

“Bullshit. Draco is an expert Occlumens. Narcissa made sure of it... and if Dumbledore had just given him one fucking chance, he’d have known it too. Do you... Do you realise what it must’ve taken for him to do that? To go to Dumbledore... to go against everything, against his family, the Dark Lord... against himself... Oh, Salazar. And he turned him away. He turned him away.”

He gripped his hair, breathing heavily. Spinning in a wild circle, he strode to the edge of the forbidden forest, but before Hermione could take one step to follow, he turned around and paced right back.

“What do you think is happening to him right now, eh? Yup, poor old Dumbledore is dead, but what do you think that psychopath is doing to Draco right fucking now?”

Hermione swallowed copiously against the big ball of... something... lodged in her throat. “I believe... he’s being lauded for pulling off a successful mission?”

He snorted scathingly. “Successful?! Darling, his mission was to kill Dumbledore. He failed. There’s no question about it – he’s being punished. Fucking brutally. Evil psycho-lord is particularly fond of torturing Malfoys, ever since Lucius got arrested...” and then he wholly, alarmingly shuddered.

[Addendum B to the NSFT policy: Say NOTHING about how on the night of the battle, Malfoy found time during the madness to pull her aside and make her promise to ensure Theo’s safety, (he’d probably breakdown completely).]

“...We need to extract him out of there. Him and Narcissa. We need to...”

“Theo... That’s... impossible. We don’t even know where they are –”

“Dumbledore promised! He promised Draco he would hide him away! Sure he was bumped off, but that shouldn’t negate –”

“Stop it.”

“No! Listen... Draco tried to the right thing, okay? And your great sodding judicious old leader didn’t let him. You – you all – you owe him this!”

Hermione could only look at him, her face full of hapless pity.

“Bloody shit,” he hissed so low it was barely audible, and stormed back over to the edge of the forest. He stood there with his back to her, hand pressed hard against a tree trunk for support.

She stayed rooted to her spot until his shoulders stopped shaking... until he turned around and said he was ready to head back in.

With heavy steps, Hermione walked out of the library, sighing in defeat. She’d spent over an hour combing through the archives, looking for a plausible identity behind the initials R.A.B. All she’d come across were Rosalind Antigone Bungs, a ninety-eight year old pureblood of Hungarian ancestry, known for her exquisite collection of brocade mantles, and Rupert "Axebanger" Brookstanton, who... well... he’d fit right in with the Gauls in the world of ‘Asterix’. He was an Auror who’d died on the job in the early 70’s.

The library to the Gryffindor tower: it was a trail she’d covered so many times that she could walk it blind. She knew it in the earliest hours of the morning, and in the blackest of nights. She knew which stones on the floor had cracks, she knew where every taper hung, she knew every painting on every wall.

And they were thinking of closing the school. This could quite possibly be the last time she’d be
walking down this hall, admiring the way the lamplight refracted off the stained glass windows. This could be the last time she climbed these steps, dragging her fingers along the cool, shiny banister. This could be the last time.

Before she knew it, she was back in her dormitory. Lavender’s parents had whisked her away earlier that day, so Hermione had the whole place to herself. Feeling piteously forlorn, she thought to call Ginny over... but then again, there was a certain perverse fulfilment to be obtained by letting loneliness work on you.

She pulled her trunk out from under her bed and began packing. Clothes, books, stationary – all fell pell-mell, spurned into motion by a bit of silent, robotic, wandless magic. Her thoughts were far, far away.

She thought about her unsuspecting parents, probably sitting down for their evening meal after a long day at the clinic. She thought about Theo, so full of anguish... she’d have to say goodbye to him too, tomorrow. She thought about Luna, Neville, Seamus, and Dean... her brave friends who’d so willingly jumped in to help save the school. She thought about Ginny, who’d lost her heart to a boy with the most uncertain of fates. She thought about Ron and the grin that once made her world spin... that held still some power over her. She thought about Harry – oh Harry –

Hermione pushed open a window and shoved her head outside, breathing in a huge gulp of cool night air.

She thought about Hagrid, flat-out one of the kindest souls she’d ever known. She thought about dear McGonagall, the closest she’d had to a mentor. She thought about Flitwick; she thought about Vector and Babbling. She thought about Snape... that cruel curl of his lip (“...insufferable know-it-all...”) that she imagined must have adorned his sallow face when he shot the curse that ruined everything.

She thought about Draco Malfoy. How desolate and doomed he must have felt that night, when he stood before her bound in ropes... “Just promise me you’ll keep Theo safe, alright?” ...Ugh, that desperate plea had lodged itself in the furrows of her brain. Theo... Safe... Theo...

She thought about his hands, of all things. The hands that had pressed against her arm and mouth when he had accosted her. The hands that made beautiful, beautiful music when dancing over piano keys. Hands that held her books with obvious care, and wrote mystifying notes. Hands that fixed the vanishing cabinet and disarmed Albus Dumbledore.

Could he truly, at that moment, be cowering in some corner, suffering the terrible wrath of Voldemort?

Voldemort. She thought about Voldemort and felt tendrils of fury writhe inside her like thousands of delirious snakes. It all began with him... and it had to end with him. Well, first they’d have to figure out how to end him...

Without the slightest bit of confidence, Hermione picked up her wand and attempted to cast her strongest summoning charm yet. “Accio Horcrux book!” she cried. And forty-eight seconds later, a thick tome bound in faded black leather flew in through the dormitory window. She shouldn’t have been shocked by how easy it had been; Dumbledore’s wards had died with him.

She placed it on her bed – Secrets of the Darkest Art – and stared. The sinister air she perceived about it was probably all in her head, but still she couldn’t bring herself to open it. Oh, she’d read it alright – every page, every word – but... not yet, not now. She didn’t like the idea of attending Dumbledore’s funeral with her head full of those secrets. It would taint the occasion.

She thought about Dumbledore; all his brilliant accomplishments, and his unfathomable decisions. She could only picture him at his spry, benevolent, and twinkling best; never as one who would manipulate situations, or ignore a boy desperate for help. She couldn’t imagine him crying and
breaking down when forced to face the mistakes of his past. She couldn’t see him begging for mercy, nor bent and broken with death lying on him like an untimely frost.

*One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,*  
*And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.*

She thought of Dumbledore and she thought, “*Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!*”

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On the soft, luxuriant grass by the lake stood a marble sepulchre: bright white and minimalistic – Dumbledore’s final resting place. The funeral was over; all the attendants had left. Harry and Ron had gone to take care of some last minute packing, and Hermione lingered by the tomb... waiting. The mermaids that had swum up to the surface to sing their lament were still somewhat visible below the surface of the lake, weaving through swirls and eddies.  
*I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.*  
*I do not think that they will sing to me.*

The band running along the edge of the tomb was embossed with tiny half-moons and stars, so like the ones frequently seen on Dumbledore’s robes. Hermione’s gaze skittered across the panorama, taking in the lake and the grounds and the forest and the glorious castle. She now knew for sure that she would *not* be returning to Hogwarts whether it remained open or not, and yet it wasn’t nostalgia she was feeling. It was some indescribable combination of resignation and approval; it had engulfed her the moment Harry said he’d be out tracking Horcruxes.

Then she heard the rustling of footsteps coming from behind her, and all she knew was dread.  
“*Ayup little girl,*” Theo said softly as he stood close beside her. Hermione licked her suddenly bone-dry lips, and... oh, *wonderful,* she was tearing up already.  
“*Hermione?*” He ducked his head and took in her face with concern.  
“Yes, um, yes,” she stuttered, straightening her shoulders, “Look Theo. You’re a... target now. The Death Eaters are going to want to get their hands on you.”  
“Oooh, titillating,” he said dryly. Hermione ignored him.  
“So I spoke to Lupin, and the Order has set up a safehouse for you. He’ll take you there today –”  
“Waaaaaaaait a minute there, darling,” Theo frowned, “Why didn’t you speak to *me* first?!?”  
“I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to refuse, and – no shut up, *listen* – the safehouse is Luna’s home.”  
“Oh.”  
“Yeah.”  
“Alright. I’ll just swing by Malfoy Manor first, whisk Draco and Narcissa away and –”  
“*Are you MAD?*”

Theo looked down his nose at her, “Perfectly sound, thanks. But this is non-negotiable.”  
“What makes you think he’s even there? It was the first place the Ministry looked. Haven’t you been reading the papers? They tore the place down hunting for him and Snape!” Hermione said incredulously.

“I don’t care!” Theo yelled, “I need to see for myself. He must’ve left some clue... some... some...”  
Hermione wrung her hands desperately. “Theo,” she appealed, “He’s with Snape... with Voldemort... you’re not going to be able to find him.”  
“*Gah!*” he howled in distress, burying his face in his hands.  
“Please, *please,* listen to me. Go stay with Luna till this is all... over. There’s no sense in you running out into the wild and getting killed. Theo. *Please.*”
Slowly, he removed his hands, and the face they revealed was disturbingly... lifeless. Hollow.

“Fine,” he uttered impassively, “When will you join us?”

*Oh god.* She bit back a sob and took a deep breath. “Well, I have to go home first and... and modify my parents’ memories. Then there’s Bill Weasley’s wedding –”

Theo snorted in disbelief; “You’re joking.”

“Heh. I know it seems like bad timing but... they all need something to celebrate...”

“Right. Delightful,” he said in a clipped manner, “And then you’ll come to the safehouse?”

The way he was looking at her, challengingly and searchingly, made Hermione certain he knew full well that she wasn’t planning on joining him. He was just waiting for her to confirm it out loud.

“I’ll be going with Harry. Dumbledore gave him a task to do, and I –”

“No. Sorry. Absolutely not.”

Exhaling heavily, she timidly reached out to touch his arm... but he jerked out of reach.

“He’s not going in blind, Theo –” (she absolutely was,) “– We have to do this! It’s the only way to stop Voldemort!”

“What?” he demanded through gritted teeth, “What do you have to do?”

“I... I can’t...” she stuttered.

“You can’t tell me?!” His eyes widened unbelievingly, “Seriously...?”

“I can’t, Theo... Oh, I really can’t! You know I trust you more than anyone –” and he turned away from her in disgust “– I do. You know that. But this is Harry’s secret to tell, and I can’t –”

“For F**K’S SAKE,” he growled, “Harry’s task, Harry secret; Harry, Harry, Harry. Why is he the main bloody protagonist in your life story? It’s pathetic. You make everything about him. You go scurrying after him no matter what –”

“This is not just about him! Come on, Theo – it’s about stopping Voldemort, and yes, unfortunately that all comes down to Harry!”

“EXACTLY! It comes down to Harry. Not you!”

“I can’t abandon him! He needs me, and –”

“Well, of course he needs you! He probably won’t last a day without you watching his bumptious chosen arse!”

“So then?! You know I have to go with him!”

Theo pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed deeply. He looked shrewdly at Hermione for a full minute, and then said, “I’m coming with you.”

“Ughhhgoorrrd,” Hermione breathed, “No!”

“Yes. I. Am.” he said forcefully.

“Harry’s scarcely agreed to let Ron and me go along! He’ll never agree to this...”

“Oh! Oh my! King Potter cannot handle a ‘too bad, bugger off, suck it up’ is it?!”

“It’s his mission, Theo! If you do this, he might... he might not let me go along either –”

“Good! Excellent! Problem solved!”

“He needs me, and –”

“I NEED YOU,” Theo shouted, stalking impossibly close to her, “I need you! My wellness... my sanity... my fucking life depends on you now, okay? I need you. I don’t know where the hell Draco is – and I... I won’t... I won’t be able to go on if something were to happen to you. Hermione. I need you.”

There was a watery shimmer across his eyes, but it was nothing compared to the state Hermione was in. Tears were falling rapidly down her heated cheeks.

“Nothing,” she stressed, “Is going to happen to me.”

“Merlin love a Dugbog... please! You can’t know that!” he differed fervently.
“But I do! Nothing is going to happen to me because I refuse to let it! No listen,” she implored hotly when he scoffed, “I absolutely and wholly intend to get through this godawful shitstorm with my mind and body intact. And you know full well that nothing can oppose the force of my determination.”

Her words weren’t... effective. Theo was looking miserable and entirely unimpressed. In a fit of desperation, Hermione said every damn thing that popped into her head.

“I have a list!” she exclaimed, “Things I simply have to do, see... and... and... House-elves! Societal inequality! The Muggle Studies curriculum!”

“You’re a lunatic! You’re batty! Stop this nonsense, you’re –”

“Werewolves! Medical synthesis! The Weird Sisters have nothing on The Who! Theo, I’ll see you when it’s all over, okay? I’ll take you to that favourite bakery of mine. I’ll take you to the cinema. I’ll restore my parents’ memories, and we can all go together!”

Nearly every word she spoke was punctuated with a sob. She stared up at Theo and took in his every feature: floppy, tousled hair (which she realised – with a start – was nearly the same colour as hers); thin, angular face (currently flushed with emotion); deep, deep blue eyes (like the ocean at night). He pursed his lips (rightfully made to be pulled up in a mischievous grin,) and blinked the moisture away from his eyes.

“I’d like to meet them,” he said croakily, “You parents.”

“They’ll adore you.”

“Course they will. Everybody does.”

Hermione sputtered out a watery laugh. Then she threw her arms around his neck. He hugged her back immediately, lifting her right off the ground. She closed her eyes and buried her nose in his scarf; she could feel his every exhale against the back of her neck.

“Love you,” she murmured, and he squeezed her tightly against himself.

When she opened her eyes, peering over Theo’s shoulder, she saw three figures making their way across the grounds towards them. With a sigh, she slipped back down onto her feet, took a step away, and lightly spun him around to face the approaching trio.

As they neared, Hermione recognised Lupin and Luna, but the third person was a stranger to her. He was tall and barrel-chested, with white hair so frizzy and fluffy that it made Hermione feel better about her own. Upon that atrocious hair sat a comically tiny fez.

“Hemione, Theodore,” Lupin greeted briskly, “This is Xenophilius Lovegood.”

“Hello,” Hermione muttered, but the man was too busy examining Theo.

“So... you’re the boy, eh? The boy... that is, my Luna’s... er...”

“He’s my boyfriend, daddy,” Luna said steadily.

“Yes. That.”

Said boyfriend was chewing his tongue nervously, struggling to maintain eye contact. “Nice to meet you, sir,” he rushed out.

“Humph. Born on a leap day, weren’t you? Such people are known to be inconstant.”

Lupin cleared his throat loudly, and much to Theo’s great relief, took hold of the situation. “We’ve secured the place... it’s ready. We’ll be apparating straight from Hogsmeade. Are you packed and ready to leave?”

Theo nodded. Luna then turned to Hermione and pressed a piece of parchment into her hand.

“That’s for you,” she said, “Remus told me how this whole thing was your idea... Thank you, Hermione.”

Hermione hugged her, and in the lowest tone she could manage, she whispered into her ear: “Take care of him.”

“I will,” she whispered back. They broke apart, and Luna looked Hermione dead in the eye, “And you take care of yourself.”

There was nothing else left to do or say. But still, Hermione wanted one last chance to look at Theo...
— just look at him — and so that’s what she did. “Come on,” she vaguely registered Luna say as she led Lupin and her father away.

Theo’s mouth was quivering, but besides that, his expression was placid. His eyes... oh but his eyes were tumultuous.

“Well,” Hermione rasped, “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead, and she closed her eyes. When she felt a gust of cool air hit her face, she knew he was no longer standing in front of her. Unable to watch him retreat, she turned to face Dumbledore’s tomb again and stared at the glossy marble, at the half-moons and stars, until her tears caused it to blur into a giant white blob. She swiped at her eyes, and stared at the grass, the damp hem of her sombre dress robes, and finally looked at the parchment Luna had given her.

‘The Lovegood House is located at Ottery St Catchpole in Devon, England.’

How long did she stand there? It was hard to determine. She was in a strange state of semi-awareness, from which she was only (and abruptly) pulled out of when Ginny came and stood next to her.

“The train’s set to leave in half an hour,” she said.

Hermione nodded, and with an arm around each other’s waists, the two girls turned back towards the castle.

“Harry broke up with me. ...And you’re not surprised at all.”

Hermione pulled a sympathetic face, “Are you?”

“No,” Ginny sighed.

“How are you?”

“I’m... not surprised,” she answered bleakly, “And you? Alright?”

Hermione looked up at the turrets and spires of the place that had been her second home for the last six years. It was the end of the world as she knew it, and

“I feel fine,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

And with that, I have officially put away The Half-Blood Prince. We will now be delving into The Deathly Hallows territory.
Colourful little buildings lined the road, and Hermione watched them blur by from the backseat of her dad’s old Bentley as it zipped across Kentish Town. Tendrils of Ian Curtis’ warbling baritone escaped from the stereo:

*I've seen the nights filled with bloodsport and pain,
And the bodies obtained, the bodies obtained...\n
“Alright, out with it,” said dad, shooting her a look through the rear view mirror. “What’s wrong? You’ve barely said a word since you got off the train.”

She knew there was no use in telling outright lies – her parents would know them for what they were immediately. Half-truths and prevarication were the way to go. So she replied, “Professor Dumbledore died. His funeral was just this morning.”

Mum gasped, “What happened?”

“He was a hundred and fifteen years old.”

“Ah, that’ll do it,” said dad, not unkindly, “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“Hmm,” she said, hoping that that was the end of the conversation.

“Had he been ill?” mum asked.

“Er, a little. Then he... took a dreadful – fatal – tumble two nights ago.”

“Oh god,” mum sighed sadly, “Poor Harry must be devastated.”

“He is.”

Mum made a small sympathetic noise, and for a short spell they sat in silence, save for the humming of the motor, and Joy Division.

*This is the car at the edge of the road,
There’s nothing disturbed, all the windows are closed.
I guess you were right, when we talked in the heat,
There’s no room for the weak, no room for the weak.*

“I know I tell you this every year and it never ends up happening, but you should call Harry over for dinner sometime. Ron, too. Actually, you might as well ask all the Weasleys –”

“Robert, please, no!” mum interrupted with something akin to panic.

Dad chuckled, “You really, really don’t like Arthur and Molly, do you?”

“They treat us like we’re remarkably clever and amusing circus animals,” mum sniffed, “Arthur is unbearable with his ridiculous enthusiasm.”

“Come now, Evie,” dad chided, “He means well. Our... um... ‘muggle’, Hermione?”

“Yes,” Hermione affirmed.

“Right. Our muggle bits and bobs are all new to him.”

“And magic isn’t to us?” mum demanded, “Actually, we ought be behaving like him, considering we were, out of the blue, thrown into a bloody fantasy novel. Is a little bit of decorum too much to ask for? And his wife. Heavens, all she wants to do is exchange recipes.”

Hermione and dad both laughed at that. Even if mum wasn’t utterly hopeless in the kitchen, her unreserved contempt for conventional gender roles would’ve put her at odds with the homely Mrs. Weasley.

“Honestly, Hermione,” mum continued, “If you end up marrying Ron I will be most disappointed.”

Hermione’s face burned with mortification as she remembered all the times last summer when her parents had caught her dancing like a madwoman on receiving terse, barely legible letters from Ron. “I have absolutely no desire to do that,” she muttered, and on catching dad’s raised eyebrows
in the rear view mirror added, “anymore.”
“Good girl,” mum cheered.
“Ron’s oldest brother Bill is getting married in two weeks,” Hermione said quickly before her dad could speak, “We’ve all been invited.”
“In two weeks? We’ll be strolling around Aussie beaches,” said dad.
“What a pity,” mum deadpanned.
They stopped at a traffic light, and dad turned around to grin at Hermione. “We have a fantastic itinerary ready for our trip,” he said cheerily, “just waiting for the Hermione stamp of approval.”

Bile shot up her oesophagus, but she somehow managed to smile back. “I can’t wait to see it,” she mumbled, staring at dad’s charming open smile, the crow’s-feet around his chestnut brown eyes, and the salt-and-pepper curls springing out of his scalp.

Where will it end? Where will it end?
Where will it end? Where will it end?

Home looked like home – exactly as it always had. The garden was overflowing with sweet peas, peonies, and giant dahlias as big as her head. The faded brick house with its brown tile roof and spotlessly white casement windows was a quaint suburban dream.

As dad busied himself with unloading her trunk, Hermione drank in the image before her. “Garden looks beautiful, mum,” she said admiringly.
“Oh, thank you, love,” mum cooed, wrapping her arms around Hermione from behind and resting her chin on her shoulder. “I missed you so much.”
“Me too,” Hermione replied unsteadily.
“Really wish you had come home for Christmas. Not seeing or speaking to you for eight whole months is agony.”
“I know, mum,” Hermione sighed, “Sixth year has been... mad. I’m so glad to be home.”
“Move it along, ladies,” dad panted, dragging her trunk down the paved path leading to their front door, “The second innings is about to start.”
“Speaking of,” Hermione began, amused, “Why did you choose to go to Australia the year the Ashes are being hosted in England?”
“It’s what happens when I let your mother make decisions.”
“Don’t start, Robert.”
Dad threw a faux-exasperated look at mum, and winked when Hermione giggled. Then suddenly, his face contorted.
“Oh, Jesus. Hun,” he whispered hotly, “Mrs. Henley’s back!”
Mum gripped Hermione’s arm, “Do not look at her. Move faster, Robert! Go, go!”
“Let me,” Hermione said to dad, and wandlessly levitated her trunk a scant inch above the ground. “Thanks,” he huffed, “Damn it, hurry. She’s hobbling over!”

Mum fumbled with the keys before finally unlocking the door, and the three panic-stricken Grangers leapt into their house, shutting out the husky cries of, “Where’s me cat?! They took her ‘gain, devil worshippin’ scum! Witches! Me cat! Where’s me cat! They killed and et me cat!”
Late at night, Hermione closed all the curtains in her room and switched off all lights save for one table lamp. Sitting at her desk in her most comfortable pajamas, she rolled her neck, took a deep breath, and with a motion suggesting grim ceremony, cracked open *Secrets of the Darkest Art*.

Four hours later, she turned the final page. Her skin was crawling with revulsion. Standing up with a suddenness that made her head swim, she hurled the book into her open trunk and slammed it shut, wanting it to be as far away from her as possible. Climbing into bed, she felt the remnants of the many shudders she had suffered while reading the horrible book. But at least she knew – in theory – how a Horcrux could be destroyed. It had to be wrecked into a state beyond magical repair. Ah, but to find something capable of inflicting such damage was going to be a problem. Hermione groaned into her pillow; it was just one thing after the other.

Hermione sat with her rapt mum on the living room settee, telling her about Arithmancy. They were deaf to the sound of cricket spilling from the telly. Yet, in spite of the noise and absorbing conversation, she was fully aware of the pointed *tick* of every passing second – had the clock on the mantelpiece always been so loud?

Dad stalked into the room from the kitchen looking terribly tetchy. “Bloody dishwasher’s conked off again,” he groused, “That’s the last time I call that galling, smug old scouser to fix it.” Putting on a fantastically convincing Liverpudlian accent, he continued, “*C’mon Robbie, giz a couple o quid for this here.* Bleurgh.”

“He’s your brother-in-law, Robbie,” mum reminded him with a smile.

“Not for much longer... Oh! Headley’s bowling up a storm today!” Dad settled down on the armchair in front of the telly, and it was clear that he was lost to them for the next few hours.

Hermione turned to mum, “Aunt Vicky’s getting a divorce?”

“Yes. And your father’s never been prouder of his little sister,” mum smirked.

“For god’s sake, YOU COULD’VE CAUGHT THAT YOU DUNDERING BUFFOON!”

After sharing an indulgent laugh, mother and daughter returned to their discussion. The *tick-tick-ticking* clock never relented.

Hermione stepped into the house (with her purse full of money) sometime around noon, after a quick trip to the local Building Society branch. The few thousand pounds didn’t feel like much when uncertainty stretched on endlessly in front of her.

Her parents were at work, and she had the place to herself for the next six hours; she was determined to make the most of it. First order of business: organising luggage. Digging deep into her wardrobe, she pulled out a tiny amethyst-coloured pouch, covered in intricate beadwork. It had been a gift from her Aunt Malorie on her fifteenth birthday. She sat cross-legged on the floor with a book on advanced charms open before her, and closely read the instructions for casting an undetectable extension charm.

“*Capacious extremis,*” she intoned, waving her wand in spiral over the bag. Then she stuck her finger into the opening... followed by her hand... her wrist... her arm... her shoulder... What if she were to just dive inside and live in there forever?
Shaking ludicrous ideas out of her head, she moved on to filling the bag with every magical book in her trunk, followed by every potion ingredient, dittany, murtlap essence, pepper-up potion... She sifted through her clothes, picking out the most practical and comfortable items to take with her. As she went to close the wardrobe doors, her eye fell on lightly shimmering lilac fabric, and wistfully, she took out the dress it was attached to. Tea-length, strapless, and made of silk and organza – it was really very, very pretty. Well, she was going to attend a wedding, wasn’t she?

After dropping the dress inside, Hermione took the bag up to the attic. Afternoon sunlight poured in through the skylight high up on the slanted roof, touching every corner of the cluttered, dusty space. She walked over to a towering stack of large cardboard boxes, wandlessly summoning the ones labelled, ‘photographs’, and ‘Hermione’s documents’. She put every paper contained in the latter into her bag, and vanished the empty box after. Turning to the other one, Hermione swallowed and precariously pulled the covering flaps aside. It was so like her mum to classify the photos by year and store them in neat piles. It certainly made her life easier. She went through the piles one by one, starting at 1979, erasing herself from every picture that included her. Nearly all of them did. She tried to be matter of fact about it; clinical, like. Her hands may have been shaking, her breathing may have been laboured, but she did not cry. No, Hermione did not cry.

She slipped a few photographs into her bag from time to time: one when she was just born, swaddled up in her mother’s arms, one when she was a toddler sitting between dad’s legs on top of a slide, one from each birthday, each family vacation, each Christmas. She laughed out loud at a picture from Halloween, 1985, when dad had insisted they dress up like the band Cream. In sensational shirts and tight bell-bottoms, dad was looking absolutely thrilled, Hermione was grinning with her giant childhood teeth gleaming, and mum seemed embarrassed to be alive.

By the time she finished, she was sitting in near-blackness. Her final move was to comb through the 1974 pile to find a photo from her parents’ wedding. How happy they looked! They were radiant, blissful, and so fucking gorgeous, holding hands under a large yew tree. She brought the photo to her lips and lightly kissed it. But she did not cry.

“Hermione!”
The call came from downstairs – evidently her parents had returned. She found them in the kitchen, laughing over something or the other. Dad saw her and grinned, waving a paper bag in her direction.
“Mongolian beef stew and rice for dinner,” he said, “How’s that sound?”
“Excellent,” Hermione beamed with forced enthusiasm.

Momentarily shelving her anxiety, Hermione let herself pretend that it was just a regular Sunday morning with her parents. Dad stood by the stove, expertly rolling crepes. Mum sat at the table, perusing the paper. She was wrapped up in a fluffy, cobalt robe, and her smooth honey blonde hair was coiled at the back of her head, elegantly messy. For the ten-millionth time in her life, Hermione mourned the fact that she had inherited her father’s explosive curls.

Mum yawned, blindly reaching out for her coffee without looking away from the paper. Hermione admired the delicacy of her neck, the cut of her jaw, the straight but gentle line of her nose, her
thick and dark eyelashes... well gosh, she truly was a beautiful woman. Despite being utterly
dishelved, she radiated poise and grace. But even when overwhelmed by all that dainty
loveliness, Hermione didn’t forget how forceful mum was; frighteningly intelligent, fiercely
opinionated, brazen, talented, unconventional, and brave. If she could be even half the woman her
mother was, she would be content.

Dad set a plate in front of each of them. “Dig in!” he proclaimed, “Anything good in the papers,
Evie?”
“No,” mum replied curtly, “Eight more unexplainable deaths.”

Anxiety soared off the shelf and speared its way back into her heart.
But she did not cry.

And there it was – the final evening. They were meant to catch a late night flight the next day, and
their tickets (that, unknown to her parents, were two in number and not three,) were stuck on the
fridge door with a magnet.

Hermione stood in her room, purportedly packing a suitcase. In reality, she was putting away every
single one of her processions – shutting away all the little pieces of her life thus far – effectively
turning the place into a bland and innocuous guest room.
Her books took up five large cartons. Her music collection took one, her clothes took two. It was a
bleak undertaking, so she forced some fun into it. Skipping around and snapping her fingers, she
made her things fly and dance around. It was a silly game, really... A lark! A spree!
“A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, the medicine go down, the medicine go
down...”
She sang, pranced, and twirled – but she did not cry. And when finally, all her things had been
packed up, she put the cartons together and transfigured them into a large comfy sofa. The walls
were bare, the shelves and dresser were empty, and her Starry Night bedcover was now plain white
linen.
No, Hermione did not cry.

Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down,
In a most delightful way.

When she got downstairs, Hermione went into the kitchen and prepared three cups of mint tea. In
two of those cups, she added a splash of sleeping draught.

Her parents were sitting side by side on the couch – Dad with his arm around mum – and chortling
while watching The Vicar of Dibley.
“Tea,” Hermione announced, steadily levitating the cups onto the coffee table.
“Just the thing,” dad approved, “Thanks, sweetheart.”
“Done packing?” mum asked.
“Yes.”

It took no more than two sips each; then they were slumped against each other, deep in slumber.
She switched off the telly and stood before them, her wand clenched tightly in her hand. Her body
was wracked with tremors; she wanted to bolt, and she wanted to shake them awake... but of
course, she did neither. And nor did she cry.
The clock on the mantelpiece was ticking loudly again. She closed her eyes and gathered all her courage. She amputated the soft, scared, aching part of her being and remembered the sound of Theo’s voice in her head: “It’s the right thing to do, Hermione.”

Okay.

It took her well over three hours to completely alter first dad’s, and then mum’s memories. She gazed at their peaceful faces after, feeling drained and empty – but she did not cry. Keeping her eyes on them, she walked backwards towards the telephone, and dialled a number with quivering fingers.

“Hello?” said a husky voice after a few rings.
“Hello. It’s me,” she whispered, “Hermione. Could I come over?”
There was a short spell of silence, and then, “Now? Er... yeah. Of course. Don’t ring the doorbell, though... the old ‘uns are asleep.”
“Sure. See you.”

She walked timidly back to her parents, touched her mother’s hand, her father’s hair, and pressed a kiss on each of their cheeks. Still, she did not cry. With her beaded bag in hand, she absorbed the sights around her one last time, and then walked out the front door drenched in hopeless finality. And no, Hermione did not cry.

The moment she stepped into the plot next door she saw his silhouette. Framed by the doorjamb, it was bold and stark against the dim light pooling around from behind. He waved as she approached – the same breezy, casual gesture with which he had always greeted her.
“Hey there, lovely,” he whispered.
“Hi, Pete.”
“Come on in.”
His hair was longer than before, almost brushing his shoulders, but he looked just as she remembered: handsome, scruffy, and well... cool. He led her up to his room, (the place where she’d spent many tantalising hours the year before,) and when there, hastily cleared an immense pile of clothes off his bed to make room for her to sit.
“Drink?” he enquired.
“Please,” Hermione rasped. Her tremors had gotten worse, and she felt oh so empty empty empty empty.
“Scotch alright?”
“Anything.”

While he fixed her drink, Hermione studied the posters on his walls – The Manic Street Preachers, Pearl Jam, The Clash... Over his desk hung a large woodcut portrait of Voltaire, accompanied by a quote: Everything’s fine today, that is our illusion.

“Here you go,” he said, handing her a glass of golden liquid.
“Thanks.”
It wasn’t firewhiskey, she mused as she took a sip, but the burning bitterness was still somewhat soothing.
“Soooo,” he broached, “What brings you here at this unholy hour?”
“I’m sorry about that,” she muttered, and he waved her apology away, “I just wanted to see you. We’re leaving tomorrow, my parents and I.”
“Holiday?”
“Um, no. We’re moving. To... California,” she lied in the hope that he would tell his gossipy mum, who’d ensure that that falsity would spread all around the neighbourhood.
“Seriously?!” he asked with some shock.
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“My parents got a really good job offer...”
“But...” he sputtered, “California, Hermione?! They’re all fucking sunny and happy over there. It’ll be intolerable.”
“Perhaps,” she said with half a laugh.
“When will you come back?”
“I don’t know.”
“Oh.”

After a few moments of silent drinking, Hermione asked, “How have you been?” and he told her all about his term at Oxford. They were three drinks down, and in the middle of a conversation about the siege of Leningrad, when Hermione surged forward and pressed her mouth against his. She felt EMPTY, and like a dementer, she wanted to steal substance straight out of him. He kissed her back eagerly, after a muted moan of surprise, and gripped her by the waist. She opened her mouth to taste him – that vaguely familiar blend of heat and smokiness was somewhat subdued by the prominent flavour of scotch – and fell back on his bed, pulling him down with her. They kissed for a long time, deeply and desperately, barely breaking away to shed their respective shirts, and her bra. His hands travelled all over her skin; and hers over his... Oh, but she was still seeking... seeking... something that continued to be elusive.

Letting her hands travel down his body, she murmured, “I want you.”
He jerked back and stared at her. “You mean...?”
“Yes,” she replied firmly.
“Have you done it before?”
“...No.”
“Look, Hermione,” he hedged, “I’m not sure –”
“But I am! I’m sure. I want you. Please.”

He considered her thoughtfully for a few second, and then... “Alright,”... and he kissed her again.

A breathless haze followed. His touches were much more motivated, his kisses more purposeful. Hermione took all he gave greedily, wanting and wanting and wanting. When they were both naked and panting, he momentarily moved away to put on a condom, before positioning himself on top of her.
“This will hurt,” he warned.
“I know. Do it.”
Bloody hell, did it hurt. It was a sharp, radiating pain that had her squeezing her eyes shut and digging her nails into his shoulder blades.
“You okay, baby?”
She just whimpered, biting her lip.
“Shit, Hermione, baby, I’m sorry! I’ll just –”
“I’m okay,” she gasped. And bit by bit, she found that she truly was. She felt full. Painfully, uncomfortably full... and it was glorious.
“Fuck, I’m sorry, but... I can’t hold still anymore...”
She smiled, arched her back, and whispered, “Then don’t.”
The sun was just bursting out of the horizon when she woke up. Blinking as she reoriented herself, Hermione sat up and stretched. Pete was sprawled beside her, lying on his stomach with his face entirely obscured by his hair. She brushed the strands aside gently, and placed a parting buss at the corner of his mouth. She winced at the throbbing soreness between her legs as she stood up and dressed.

She didn’t look at him again before creeping out of his house. She didn’t allow herself to look at the building that was no longer her home as she walked down the street. She stared instead at her feet, and shook her hair down to work like blinkers and obscure her peripheral vision. At the end of the road, behind a dense grove of beech trees, Hermione spun on the spot and apparated.

There was a hillock not too far from the burrow that provided quite a spectacular view of the area. Upon it sat Hermione watching the morning break. She was urgently convincing herself that the wonky house in front of her was where she was to go, and not to another invisible house nearby, where Theo currently resided. She wanted so badly to see him. So badly, that it winded her. But no – Hermione did not cry.

The door to the Burrow opened, and Mrs. Weasley waddled out, wrapped up in a ratty tartan gown. She was, without a doubt, the most ostentatiously maternal woman Hermione had ever known; a mother to seven – eight if you counted Harry, and she knew Mrs. Weasley certainly did. However, Hermione recoiled at the thought of joining those ranks, even though she was effectively an orphan now. She had grown up under the care of the most perfect of mothers... there was no replacing that. As she watched Mrs. Weasley feed the chickens strutting about in the yard, she pictured her mum and dad... no, Monica and Wendell Wilkins, a childless couple, waking up. They’d shake their heads at themselves for falling asleep on the sofa. They’d share laughs and banter over breakfast. They’d spend the day finalising their big move down under. And at night, they’d board an airplane.

Would it really be so bad if she went to see Theo?

Yes. Yes it would. She was in no state to have another argument about her plans to go with Harry. So she stood up, dusted her trousers, and descended down the hillock. She did not cry.

“Hermione dear!” Mrs Weasley called on spotting her, “You’re here early!”
“Erm, yes. I hope it isn’t a problem...”
“Not at all. Come here, you.”
Hermione was pulled into a warm trademark Molly Weasley hug; it was brief, but she savoured it. “You’ll be rooming with Ginny, of course,” Mrs. Weasley said as they walked into the house, “Would you like to go and freshen up? She’s still asleep, but not even a herd of feral hippogriffs could wake her.”
Hermione smiled, “Yes, thank you.”
“Where are your things, dear?” Mrs. Weasley asked with a puzzled glance at Hermione’s tiny bag.
“All in here,” Hermione answered awkwardly.
Though it earned her a suspicious look, Mrs. Weasley didn’t pursue that line of questioning, “Go along then. I’ll get started on breakfast. Now that this is the new headquarters, there are so many more mouths to feed.”
She bustled away, and Hermione saw herself up the stairs and into Ginny’s room.

Dark times change a lot of things, and that included Ginny’s sleeping habits. It turned out that it
didn’t take a herd of hippogriffs... it took no more than the sound of a door closing to wake her.

“Wha – Hermione?” Ginny mumbled as she rubbed her eyes and wearily sat up, “What time is it?”

“Six-thirty. Sorry for waking you... go back to sleep.”

“Nah, ‘sfine.” Ginny shoved her hair back from her face and huffed. She scooted a bit to the side and patted the space next to her, wordlessly telling Hermione to sit.

Hermione complied and asked, “How’re things?”

“Insane,” Ginny responded promptly, “Between Order meetings and wedding planning there isn’t a moment of peace around here.”

“Hmm.”

“What about you? How’re your parents?”

Hermione knew immediately that that was the moment she was to break. Maybe it was the fact that she had finally slowed down, maybe it was Ginny's straight question, or maybe it was the genuine concern in her eyes.

“I... I... I had to do the most awful thing...” was all she managed to say before bursting into tears.

Yes – Hermione cried.

“Hermione!” Ginny exclaimed in alarm, “What is it?”

But she was too far gone to be able to speak. Ginny pulled her close and wrapped her arms tightly around her. “What...? What?” she demanded frantically.

When Hermione merely shook her head and sobbed into her nightshirt, Ginny sighed. She gently rocked her – back and forth and back and forth – and stroked her hair.
Hermione slept through most of the morning (thanks to a much needed gulp of dreamless sleep potion,) and after a long and calming shower, she went down to the Burrow’s kitchen for lunch. Or, at least, that was the plan until she ran into Ron at the landing outside Ginny’s room.

“Blimey!” he exclaimed, “Hermione! You’re here!”

“It would appear so,” she said, the end of her sentence getting muffled against his chest as he yanked her into his arms.

“Jolly good to see you,” he chattered on as they descended, “Place is a madhouse, by the way. If you thought there were too many people here before...”

Mrs. Weasley had set up a table in the back garden to accommodate all her many guests, and when Hermione stepped out she was inundated by the sound of multiple, simultaneous conversations and the clattering of cutlery. As discreetly as possible, she slid into a chair between Tonks and Ginny. Ron dithered conspicuously behind her for a long moment, before taking a seat next to Moody on the other side of the table. She didn’t need to look at him to know he was displeased by that arrangement.

“Hi Hermione,” Tonks greeted with a glittering smile, “Lookie here!” She waggled the fingers of her left hand, and on her ring finger, a slim gold band gleamed in the bright afternoon sunlight. Hermione looked from her to Lupin with surprise and delight. “You got married?” she gasped, “Congratulations!”

“Two days ago!” Tonks beamed, “Just a quiet ceremony in my parents’ garden. Well, it was quiet until dinner, when...”

“That’s enough, Dora,” Lupin chided. Unlike his radiant wife, he looked more careworn and drawn than ever. But when he met Hermione’s eye he offered her a tight semblance of a smile.

Curious as she was about what it was that had disrupted their quite dinner, Hermione’s attention was stolen away from the couple due to a small explosion from the far end of the table. Mad-Eye Moody sat stock-still with his hand frozen in front of his open mouth... and every inch of his skin and hair was covered with chunks of ham, bread, and assorted vegetables. Utter silence struck the gathering as they all waited with bated breath for the impending second explosion that would be Moody’s temper.

“FRED,” he roared, pounding his fists on the table, “GEORGE!”

The twins were looking absolutely horrified.

“Now, Moody,” said Fred in a conciliating manner, “Keep calm, yeah?”

“CALM?!?” he bellowed, “You stupid, ginger, good-for-nothing cretins; I’LL KILL YOU!” He roughly wiped a globule of mustard off his glass eye and stood up thunderously, a motion that caused a great lot of food-debris to rain down on the grass around him.

“Okay, listen,” George stuttered, “It was an accident, alright? That mini-bomb was meant to reach Ron’s plate...”

HA!” Ron barked, but everybody ignored him. They chose instead to watch the twins ditch their seats and slowly walk backwards and away from the table, hands raised in what was meant to be a placating symbol of surrender.

“I am,” Moody growled, bearing down on them threateningly, “Going to kill you two. I’ll turn you,” he pulled his wand out of its holster, “inside out. I’ll transfigure you into flobberworms and feed you to the chickens. I’m going to shove hundreds of those damned mini-bombs up your...”

Fred and George turned around and fled.

“COME BACK HERE!”
Moody limped behind them, brandishing his wand. They scurried around the garden before turning around the corner of the house and disappearing from sight.

“Those boys!” Mrs. Weasley wailed, massaging her temples. Her husband quickly rearranged his look of amusement to reflect a more disapproving state of mind.

On either side of Hermione, Tonks and Ginny were laughing irrepressibly... infectiously.

“Serves them right,” Ron declared with glee.

“Must we ‘ave zem at our wedding?” Fleur asked Bill miserably, “If zey ruin it, I will –”

“Oh don’t you worry, love,” said Bill, still chuckling over the episode, “They wouldn’t dare cross you.”

All laughter suddenly ceased when Moody returned to the table. He was whistling and perfectly clean as he sat back down on his seat.

“Pass us another sandwich would you, Molly?” he asked almost cheerfully.

Fred and George did not reappear.

The twins were found later that day, immobilised and silenced, bobbing up and down in the middle of a scummy pond just outside the Weasley’s orchard. A sickening layer of slime and algae covered their faces.

A large group of garden gnomes had congregated around the pond, and had made a game of lobbing clumps of wet mud at Fred and George’s heads.

Instructed to buff up every piece of silverware in the house, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny sat at the kitchen table with a pile of rags and a bottle of Madam Glossy’s Silver Polish.

Ron was muttering petulantly under his breath, and only a few odd words were audible from time to time. “Bloody... sodding... miserable... house elf...” and the like.

The door opened and Mrs. Weasley, Lupin, Bill, and Kingsley walked in.

“That’s enough for now,” Mrs. Weasley announced, “You can finish the rest after dinner.”

“Oh thank you, thank you, mistress,” Ron gushed.

Mrs. Weasley spared him a sneer before moving on to pull a casserole from the oven. “And incidentally, we’ll be going to Diagon Alley tomorrow, to pick up your schoolbooks. Kingsley here has very kindly agreed to chaperone us...”

“It’s nothing,” Kingsley said in his slow, deep voice, “The muggle Prime Minister is in Berlin for two days, so I’m officially off duty.”

Hermione and Ron shared an apprehensive look.

“Um... mum,” Ron ventured, “Hermione and I aren’t going back to Hogwarts.”

She turned around in slow motion, looking like she hadn’t quite comprehended what Ron had said, “I beg your pardon?!?” she spluttered.

“Hermione and I aren’t –”

“You’re dropping out?” Bill asked looking bemused, “Seriously?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, “We’re –”

Mrs. Weasley rounded on her before she could finish. “You!? Hermione? You’re abandoning your education?”

“Unfortunately,” she ground out, “We’re going with Harry. Dumbledore had given him a task, and
we’re going to help him.”
Since the Weasley matriarch was too busy turning purple to speak, Lupin took over. “Dumbledore
gave him a task?” he asked eagerly.
“Yeah, but he also told him not to tell anybody but us,” said Ron.
“But, surely with recent events in mind, you can –”
“No,” Hermione interjected shortly, “Dumbledore made him promise.”
“If Dumbledore made him promise,” said Kingsley decisively, “Then that promise ought to be
honoured.”
Lupin’s mouth thinned with disapproval, but he fell silent. Mrs. Weasley on the other hand, had
regained her speaking abilities.
“No,” she raged, “Absolutely not. I’m you mother Ronald Weasley – I deserve to know where
you’ll be going. And what about your parents Hermione? They’re perfectly content with you
running off like that?”
Under the table, Ginny clasped her fingers around one of her hands, and Ron took hold of the other.
Grateful for their support, Hermione faced Mrs. Weasley with bravery she wasn’t feeling and said,
“I am of age. I make my own decisions.”

Hermione Granger: Ragpicker. That was her new designation.
She’d taken to scrounging around the Burrow, pilfering items she thought might prove to be useful
for the forthcoming quest. And so, while everybody else was assembled in the sitting room
indulging in a post-supper nightcap, she was raiding Mrs. Weasley’s potion cabinet. When she
walked into the living room a few minutes later, her little beaded bag contained a good stock of
healing balms and ointments.
Over the next two days, she also picked up:
1. A book of basic household charms,
2. A book on remedial spells,
3. A kettle, mugs, plates and cutlery, a billycan, and a large knife,
and 4. Mr. Weasley’s detailed map of wizarding London.

One afternoon during lunch, she feigned tiredness and snuck into Fred and George’s room.
Understandably nervous, she judiciously waved her wand over everything, not wanting to set off
any booby traps. From their room she took:
1. Two Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes Broom Broom Kits,
2. A handful of extendable ears,
3. One large box of Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder,
and, 4. Half a dozen Decoy Detonators.

She hurried out as soon as she’d gotten all she needed and closed the door softly, letting out a
relieved sigh. Then a voice spoke from behind her and she jumped out of her skin.
“Got all you wanted, eh?”

She turned around slowly to face Fred who was leaning casually against the wall.
“... I...” she stammered, shamefacedly, “I’m so sorry, I’ll put everything back –”
“Don’t be an idiot,” Fred reprimanded, “I just hope you’ve taken at least a couple of U-No-Poo
pellets to put into Ron’s tea from time to time. Just in case he misses us too much.”
Hermione laughed and shook her head. “I am sorry, though,” she felt it necessary to reiterate, “I
should’ve just asked you or George. But I just... um...” she trailed off uncertainly.
“You’re far too used to sneaking around, you thrill-seeking little junkie,” said Fred fondly, “Now come on, we’re going to the attic.”
“What for?” she asked, even as she let him apprehend her arm and drag her up the stairs.
“It’s a surprise.”

Once they’d reached the fourth floor landing, Fred pointed his wand at the ceiling and muttered, “Descendo.” A panel slid away to reveal a small opening, from which a ladder dropped down to the floor. Fred tilted his head towards it, gesturing for her to climb.

A horrible sense of nausea infiltrated her senses when she stood in the small, dusty space, and it wasn’t just because it stank to high heavens. She was brutally thrown back to the day she’d spent coddled in her own attic, pouring over photographs from happier times.

“There you are,” said George appearing in front of her jarringly. Fred, too, had climbed up by then, and looking around, she saw Ron and Mr. Weasley there as well. They were all staring at something on the floor, and Hermione looked down and...

...And she nearly vomited all over her shoes.

Cuddled up on the floor was the most revolting creature she’d ever seen. She knew it was a ghoul, slimy and gnarly, but for some reason, it was clad in striped pajamas.

“What the hell?” she yelped. The ghoul moaned loudly.

“Hermione,” said Ron, “Say hello to my doppelganger.”
She pursed her lips and eyed the ghoul doubtfully, “Your doppelganger,” she repeated blandly.

“My doppelganger,” Ron affirmed, “We’re going to give him spattergroit.”

“What –?”

“Fake spattergroit,” Mr. Weasley assured her, “Okay then. First we need to give him hair –” He tapped his wand on the ghoul’s head, and from it sprouted a vast quantity of red hair, “– And now for the boils and pustules. They need to be large and purple... and ample. Fred, George, take a leg each; Hermione, the arms, if you please...”

And so they set about the truly horrendous task of covering the ghoul’s body with oozing blisters. Ron watched from a distance with a sickened grimace twisting his features.

“Merlin’s saggy left testicle,” he spat once they’d finished, “He’s really repulsive.”

“Yeah,” George agreed. “But that’s good. People will believe it’s you.”

“Just one thing though...” said Fred, before lengthening the Ghoul’s nose so spectacularly that he would’ve put Pinocchio to shame.

“That’s enough!” Mr. Weasley ordered, and cuffed Ron on the head when he saw him bestowing the twins with a two-fingered salute. Then, squatting by the Ghoul’s hideous head, he spoke in a very deliberate manner, “Er... Mister... Ghoul –” (Fred and George began to snigger quietly,) “– Ron here,” he pointed at the same, “will be leaving soon.” The ghoul simply moaned, and Mr. Weasley went on, “You are to move into his room when he goes. Do you... do you understand?”

This time when the ghoul moaned, he accompanied it with a fit of fervent nodding. One would think he was actually... excited by the prospect.

“Can we leave now?” Ron begged.

They left. Out on the landing, Mr. Weasley pushed a small watermelon-sized bundle into Hermione’s hands – “This is Perkin’s tent. You know... the one we stayed in during the quidditch world cup...”

“Thank you, Mr. Weasley. Thank you.”
It was a beautifully embroidered, long-sleeved blouse in navy blue, and Hermione slipped it over her head, relishing the feel of it. It had belonged to her mum, who’d handed it down to her a few years back. With a deep sigh, she walked out of the bathroom.

She entered Ginny’s room in a state of distraction (she couldn’t stop her mind from constantly running over protective enchantments and defensive spells,) and hence, didn’t quite pay attention to the owner of the room, who was standing in front of the full-length mirror by the dresser. A few seconds later, the image registered and she spun around in shock. Ginny had a large pair of scissors in her hand, and her glorious, shiny, long red hair lay in heaps on the floor by her feet. That which was remained on her head, barely went past her jaw.

“Ginny,” Hermione gasped inanely, “You... cut your hair!”

“So it’s noticeable then?” Ginny asked with a twisted smile.

Hermione’s subsequent laugh was more incredulous than amused, and she went closer and sat on the edge of her bed. “I’m sorry, I’m just... well, stunned.”

Ginny shrugged, “I... I needed to do something reckless, y’know? Does it look really bad?”

“Oh, come on,” Hermione scoffed, “You’d look good even if you shaved it all off and wore only bin bags for the rest of your life.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

It was true though... once Hermione got over the shock of it, she realised that the cut suited Ginny; it gave her an edgy sort of look that matched her personality. “Your mum’s going to lose it,” she warned.

“Oh yes she will,” Ginny said with obvious delight. She waved the scissors about and asked, “Shall I do yours too?”

“No,” Hermione declined flatly, “My hair explodes the moment you cut it. It’s like –” she gestured wildly with her hands, “– POOF! A veritable lion’s mane. I’ll be declared the new Gryffindor mascot.” She paused to let Ginny laugh, and then after fixing her eyes obdurately on her toenails she continued, “And besides... I’ve already done my reckless something.”

“Oh?” Ginny sat on her knees in front of her, infiltrating her line of vision, “Do tell.”

Hermione felt her face heat up, and she squeezed her eyes shut before saying, “I had sex with my neighbour the night before I came here.”

When she finally gathered the courage to steal a look, she was faced with a wide-eyed Ginny whose mouth had fallen open.

“Galloping Gargoyles,” she whispered in awe, “Is this the same muggle bloke you went out with last year?”

“We didn’t exactly go out... but yes.”

Ginny’s mouth opened and closed a couple of times as she struggled to find the right words to say. Finally, she settled on, “How was it?”

“Oh god,” Hermione groaned.

“Did it hurt? It’s supposed to hurt, yeah?”

“It did hurt,” Hermione admitted, “A lot. But at that point, I really wanted it to.”

They stewed in silence for a while. Hermione’s face eventually stopped burning, and Ginny shook the astonishment off her own.

“Well, shite. My recklessness seems really insipid now.”

Hermione chuckled lightly. And again... they fell quiet once more.

“So,” Ginny broached by and by, “You definitely don’t fancy Ron anymore?”

“I do not,” Hermione mumbled.

Ginny exhaled heavily out of her nose and said, “That’s for the best, I suppose. You two aren’t well suited at all.”
“No,” Hermione agreed, “We really aren’t.”
“And this muggle...?”
“No. I mean, he’s lovely... but...” Hermione pulled a face, “Even if there’s a chance, I can’t think about it right now.”
Ginny stood up and signalled for Hermione to follow. “Alright then. Come on –” she tossed her short locks dramatically, “– let’s go downstairs and give my mother a heart attack.”

Late one Friday evening when dusk was at its most violent stage, sending blood-red shafts of light piercing through the Burrow’s window panes, Mad-Eye Moody paced in front of the large fireplace in the sitting room. He vibrated with flagrant impatience as the room slowly filled up, until every surface available became a perch for somebody or the other. Hermione was comfortably sat on a sofa with Ginny and Hestia Jones... until Ron come by and squeezed in next to her – unnecessarily close.

Once everybody had settled, Moody cleared his throat and revealed the reason behind convening an emergency meeting of the Order.
“I’ve called you all here because we need to come up with an alternative plan to get Potter here from Little Whinging,” he rumbled, (and Hermione huffed to herself as she remembered how her suggestion to call the plan Operation Spring the Stag during a previous meeting had been met with a full house of blank looks.)

“Hestia and Dedalus,” Moody continued, “Your part still holds. You are to reach the house and take the Dursleys – in their car – at least ten miles away before disapparating to the safehouse in Upper Flagley.

“Now here are the problems: First, Pius Thicknesse, newly appointed Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has gone over. He’s made it an imprisonable offense to connect the house to the Floo Network, place a Portkey there, or Apparate in or out; all done apparently to protect Harry, and to prevent You-Know-Who from getting to him. Absolutely pointless, seeing as his mother’s charm does that already. What he’s really done is block him in.

“Second problem: The boy’s underage, which means he’s still got the Trace on him. We can’t wait for the Trace to break, because the moment he turns seventeen he’ll lose all the protection his mother gave him.”

“Brooms again, then?” Tonks asked, “The trace can’t detect those.”

“Brooms an’ Thestrals,” Hagrid replied from his place by a window, “I’ll get a pair of ’em from Hogwarts. An’ I’ll haveta use Sirius’ bike... nothin’ else can take me weight.”

“When will we do this? Harry’s seventeenth is four days from now...” said Mr. Weasley.

“Tomorrow,” said Moody firmly, “Tomorrow evening, after sundown.”

Kingsley raised his hand; “I’ve leaked a fake trail to the Ministry: they think Harry’s staying put till the thirtieth. However, this is You-Know-Who we’re dealing with... he’s bound to have a couple Death Eaters patrolling the skies in the surrounding area, just in case...”

“And that’s the third problem: Azkaban has seen a mass breakout. There will be more than just a couple of Death Eaters. So we’ll need a diversion,” Moody explained, “Multiple diversions.”

With a wave of his wand, he unravelled a large map, and hung it mid-air like a large screen in front of them. “We’ll give multiple houses the best protection we can throw at them. They all look like they could be the place we’re going to hide Harry. So far we have... My house, Kingsley’s place...” as he named a location, the corresponding point on the map lit up, “...Ted and Andromeda’s.... Remus, your place too? Okay good...”

“My Auntie Muriel’s place isn’t too far from here,” Mrs. Weasley added.
“Excellent,” Moody barked, “Sturgis Podmore’s flat is lying empty since his arrest... we can use
that too. And... here... Minerva said we could use her niece’s house... Now, here’s the deal – we’ll travel in pairs, each flying to a different location. It’ll force the Death Eaters to scatter.”
“But why would they even bother with the rest of us?” asked Bill, “They’ll just follow Harry...”
“That’s where this comes in.” From within the folds of his robe, Moody pulled out a large flask of sludge-like liquid.
“Polyjuice!” Lupin exclaimed, “So there’ll be seven Harry Potters flying the skies tomorrow?”
“Precisely,” Moody confirmed, “Mundungus’ idea, if you’ll believe it.”
Every single person stopped to stare at the droopy pile of rags that was Mundungus Fletcher. He met their disbelief with an inordinate amount of smugness.

Hermione couldn’t help it. She scoffed. Loudly.

“Is there a problem?” Moody asked testily.

“Harry will never go for that. Six people risking their lives for him? Oh no.”
“I’m sure Harry will listen to reason...” Kingsley began. And this time, Ron and Ginny joined Hermione in expressing disbelief.


“Well we’ll make him do it then,” Moody growled, “Hold him down and tear his hair out if necessary.”

“We volunteer,” said Fred and George simultaneously.

Moody dived back into the plan – “We have seven ‘protectors’, or companions – Kingsley, Tonks, Remus, Arthur, Bill, Hagrid, and myself. Now we need the decoys...”
Half a dozen hands shot up in the air immediately.

“Good, good,” Moody muttered and began noting down names, “Ron, Hermione... Fred, George... Erm... Miss Delacour? Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said simply, taking Bill’s hand.

“Okay... And...”

“ME,” Ginny yelled fervently.

“Absolutely not Ginevra –”

“Underage,” Moody barked dismissively, (Ginny glowered but held her tongue,) “Mundungus old chap... I’m sure you’ll want to participate in this ingenious plan of yours.”

“Nah, thank ye very much... I’ll pass, I will.”

“Shut it.”

Half an hour later, with their plan more or less cemented, the party sat down for supper in the garden, amid the sound of gentle winds and unremitting cicadas.

...That and Ron’s unassailable grumbling – “Why me? Why Muriel’s? Why do I have to go to bloody Muriel’s? Right nightmare, Muriel is...”

It was so bloody odd, inhabiting Harry’s body. The ground was further away, she felt unnaturally broad and heavy, and the glasses sitting on her nose were very annoying. She was also very, very adamantly trying to not think about the situation below her belt at all.

Kingsley helped Hermione-disguised-as-Harry climb onto a thestral out in the Dursley’s back garden before leaping onto one himself. Though it was a dark thought to have, she was glad that this time she was able to see the great winged steed she was set to ride. Gibbon, you louse, your death was worth something after all.

On her right, Ron-disguised-as-Harry and Tonks were poised on their brooms. Beyond them,
Hagrid sat like a boulder on Sirius’ bike, with Harry crouched comically in the sidecar.
“Good luck, everyone,” Moody blared, “See you all in about an hour at the Burrow.” (...Hermione-disguised-as-Harry stared at her larger, tawnier imposter hands gripping the Thestral’s silky mane...) “On the count of three: One... Two... THREE.”

The motorcycle roared, and everybody took off. They ascended rapidly, all in a cluster; the phthalo blue sky and wispy clouds embraced them.........

Like a bolt from hell, a score of Death Eaters on brooms materialised from all sides. Without giving them a chance to recover, the black-cloaked figures set off a barrage of bright green streaks of light.

She heard screams... maybe she screamed as well... and the Order members paired up and dispersed.

Hermione-disguised-as-Harry directed her thestral to follow Kingsley, veering to the left... then to the right... and left... to dodge the myriad of curses coming her way.

Thousands of feet up in the air with five Death Eaters hot on her trail... she thought she might actually go mad with terror. The wind whistled in her ears, adding to the cacophony of alarm bells and sirens going off in her head: Danger, Danger, Mayday, Abort, Abort, Fucking ABORT.

There were two Death Eaters on either side of her – two thickset men by the looks of them. The other three shot ahead to deal with Kingsley.

“Bombarda Maxima!” she shrieked, aiming straight for the Death Eater on her right. She didn’t care that if hit, he’d fall to a certain death... somehow she didn’t care at all. The bastard moved out of the range of the explosion just in time – and his colleague took the opportunity to try and hex her. She retaliated – he evaded – and by then the other Death Eater had recuperated.

Fuck fuck fuck. They were relentless... she wouldn’t be able to keep this up for long. Not without solid ground under her feet. She tried to stun them – a spell she was really, very good at – but fuck they were nimble fliers.

Suddenly, her thestral bucked so violently that she was nearly thrown off. She flung her arms around the creature’s skeletal neck, as it whinnied in a horrible, agonised way.

“STOP, OH GOD STOP,” she screeched.

The Thestral did nothing of that sort. It reared and thrashed like a rodeo bull, so hard her bones began to rattle. And then it hit her – the smell of smoke – she dared to twist her neck and look behind....

The thestrals tail was on fire.

“Mum,” she sobbed irrationally. Digging her knees into the thestral’s flanks and looping one arm tightly around its neck, she pointed her wand over her shoulder, and without looking long enough to aim properly, she conjured a powerful jet of water, followed by a swift numbing charm.

“Shhhh...” she whispered into its mane, “Shhh.”

It calmed... and the Death Eaters were back on her. Two bright white beams of light burst on either side... “Protogo!” she yelled, and then, “Ventus Duo!” Both her adversaries were blasted off course, giving her the opportunity to race ahead... maybe lose them entirely...

Up ahead, Kingsley knocked a Death Eater off his broom, who, with a dreadful almighty scream, spiralled headfirst towards the ground, and then –

The world around her froze... but she was still moving. Somewhat. It was like her thestral was flying through some sort of viscous gel. Kingsley and the Death Eaters were paralysed mid-duel – set dramatically against the dark sky, as if they’d been painted by Caravaggio. There was a static owl a few metres away with its wings arched. What the fuck had happened?
And suddenly he was in front of her, hovering with no apparent means of flight keeping him airborne. Her mouth fell open in a silent scream. Vol – Voldemort – for the first time in a really long while, she couldn’t bring herself to even think his name. Not when his ghastly, cadaver-white, snake-like face was mere inches from her own. Not when his blazing, blood-red eyes were boring holes into her own. Not when shards of something alien and malevolent were piercing into her consciousness. She was choking on her fear... but she could not look away. Red eyes. Red red red eyes....

Voldemort – he hissed in fury... and then he vanished as abruptly he had appeared. The world was jolted into motion again.

“IT’S NOT HIM. IT’S NOT THE REAL POTTER!” one of the Death Eaters behind her shouted. His four remaining comrades retreated immediately.

She pulled in a deep tremulous breath. It was over – for now – it was over. “Hermione,” Kingsley called urgently, “Hermione, are you okay?” “F – fine.” She raised a shaking hand reassuringly.

And so, the final stretch of their journey was (relatively) peaceful. Hermione, who was gradually regaining her true appearance, trusted her Therstal to stay on track and closed her eyes.

And she saw red eyes. Red red red eyes....

No more than ten minutes later, they landed in Kingsley’s small and tidy garden. On dismounting, Hermione found that her legs could not hold her up, and she stumbled straight into a heather bush. “Careful, there,” said Kingsley, coming over to help her up.

“How did this happen?” she whispered as they walked into his Spartan living room, (plain white walls, minimalist furniture,) and to the bent coat hanger that was their portkey to the burrow. “Somebody betrayed us,” Kingley spat, “And I intend to find out who that was. Here,” he held out the coat hanger, “Any second now...”

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Hermione was standing by the pond where Moody had vengefully deposited Fred and George a mere week ago.

Now, he was dead.

It was almost implausible that someone so powerful, so durable, so constantly vigilant had died. She felt the same horrified disbelief she’d felt when Sirius and Dumbledore had been killed. Did anyone ever truly get used to death? Would it happen to her as the war progressed? Would she become that jaded?

And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

The sound of people approaching had her looking over her shoulder, and she smiled thinly as Harry, Ron, and Ginny joined her. Nobody spoke.

“Oi, you lot,” called out a voice, “Mum says we’ve got to de-gnome the garden.” “Again?!” Ginny and Ron grumbled simultaneously.
The twins stood under the shade of the orchard, waving them over. As Hermione got closer, George’s t-shirt caught her eye. Bright purple it was, and on it, printed in bold, white letters were the words:

COGITO

EAR-GO

BUM.

Harry began to laugh. It was that full, unencumbered laugh of his... the one that Hermione never understood. How could someone as fraught as Harry summon such pure joy? But it was also contagious; soon enough they were all joined together in boisterous mirth.

“Told you, Freddie, didn’t I?” George elbowed his brother and grinned from ear to... gaping hole, “I told you it’s funny.”

“Listen Ginny, please let me fix it,” Mrs. Weasley implored, “A simple lengthening charm – just for the wedding. You can hack it all off again after –”

“I’ve told you a hundred times, mum. I like it like this. You may not ‘fix’ it!” Ginny snapped.

They were in the kitchen, preparing vegetables for dinner. Hermione had shuffled into the pantry allegedly to fetch some carrots, when actually she was seeking a good vantage point. She kept a keen eye on the bickering Weasley women, glad that they were so focused on each other.

“But the wedding, poppet! You’re a bridesmaid! You cannot have your hair looking like that. Fleur is quite distraught!”

“Well, Phlegm can go straight to –”

“Ginny!”

‘Accio Polyjuice potion; Arresto Momento,’ Hermione pronounced in her head, and from the top shelf of a nearby cupboard, an entire crateful of vials started gently floating towards her. ‘Silencio,’ she added, for good measure. It had been Moody's stash, but she refused to feel bad about taking it.

“You’re such a beautiful girl; I don’t understand why you feel the need to sabotage –”

“Mum, you’re being absolutely ridiculous. Lay off, please –”

As the vials soared over Mrs. Weasley and Ginny’s heads, Hermione held her breath. They cast the slightest of shadows as they passed, but thankfully, the women were too distracted to notice. When finally, they drifted into the pantry, Hermione held her little beaded bag open, and one by one, the vials fell inside with nary a sound.

When she had told Ron about her parents, he had looked troubled and hugged her.

Then she told Harry about her parents. He looked troubled, and let Ron hug her.

Neither had looked straight into her eyes and said, “It’s the right thing to do, Hermione.”

She couldn’t stop thinking about how close he was... and yet so utterly out of reach. Within her reach, however, were piles of Ron’s socks and underpants that she was packing into a rucksack.

“To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, in the hope that she will find it entertaining and instructive.”

What a bizarre day it had been. Hermione had so hoped that it would be a day as close to normal as possible – that Harry would have a pleasant birthday full of cake, presents, and cheerful chitchatting. But things like that tend to go out of the window when the Minister of Magic decides to pay a visit.

Dumbledore’s will had stumped her. Why did he do that? Why was it always cryptic clues, hidden agendas, and coded secrets?
Here she had a book of children’s stories written in runes. Harry was stuck with riddle-embossed snitch, (I open at the close – what the earth?!) And Ron could play with lights.
...Excellent. Lovely. Dead useful, Professor Dumbledore, sir.

Hermione set the book aside and lay back in bed with a groan. She was just tired – tired of it all. And so she decided to read Catch-22, using her fist to muffle her laughter lest she wake Ginny up.
Wrapped up in her bathrobe after a fairly luxurious shower, Hermione stepped out into Ginny’s room. Her face broke into a wide, genuine grin.
“You look beautiful, Ginny,” she exclaimed.
“Thanks,” Ginny mumbled with half a smile. Her bridesmaid’s dress was pale gold and flowy, with an almost dangerously low neckline. She’d pulled her shorn locks away from her face using many tiny glittery clips, making rubbish of Mrs. Weasley’s claim that they would take away from her appearance.
“Get here, you,” Ginny ordered, patting the pouf in front of the dresser, “lets tame that wild bramble on your head.”
Hermione scowled but obediently sat, and Ginny popped open a bottle of Sleekeazy with great fanfare.

There were quiet through the whole process; complicit in an unspoken understanding of each other’s preoccupation. Hermione thought about how much her mother would’ve loved to see her getting dressed up, since she so rarely bothered. It was strange that someone as unconcerned with appearances as mum would be so delighted when her daughter made an effort. A small, wistful smile tugged at the corners of her mouth... and disappeared almost instantly at the sight of Ginny’s face, which held more than a little rigidity – it was an explicit show of anxiety.

When her hair finally flowed smoothly and sleekly down to her waist, Ginny put her hands on Hermione’s shoulders and rested her chin on top of her head.
“You’ll take off, wont you,” she asked, “once the wedding’s over?”
“Yes,” Hermione whispered.
Ginny’s grip tightened, but she sighed resignedly. “Keep them safe. Promise me you’ll keep them safe. And make sure they come back home. Please –”
“...I’ll do my best...”
“– And you know... the only way you can ensure that is by bringing them back home personally. You have to walk them through the door. You have to be there.”
“You make sure everyone’s there to welcome us, then. Every last one of you.”
“It’s a deal,” Ginny stated; then she straightened and half-turned away, “I’ve to go help the bride get ready now. Not that she needs any help, mind you. Just wants someone to bark orders at.”
With a small chuckle, Hermione nodded. “Okay. I’ll see you downstairs.”

Once Ginny had left, Hermione went over to the pale purple dress laid out on her bed. She shed her robe and stepped into the light material, wandlessly coercing it to zip itself up. It fit her well... she ran her palms down the silky bodice, smoothening out creases that didn’t exist. Returning to the dresser, she dabbed a bit of colour on her face: purple on her eyelids and coral pink on her lips. She bent to slip on the scary high heels that she’d borrowed from Ginny and transfigured to match the colour of her dress. And as the final touch, she conjured a small cluster of fresh lilacs and tucked them behind her ear. Then she took a step back and stared at her reflection. The girl in the mirror was undeniable pretty... Hermione hated her.
“What are you doing?” she asked out loud, “There’s a sodding war going on. People are dying. Your parents have forgotten you. Your favourite person in the world is miserable and trapped in an invisible house. You need to help the prospective saviour of the world realise his destiny. What the hell are you doing?!"
The girl in the mirror gave her no answers. She just mimed her words back at her... mocking her. Huffing in disgust, Hermione spun around and walked out of the room.

She didn’t go downstairs, where the first lot of guest were undoubtedly beginning to show up. Instead, she climbed upstairs, all the way to the fifth floor – Ron’s room. There, she collected Harry and Ron’s rucksacks and shoved them into her tiny beaded bag. She took one last look around, smiling at the Ron-ness of it all. There was nothing else to do now... she was as well equipped as she could be.

Descending in four-inch heels was not easy. Hermione took each step at a time while keeping a steady grip on the railing. On the third floor, she paused as voices filtered out of the slightly ajar door to Bill’s room.

“...you bring a date?” said Bill’s voice.
“Come off it, mate,” Charlie’s voice chided, “I didn’t want to cause a scandal –”
“Oh fuck off, Charlie! We all know. Nobody cares!”
“Mum doesn’t know, Bill. She’d explode.”
“Nah. She has six straight children to give her all the grandkids she needs... and more. You should just tell her –”

Hermione moved on. On the second floor, from Percy’s old room (or, the recently allocated Bridal station,) she heard:

“...Ma chérie! Ma fille! Tu es si belle!...”
“...Ces boucles d'oreilles en perles, Fleur...?”
“...Stop fiddling with my hair, mum...”
“...Auntie Muriel should be here soon...”

On the staircase between the first and second floors, Hermione ran into a shrivelled up bird of prey in very frilly magenta dress robes. Mr. Weasley, from a few steps below, said, “Ah, Hermione! This is Madam Muriel Prewett, Molly’s great-aunt –”

“Oh dear,” said Muriel dryly, her red-rimmed eyes looked down her enormous hooked nose at Hermione, “Is this the muggleborn?”

“Hermione Granger, madam,” she sniffed, “Nice to mee–”

“Don’t muggle’s feed their children anymore? She looks half-starved,” Muriel sniped. She was like some highly caricaturised Dickensian dowager. In her hands was an ornate antique box that no doubt contained her famous goblin-made tiara.

“Er,” Hermione muttered, stealing a look at Mr. Weasley who was gazing heavenwards as though begging for forbearance.

“Speak up girl,” Muriel barked, “And straighten up! Bad posture and skinny ankles – such a shame.”

With those grim words, Muriel clomped away with her nose in the air, and Mr. Weasley offered Hermione an apologetic smile as he followed.

The white marquee in the orchard gleamed like alabaster that afternoon. A rich purple carpet
divided the space into two, and delicate golden chairs were set on either side. Supporting poles were covered in gold and white flowers, enormous floral arrangements stood at every corner, and suspended above the pulpit were large golden balloons, courtesy of Fred and George.

The guests were all mostly seated in place, and the low buzz of excited chatter swelled and ebbed rhythmically.

Hermione stood outside with Ron, the twins, and their so-called ‘cousin Barny’, (who was Harry in the guise of some unspecified plump and red-haired boy from the nearby village). They were in splits, all of them, as Fred and George told stories about their notorious Uncle Bilius... which was why Hermione jumped about a foot in the air and dropped her bag on the ground when a voice extremely close to her ear said, “You look vunderful.”

“How come you’re here?”

Lord, she sounded like a silly fifteen year old. Victor did look good though… in that intense, distinguished way of his. In dapper dress robes and a newly cultivated beard, he was somehow taller; more imposing. But he smile he bestowed upon her was sweet. He took her hand and kissed it, and opened his mouth to speak when –

She stopped on account of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley’s arrival.

“Children, she says,” George muttered,) collecting Barny (or, The Wizard Formally Known as Harry,) on the way.

“Children, she says,” George muttered,) collecting Barny (or, The Wizard Formally Known as Harry,) on the way.

From her place in the second row, Hermione looked about her with a sense of disconnection – the excitement, the anticipation, the eager humming – none of it made sense to her. Bill and Charlie marched up to the pulpit, both looking extremely sharp in fitted black dress robes that looked like ankle length morning coats. Fred wolf-whistled, much to the delight of Fleur’s veela cousins. Suddenly, from nowhere and everywhere, music bloomed and the guests fell silent.

Fleur floated up the aisle, her hand daintily placed on her beaming father’s elbow, with Ginny and Gabrielle following behind in matching dresses and similar smiles. She looked... oh, to say she looked beautiful, would’ve been extremely trite. She was faultless, she was exquisite, she was glowing. Her dress and jewellery were simple – the most ornamental thing on her was the tiara – but for once, surprisingly, it wasn’t her appearance that made her so breathtaking; it was the pure, incandescent joy on her face... in her stride... it radiated out of her and touched everyone watching. Hermione turned to look at Bill. He was gazing enraptured at his bride with shining eyes and a mile-wide grin. The scars on his face – all marks of distress and trauma – seemed to have melted away. There was nothing but untainted, absolute happiness in the space between the couple. And just like that, Hermione understood. The reason for that whole elaborate circus; for the fancy cutlery, for the expensive hors d'oeuvres and beverages, for all the planning and nitpicking... it was
obvious, really. It was for this exact moment: Bill and Fleur generating so much joy that all those lucky enough to be around were caught in the swell of it.

Yes, there was a sodding war going on, and yes, people were dying. But still... look! Look at how effortlessly true bliss and deep love have empowered an entire room!

It didn’t mean a lot; it meant **everything**.


The sun had set, but the wedding reception was at its peak. Twinkling lamps hung from the golden canopy that the marquee had been transfigured into. The band was playing particularly energetic jazz numbers. Bill and Fleur were in the middle of the dance floor, twirling and giggling as though drunk on happiness (and copious amounts of champagne). Ginny was dancing with Lee Jordan, Ron was dancing with Gabrielle. Victor had found some veela-type to keep him company after Hermione had turned down a second dance with him. Hagrid, Charlie, and a Bob Hoskins lookalike were sitting on the floor in one corner, singing. Tonks was trying to pull Lupin onto the dance floor, but he shook his head adamantly. Then, Fred offered to dance with her instead, and laughing brightly, Tonks agreed. Lupin continued to stare into his glass of firewhiskey miserably. Leaning against the bar with a glass of gin and gillywater in her hand, Hermione felt a sort of kinship with him.

Her spirits had come crashing down as she imbibed more and more... well, spirits. Her feeling of detachment had returned, but now she also felt hollow and melancholy. She took a long sip and sighed; her eyes continued to skitter all around the throng dejectedly. She saw George disappear under a table with one of Fleur’s cousins. She watched as Ron towed Gabrielle across the crowd to get more cake. At a corner table, she saw Barny (or, The Wizard Formally Known as Harry,) talking to... of all people... Old Auntie Muriel and Elphias Doge. She thought she ought to go rescue him... maybe even wrangle a dance out of him... But no. Nothing could induce her to go anywhere near Muriel again.

There was an outbreak of laughter from the dance floor, where Luna and her father were dancing utterly **ridiculously**. Hermione scowled. She’d tried no less than eight times to drag that insane girl aside to talk... but each and every time Luna had pulled away and initiated a conversation with the nearest person. Hermione was one drink away from casting her first **Imperio**...

“Hi.”

With a bit of a jump, she turned to look the young man who’d sidled up next to her. He was dark haired and stocky, wearing a pleasant smile and clutching goblet of mead.

“Hello,” Hermione replied curtly, hoping that the unspoken ‘please go away’ was clearly put across through her tone.

“You look beautiful,” he went on, undeterred, “Would you care to dance?”

“No thanks,” she gritted out through her teeth.

The young man’s smile widened, “Don’t worry... I’m not on the pull. I’m actually here with my girlfriend.”

“**Really,**” Hermione drawled.

“Yes, **really.** She’s right there,” he said and pointed. Hermione disinterestedly followed the line of his finger, and her eyes came to rest on a blonde girl in bright yellow robes...

“Pshaw. She’s not your girlfriend.”

“Excuse me?! Yes she is!”

“That’s Luna Lovegood,” Hermione said, getting seriously angry, “I know for a **fact** that she is NOT your girlfriend.”

“Oh really?” He tilted his head down and eyed her meaningfully, “You’re sure, are you –”
“Good grief, YE–”
“– Buddy.”

Hermione’s entire body seized. Her hands suddenly began to shake, so she carefully placed her glass on the bar. “Oh my god,” she gasped.

“In the flesh,” the man said cheerfully. Then he grinned, and he looked entirely wrong, but... she knew that grin.


“Well, of course I’m here,” he laughed, “The moment Luna told me her father had gotten an invite, I insisted they take me along.” He pulled away, but kept his arms around her as he ran his eyes all over her face. “Merlin, it’s good to see you.”

“Wish I could say the same,” Hermione quipped as best she could, (her fanatical grin wasn’t letting her speak clearly,) “Who are you supposed to be?”

“Some bloke,” Theo replied with a shrug, “Luna got his hair off the floor of a barber’s shop in the muggle village down the hill. Terribly unhygienic, yeah... but... desperate times and all that. Now. I’m going to ask you one more time... would you care to dance?”

“I would love to. Absolutely.”

He hauled her onto the dance floor and whirled her round and around, and around once more. He pulled her close and twirled her away. He picked her up by the waist and spun. Hermione was laughing breathlessly when she caught Luna’s eye over Theo’s shoulder. “Thank you,” she mouthed, and Luna grinned before returning to the alien square dancing routine she had going with her father.

Theo made her dizzy through three songs, then led her, stumbling and giggling, back to the bar. “So,” he said after they’d got a drink each, “How are you?”

“I am...” Hermione hedged, “...As expected.”

“I see,” he pronounced with a raised brow, “And your parents...?”

She breathed heavily out of her nose. “Safe.”

“Good girl,” he said and squeezed her hand.

“What about you?” Hermione asked, “How have you been?”

“Er, as expected?” he ventured, “Wait no. Worse. Definitely worse. Hermione, I’m going crazy.”

“Cabin fever?”

“Not exactly,” he said with a scowl, “It’s fucking Xenophilius. He’s a madman. No listen, believe me. Luna’s quirks are adorable, right? His are outrageous. He hates me. He absolutely loathes me.”

“Oh, come on,” Hermione reasoned, “He’s probably just playing the part of the overprotective father...”

“Yeah, see, if that was the case, he’d simply have warded Luna’s room to keep me out. Which he has done, by the way –”

“Oh, you poor thing!”

“– but he does not have to make me spend the afternoon peeling and slicing those bloody awful dirigible plums, and then bake them into a pie and have me eat it for dinner every single day! And that Gurdyroot infusion! I spat it out the first time, so he’s punishing me by making me have a glass with every bloody meal. As if it isn’t bad enough that I have to scrounge around in the garden like a fucking niffler, digging the blasted things out! I also have to fish for Plimpies, keep out the Wrackspurts – which basically involves me batting at empty air for hours, and... Stop laughing, you monster!”

Of course, Hermione did no such thing. “Oh, the Labours of Theodore...”

“Far more than ten,” he grumbled, but then he brightened, “Luckily, the miserable sod has a weakness.”

“Oh?”
“Yes. He trusts Luna implicitly. So he hasn’t put any wards on my room.”
“Ah.”
“Exactly. So she visits me every night.”
“Lovely.”
“It really is. We don’t sleep much.”
“I’m sure you don’t.”
“We spend a lot of time not sleeping.”
“Yes, I get it…”
“Not sleeping every night is doing me a lot of good.”
“That’s nice.”
“And Luna really does love good. I mean, really, really –”
“Theo!”
He threw back his head and laughed. Hermione’s own lips quirked up reflexively at the sound. In her mind’s eye she could picture him as he ought to have been – thinner, taller, with his light brown hair falling into his fine blue eyes.
“Oh, sweet Salazar, darling,” he chortled, “I’ve missed you.”
“I’ve missed you too,” she said softly, “So much.”
He sipped his drink after the last vestiges of his amusement subsided, and adopted a more solemn tone.
“When will you set off on your great, secretive adventure?”
Hermione cleared her throat uncomfortably, “Tomorrow.”
“Fuck,” he muttered, “Potter’s here isn’t he? That tubby red-haired fellow…”
“Huh? How’d you know?” she demanded in shock.
“Luna told me.”
“How did she know?!”
“It’s Luna,” he shrugged offhandedly, “She knows things. But anyway. Are you... well... are you prepared?”
“Yes. I am – I think – I suppose I’ve thought of everything.”
“I can believe that,” he said with a sigh, “Carelessness and cutting corners aren’t your style.”
“No,” she agreed, wanting to say more comforting things but drawing nothing but blanks.
Fortunately, that’s when Luna joined them, flushed and glinting with sweat. (The sunflowers in her hair were beginning to wilt, making Hermione wonder about the state of her lilacs...)
Luna ordered herself a glass of sherry and leaned into Theo’s side as he put an arm around her.
“Had fun, love?” he asked affectionately.
“Oh yes,” she beamed, “Daddy is a wonderful dancer, isn’t he?”
“By the way, Hermione,” said Luna, “I’m sorry for ignoring you all evening. Theo wanted to surprise you.”
“Please don’t apologise. It was a fantastic surprise. In fact,” Hermione bit her lip, “I should apologise for even thinking about using the Imperius curse on you.”
“Hermione Granger!” Theo admonished playfully.
“Oh never mind,” Luna laughed calmly, “It wouldn’t have worked anyway. A gnome bit me this afternoon.”
“Er... okay?” Hermione said, puzzled.
“Gnome saliva is extremely beneficial! It makes you immune to the unforgivable curses and bestows the gift of many tongues.”
“Many tongues, eh?” Theo murmured licentiously. 
Don’t say anything, Hermione firmly told herself.
Just then, somebody shrieked, and Hermione jerked around in alarm. Something enormous and blazing fell through the canopy and landed smack-dab in the middle of the dance floor. All the revellers fell silent and gaped in unified astonishment at the silver light which turned out to be a patronus in the shape of a lithe and graceful lynx. Its mouth opened and Kingsley’s voice issued forth:

“The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming.”

All hell broke loose.

The panic-stricken crowd turned wild, with people running around in shock, or screaming, or promptly disapparating. The protective enchantments around the burrow had been decimated.

“Shit,” Hermione cried. She rounded on Theo and Luna – “You need to get out. You need to leave –” Theo shouted... something, but she ignored him. “Shield charms. NOW. Protego!” she ordered, “Shit shit shit. Go! Theo, Luna, GO!”

Guests were running around hither-thither like headless chickens. Tonks emerged from an especially dense huddle, barking orders at Bill, Charlie, and Hagrid.

“Theo!” Hermione half-sobbed, “They can’t find you here. Hurry!”

“But –”

“Luna. Get him out of here. Find your father and go. GO.” She shoved them both, “I’ll be fine – I need to get to Harry and we’ll be out too – Damn it – MOVE.”

And that’s when they appeared: Death Eaters – at least thirty of them. With perfect synchrony they raised their wands and let loose a violent flow of spells. There was madness, madness everywhere. Furniture flew all over the place, amid an outburst of explosions and lights and screams.

Luna grabbed hold of Theo’s hand and ran towards her father at the other end of the floor.

She was one and they were three.

Three rancorous Death Eaters were attacking her with all they had and she could do nothing besides struggle to maintain her shield charm.

“Not so tough now, are you, mudblood?” yelled one Death Eater – the woman from the night of Dumbledore’s murder. Hermione was pushed back brutally from the force of her curse.

“Protego Totalum,” she wheezed.

A little behind her and to the left was a large table that had been knocked over on its side, effectively forming a partition. If she could just duck behind it, she might be able to fend off the brutes......

Suddenly, from behind the table, three jets of light shot out and hit all three Death Eaters squarely in the chest, knocking them out cold. Overwhelmed with relief, Hermione took a moment to collect her breath before diving behind the table-screen.

But her words of gratitude died in her throat. What came out instead was, “YOU!”

Instantly, her wand was levelled at the young man before her. “You...” she spluttered, “What – YOU – Wha –”

“Is this how you thank someone for saving your life?” asked Draco Malfoy with his mouth twisted sardonically, ‘By stuttering and pointing your wand at them?’

“Saving my – Go to hell!” she snarled.

“Oh, put away your wand, Granger,” Malfoy commanded. He kept his own wand harmlessly at his side, pointing towards the ground. “You aren’t really going to do anything –”
Hermione laughed humourlessly, “Is that what you think? I’m not going to make the same mistake twice, you arsehole.”

Malfoy scoffed. “It wasn’t a fucking mistake, and you know it. The reason you let me go that night... the reason I saved your miserable hide just now... still holds.”

“Save it, Malfoy. I think the reason would prefer knowing where you are – even if you’re chained and shackled.”

Malfoy smirked. It was such an aggravatingly familiar expression that Hermione nearly hexed him there and then. “What makes you think he doesn’t already know?”

That stumped her. She gaped at him and his smirk grew. “Wha – he – he –”

“Stuttering again, Granger? Shit, you’re a dreadful conversationalist.”

“I simply don’t belie –”

A blur rushed into their tiny shelter and pinned Malfoy to the back of the table by this throat. Lupin.

Hermione’s gasp of shock was lost under the livid growl that tore out of the older man. “You double-crossing little maggot. I knew we shouldn’t have trusted you!”

“GET OFF ME –”

What was going on? Hermione stared at the two men in astonishment.

Lupin’s grasp tightened. “This was your plan all along, wasn’t it? Lull us into a false –”

“Plan?” Malfoy choked out, “Plan?! D’you think ‘m allowed to make plans?! GERROFFME!”

He kicked his leg out, catching Lupin in the shin and causing him to jump back with a howl of pain. Gingerly rubbing his reddened neck, Malfoy seethed, “There was no time to warn you, alright? Yaxley showed up with the news that they’d taken the Ministry, and minutes later we were apparating here. There was no time, you hear me?”

“Liar!” Lupin roared.

“I’m NOT fucking lying! Here –” Malfoy spat, shoving a piece of parchment into Lupin’s hand, “– a list of all raids and attacks intended for the next two months.”

Glaring furiously, Lupin tucked the list inside his robes.

“Quit frothing at the mouth, would you?” Malfoy snapped, “You know what they do to rabid dogs.”

Hermione made a noise of deep indignation on Lupin’s behalf, which finally alerted him to her presence. “Hermione?” he started incredulously, “What are you doing here? Where’s Harry?”

Oh dear god... Harry! What was wrong with her?

Muttering a stream of oaths, she tore out from behind the table and into the chaos. Her eyes darted all over the place, searching...

She saw Ron attempting to stave off that same large blond Death Eater who’d gone berserk on the night of Dumbledore’s death. He was wearing Ron down, so without wasting a second, Hermione rushed forward crying, “Impedimenta!”

“Fuck,” Ron panted, “Bloody maniac. Thanks, Hermio –”

“Where’s Harry?” Hermione urged, cutting him short.

“Donno... I haven’t... THERE!”

He was at a far corner, duelling two Death Eaters. Much to Hermione’s horror, his disguise was fading – as she watched, he seemed to get thinner... his hair was darkening...

“Come on,” she yelled, grabbing Ron’s wrist and pulling him along. In a strangely serendipitous moment, that was exactly when Harry shook his opponents off and looked up...

At once, he ran towards them, cutting frantically through the crowd. They met in the middle of the dance floor, and Hermione grabbed onto his hand tightly. Her mind filled with the image of a wide street lined with electronic shops and glitzy nightclubs... a mishmash of architectural styles... a big blue sign that read Tottenham Court Road Station...

She spun on the spot and vanished.
Getting attacked by Death Eaters in Central Bloody London: what a bizarre nightmare. And here she had believed they’d be relatively safe in a heavily populated muggle area. Hermione blew a strand of hair away from her face and glared at the dark-haired Death Eater sprawled on the floor. Dolohov – her old friend from the battle at the Ministry; the one who was responsible for the fading scar above her bellybutton.

The café where they’d taken sanctuary was in shambles.
“Lock the door,” Harry said to her, “and Ron… turn out the lights.”
She rushed to do as he said, glad that he was taking charge. She was on the brink of a meltdown… she had no idea where to go next.

Ron used the Deluminator to extinguish the lights, and then whispered, “What the fuck are we going to do with them? Kill them? They’d kill us. They had a good go just now.”

Dimly illuminated by the yellow light that streamed in from outside, Hermione could just make out his face – and it made her shudder. Harry, bless him, shook his head. “We just need to wipe their memories,” he said, “It’s better like that, it’ll throw them off the scent. If we killed them it’d be obvious we were here.”

“You’re the boss,” said Ron flippantly, “But I’ve never done a Memory Charm.”

Hermione muttered hoarsely, “I know the theory.”

Taking in a gulp of air, she focused on the events of the last fifteen minutes and – “Obliviate.”

When Dolohov’s eyes glazed over, she knew she had succeeded.

Harry patted her on the back. “Brilliant! Take care of the other one and the waitress while Ron and I clear up.”

She nodded and turned to the large blond Death Eater as Ron sputtered in dismay: “Clear up? Why?”

“Don’t you think they might wonder what’s happened if they wake up and find themselves in a place that looks like it’s just been bombed?”

“Oh right, yeah…”

“Obliviate,” Hermione whispered, tunning them out.

When they’d taken care of everything, she leant her hip against a table, and looked askance at Harry. “How did they find us? How did they know where we were? You—you don’t think you’ve still got your Trace on you, do you, Harry?”

Ron promptly refuted that theory, “He can’t have. The Trace breaks at seventeen; that’s Wizarding law. You can’t put it on an adult.”

“As far as you know,” Hermione countered, “What if the Death Eaters have found a way to put it on a seventeen-year-old?”

“But Harry hasn’t been near a Death Eater in the last twenty-four hours,” Ron argued, “Who’s supposed to have put a Trace back on him?”

They both looked at Harry, and Hermione nearly groaned out loud. He had that typically tortured, self-loathing look on his face. “If I can’t use magic,” he said slowly, “and you can’t use magic near me, without us giving away our position—”

She’d heard enough. “We’re NOT splitting up!”

“We need a safe place to hide,” Ron reasoned, “Give us time to think things through.”

“Grimmauld Place,” said Harry, simply.

And so it was.
The insalubrious old house looked exactly as Hermione remembered. She placed her bag on a dusty sofa, and waved her wand to set the rusty gas lamps aflame. She pulled the filthy curtains aside and peered cautiously at the street outside: it seemed deserted. She backed away and pointed her wand at the large fireplace, and conjured a fire sans the heat. The warm orangey tint that subsequently spread across the room somewhat lessened its dreadful drabness.

Harry was standing in front of the massive Black family tapestry, staring hard at Sirius’ name. Hermione swallowed, and looked apprehensively at Ron, who merely shrugged bleakly. Then, abruptly, his eyes widened, as he pointed at something behind her. Hermione spun around, and a tiny shriek tore out of her. As before, a bright slivery light zoomed into their presence, and gradually took on the form of...a weasel.

“That’s dad’s!” Ron exclaimed, and in a moment of insanity, Hermione wondered what Draco Malfoy would’ve said on finding out that Arthur Weasley’s patronus was actually, truly a weasel.

She gave herself a solid shake just as Mr. Weasley’s voice projected out of the glowing animal:

“Family is safe. Do not reply... we are being watched.”

The Patronus dissipated, and Ron emitted a choked whimper. “They’re alright,” he gasped, “They’re all safe!” She smiled widely at him, and he laughed, (“THEY’RE ALRIGHT!”) and hugged her.

But, alas, fucking shit, as always, their jubilance was short-lived: Harry let out an agonised cry and fell down heavily on the sofa. A cloud of dust exploded all around him.

“Harry!” Hermione shouted, “Harry! What is it?”

He moaned, and clutched at his forehead.

“Bugger!” Ron yelped, “It’s another vision, innit? What is it? What did you see?”

Hermione stared between the two of them, flummoxed and worried. “What? A vision?! Your scar, again? What’s going on? I thought that connection had closed!”

With his fingers pressed against his scar, Harry groaned. “It did, for a while. I – I think it’s started opening again whenever he loses control, that’s how it used to –”

“But then you’ve got to close your mind–” Hermione was horrified, “–Harry you have shut that connection down... use Occlumency! Otherwise Voldemort can plant false images in your mind, remember –”

“Yeah, I do remember, thanks,” Harry spat, “I try. These fucking – these visions – they just come to me at the most random moments. I can’t – FUCK. Damn it. It hurts like hell.”

Hermione didn’t have the heart to berate him anymore. She fished a handkerchief out of her bag and cast a cooling charm on it. She perched on the arm of the sofa next to Harry, and pressed the cloth against his scar.

“Thanks,” he sighed.

“So, um...” Ron broached, “What did you see then?”

Harry closed his eyes. “It was just a flood of rage at first. Burning hot rage. Then... a long room dimly lit room...” (Harry’s hand convulsed, and Hermione reinforced the cooling charm on her handkerchief,) “...that giant blond Death Eater – he’s called Rowle, by the way – was on the floor, thrashing and screaming, and I was... I mean, Voldemort was... threatening to feed him to his snake for letting us escape again. There was another person in the room... Draco... and... and Voldemort forced him to torture Rowle...”

“Oh.. god,” Hermione groaned.

How awful. How sickening. And ghastly. And... And... And...

“Stuttering again, Granger? Shit, you’re a dreadful conversationalist.”
How utterly wretched.

“Oh come on, he forced him?” Ron jeered dismissively, “It’s all exactly what that little shit willingly signed up for –”

“He didn’t willingly sign up for anything,” Hermione burst out before she could stop herself. Ron stared at her.

“She’s right,” Harry seconded. His eyes were open now; the brilliant green streaked with reflected firelight, “You didn’t see him, Ron... he looked completely petrified. Voldemort told him that if he didn’t do it, he and his parents would face the consequences.”

There was a terrible weight inside Hermione’s chest. She jumped to her feet and collected her bag saying, “I need to get out of this bloody dress. I’ll – I’ll be right back...”

She scarpered into the nearest bathroom and shut the door firmly behind her. Sitting on the edge of the large and garish bathtub, she rummaged around in her bag till her fingers closed around her old DA Galleon. Then, praying – to deities she didn’t believe in – that Luna still had hers at hand, Hermione altered the coin’s engraving: ‘Fine?’

No more than a minute later, the galleon burned hot.

‘All are fine’.

She pressed her palm against her heart and breathed.
Chapter Notes

I have been nominated in three categories for the 2018 Enchanted Awards. My reaction was as follows: What?... then, Holy shit!... followed by, WHAT?!
The list of nominees is available on the Granger Enchanted Survivors 18+ page on Facebook, and voting's open till March 24. So if you'd like, you can... you know.
Ahem.

Some of the dialogue here has been borrowed (and maybe somewhat decontextualised and fiddled with,) from DH.

There was a plate of stale biscuits before her, with a cup of cold tea to the side – both remained untouched. Hermione was doing what she always did when beleaguered: She was making a list.

Their first day in hiding at 12 Grimmauld Place had been, to say the least, utterly insane. So here’s what happened, she summarised systematically and succinctly in her head:
1. Harry was being tormented by the idea that Dumbledore had sat mute and indifferent while his domineering mother had abused his squib sister, (based on a claim by the oh so scrupulous Rita Skeeter).
2. R.A.B. stood for Regulus Arcturus Black. (Now that was a discovery that truly stunned her. Sirius’ so-called ‘evil brother’ – supposedly an irredeemable coward and ex-follower of Voldemort – turned out to be an unexpected hero. They didn’t know what it was that had caused him to turn against his master, but it was enough for him to sacrifice his life. And he hadn’t let Kreacher take the fall for him either. How could such a man, all things considered, be thought of as anything but brave? His family and upbringing had led him down a certain path, but he had eventually chosen to turn away. Not as soon and as easily as his brother, but still... Hermione’s mind jumped to Theo and Malfoy – a situation that could be similar... but wasn’t quite...)
3. The locket, that is, the bloody Horcrux, had been in their hands two years ago, and they’d tossed it aside carelessly. Now that crook Mundungus Fletcher had it. (Thinking of Kreacher’s horrible ordeal made her eyes sting, yet again, with tears. It was truly sick the way...)

“...literally no food in the bloody house!”

Harry and Ron stomped into the drawing room, shattering her train of thought. Ron looked supremely disgruntled, but perked up a trifle on spotting the plate of biscuits that Hermione wasn’t eating.

“-choo up to?” he asked with a mouth full of crumbs.
“Nothing,” she replied wearily.

Harry was noticeably twitchy, and he strode over to the large window to peer outside. “Shouldn’t Kreacher be back by now? House-Elfs are supposed to be great at finding people...”

“It’s Mundungus, mate,” said Ron smoothly, “He’s a good hider, yeah?”

Hermione clasped her hands together and sighed –

Hey, Hermione? Hullo... more where that came from?”

She glared balefully at Ron who was pointing at her cup. But then, Harry came and sat beside her,
looking discouraged and jittery and everything else that characterised a person in desperate need for a spot of tea.

So, she muttered, “Of course,” and fished a kettle, two cups, and a box of teabags out of her bag.

One... Two... Three... Four days went by, and Kreacher did not return. Worry over that, mixed with the strain of their general situation and the gloomy atmosphere in the house had turned the three ‘best friends’ into bad-tempered, intolerant, and reluctant roommates who could scarcely stand to be around one another.

One the fifth night of Kreacher’s nonappearance, Harry was, true to form, glued to the drawing room window with his hands in tight fists by his sides, and Ron was stretched out on the moth-eaten sofa, twiddling his thumbs. Scribbling furiously into a notebook, Hermione sat on the floor translating *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* – mostly to keep her mind off Theo and how much she wished he was around. The text was littered with irregular runes, some that she couldn’t find anywhere in *Spellman’s Syllabary*, and so she was forced to improvise.

*The Wizard and The Hopping Pot*

*There was once* (deviation from the standard rune for ‘c’) *a kindly old wizard who used his magic generously and wisely for the benefit of his neighbours. Rather than reveal the true* (single symbol used; similar to the Old Futhark rune for ‘truth’) *source of his power, he pretended that his potions, ?????, and antidotes*

“What’s wrong, Harry?”
She dropped her pen at Ron’s exclamation, gazing up at the Chosen One’s choicest look of disquietude.
“Reckon they know we’re in here?” asked Ron while sitting up.
Hermione nervously tapped her nail against the floor and mused, “I don’t think so... else they’d have sent Snape in after us, wouldn’t they? And Moody’s curse is preventing him from telling them how to get in... They’re probably watching to see whether we turn up. They know that Harry owns the house, after all.”
“How do they—?” began Harry.
“Wizarding wills are examined by the Ministry, remember? They’ll know Sirius left you the place.”
With a low grunt, Harry stalked back to the window to keep vigil. Ron fell back on the sofa, and Hermione picked up her pen.

*sprang* *for* ready–made from the little cauldron he called his lucky cooking *peg pot*. From *myls* (i.e., miles) *around people came to him with their troubles, and the wizard was pleased to give his pot a*
The lights went out.
Then they came back on.
Ron was fiddling with the blasted Deluminator again.

*stir and put things right.*

_This wee belove well-beloved wizard lived to a godly (goodly?) age, then_

The lights went out.
Then they came back on.

died, leaving all his ?haytles (chattels?) to his only son. _This son was of a very different disposition to his gentle father. Those who could no_

The lights went out.
Blind with rage, (and, yes, okay, the lack of illumination, too,) Hermione chucked her pen in the direction she thought Ron was. It landed with a thud somewhere embarrassingly close to her.
“Will you stop it!” she yelled.
“Sorry, sorry!” Ron’s voice called through the gloom, “I don’t know I’m doing it!”
The lights came back on, and Hermione glowered at Ron’s sheepish expression. “You don’t know you’re doing it?!” she demanded in disbelief, “I know you’re remarkably thick, Ron, but how could you not notice the lights going on and off and –”
“Oh, simmer down! I said I’m sorry, didn’t I?” Ron responded hotly.
“Well,” Hermione spat, “can’t you find something useful to occupy yourself?”
“What, like reading kids’ stories?”
“Dumbledore left me this book –”
“– and he left _me_ the Deluminator! Maybe I’m supposed to use it!”
“I’m sure he didn’t intend for you to _use_ it to annoy the shit out of your friends!”
“Well, maybe he did! You know, since I don’t have your natural talent for annoying people –”

There was a loud CRASH from downstairs, and Hermione and Ron froze. They stared at each other in alarm for two-and-a-half seconds...
They tore down the stairs, wands drawn, coming to an abrupt halt in the hall, where Mrs. Black’s portrait was raving, and Harry stood with his wand trained on a man whose identity was masked by a cloud of dust.

“MUDBLOODS AND FILTH DISHONORING MY HOUSE!”
Hermione skittered over to Harry’s side; her heart was in her throat. The mysterious man coughed, waved his hands about to clear the air, and said, “Hold your fire, it’s me, Remus!”
The relief she felt was so enormous that she nearly laughed. _Oh thank goodness_. She pointed her wand at Walburga Black’s portrait and closed the curtains that kept her silent.
They sat at one end of the long wooden table in the kitchen, sipping on warm butterbeer that Lupin had pulled out from under his cloak, and stared down at the copy of the Daily Prophet that he’d placed before them. The entire front page was taken up by a photograph of Harry, under the most inflammatory of headlines: WANTED FOR QUESTIONING ABOUT THE DEATH OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” said Lupin gently.

Harry said nothing. He simply pushed the paper away and took a small sip of his beverage. Hermione seethed on his behalf; “So Death Eaters have taken over the Daily Prophet too? But surely people realize what’s going on?”

Lupin shook his head tiredly. “The coup has been smooth and virtually silent. The official version of Scrimgeour’s murder is that he resigned; he has been replaced by Pius Thicknesse, who is under the Imperius Curse.

“Naturally many people have deduced what has happened: There has been such a dramatic change in Ministry policy in the last few days, and many are whispering that Voldemort must be behind it. But that’s the point: They whisper. They daren’t confide in each other, not knowing whom to trust; they are scared to speak out, in case their suspicions are true and their families are targeted.”

“And this dramatic change in Ministry policy involves warning the Wizarding world against me instead of Voldemort?” Harry asked bitterly.

“That’s certainly part of it,” Lupin replied, “and it is a masterstroke. Now that Dumbledore is dead, you – the Boy Who Lived – were sure to be the symbol and rallying point for any resistance to Voldemort. But by suggesting that you had a hand in the old hero’s death, Voldemort has not only set a price upon your head, but sown doubt and fear amongst many who would have defended you. Meanwhile, the Ministry has started moving against muggleborns. Look at page two,” he said, gesturing towards the Prophet.

With anticipatory disgust, Hermione turned the page. “Muggleborn Register,” she read aloud, and the more she read, the higher her voice got. It reached a fevered pitch at phrases like ‘the so-called muggleborn is likely to have obtained magical power by theft or force’, and ‘the Ministry is determined to root out such usurpers of magical power’.

“People won’t let this happen,” Ron said questioningly.

“It is happening, Ron,’ said Lupin, “Muggleborns are being rounded up as we speak.”

And so, Hermione deduced, she would have had to be on the run even if she hadn’t chosen to stick with Harry.

“It’s ...it’s ...” Harry stuttered, face red and eyes blazing.

“I know.” Lupin stated gloomily.

Hermione used the spell of silence that followed to steel herself to broach a rather precarious subject. She hadn’t said a word about it to Harry or Ron, since tempers had been flying high of late, but with Lupin here... well, she just had to know.

“Proffes – ahem, pardon me, Remus... What is going on with Draco Malfoy?”

To her right, Ron choked on his butterbeer, and broke into a loud bout of coughing. To her left, Harry froze, and stared at her in discombobulation. Hermione, however, kept her eyes locked on Lupin, who, with a look of great resignation, said, “I was wondering when you’d bring that up.”

“Draco Malfoy?!?” Ron splutter, “What the hell?”
Hermione sighed, and at long last, told the tale about her run-in with Malfoy at Bill and Fleur’s wedding, and his subsequent spat with Lupin that she witnessed.

“What the hell,” Ron said again, once she had finished.

Lupin chugged the final dregs of his butterbeer, set the bottle down on the table rather loudly, and ran the back of his hand across his mouth. “He came to us on the night of Tonks and my wedding. Genius move on his part, to show up at Andromeda’s – no matter what the family history, she would never turn her nephew away. I was all for handing him over to Mad-Eye, but she insisted he be allowed to explain himself. And for the first time in my life, I witnessed Tonks agreeing with her mother.

“First thing, he wanted to know where Theodore Nott was. Of course, I told him nothing until he first made his intentions clear... So he told us that Dumbledore had offered him sanctuary, but... um... had unfortunately died before he could accept –”

“And whose sodding fault was that?” Ron spat.

“He said,” Lupin continued, “That he wanted to take up that offer... that he would switch sides and help out. Of course, I didn’t believe a word he was saying, so he offered to drink Veritaserum, if necessary –”

“He wasn’t lying,” Harry muttered, “I was there, remember? Dumbledore did offer, and he was going to accept...”

“Well, yes,” Lupin concurred, “The Veritaserum confirmed as much. When we asked him what his terms were, he demanded again to know the whereabouts of Nott. But then, he declined to go into hiding with him – said he couldn’t leave his parents behind. Bear in mind, I’m giving you a highly sanitised version of what transpired; that boy is a smartarse reprobate, and I quite nearly rung his neck.”

“You should’ve,” Ron grumbled, and Hermione, who was completely riveted by Lupin’s account, shushed him impatiently.

“So then what happened?” Harry prodded.

“Well, he said he’d play the spy – pass information about Death Eater plots and plans –” (Lupin paused to acknowledge Hermione’s surprised snicker of approval at his phrasing,) “– and in return, we would have to swear not to harm either of his parents, and, when...and if... the time for sentencing comes –”

“NO,” Ron exploded, “You’re JOKING. He wants to be let off?”

“Him and his mother, yes. I told him that there was no way Lucius Malfoy could dodge punishment, so he demanded leniency in his case –”

“That’s just... oh wow... batshit insane!” Ron shouted, “Leniency for Lucius Malfoy?! NO punishment for his arsehole son? He’s a murderer!”

“He isn’t a murderer –” Hermione reasoned timidly.

“Bloodly close to one though!”

“Ron,” Lupin called calmly, “His information has proved to be true and has helped us deflect some half a dozen Death Eater attacks – one of them, Hermione, being on your parents’ neighbourhood.” Hermione shuddered... dreadfully... but Ron was not deterred.

“All that’s well and good,” he growled, “But he still fucking tried to kill people –”

“Ron –”

“He tried to kill ME!” Ron turned his eyes, burning with fury and betrayal towards Hermione, “I almost died, thanks to him. Don’t you care about that? Shouldn’t he be punished for that?” Hermione let out a low whimper, not knowing at all how to answer him. Still, she tried: “Ron, it was an accident –”

“An accident,” he hollered, “That’s all? I could’ve died, and you’re brushing it off as an accident?!”

“Harry nearly killed Malfoy, too! This whole... thing... is a mess...” Next to her, she felt Harry shift uncomfortably. Ron’s face twisted with contempt. “I don’t believe this.” He turned away from Hermione in disgust, and rounded on Lupin, “How... HOW... could you
agree to this? How could you?"
“Told you, his information proved —”
“No. I mean before all that. How could you agree?!”
Suddenly, Lupin looked tired. His greying hair seemed to wilt, and a shadow passed over him. He looked crushingly sad. “He’s Sirius’ cousin. His... his whole demeanour... his eyes...” he broke off with a devastated sigh.
“For fuck’s sake,” Ron roared. He jumped out of his seat and stormed out of the kitchen.

Nobody spoke for a long time. Eventually, Lupin tentatively asked, “Are you okay with this, Harry?”
Harry shrugged apathetically. “It’s what Dumbledore wanted. And turns out, Dumbledore wasn’t a very good person at seventeen, either... so yeah, I’m all for redemption.”
“Harry,” Hermione whispered, “You know the Prophet is being controlled by Death Eaters; you can’t believe what —”
“Right,” he cut in shortly, and got to his feet, “I’m going to check on Ron.”

And that left Hermione with Lupin who continued to look completely depressed.

“Remus,” she whispered, and he started.
Clearing his throat, he broached, “I presume you still can’t confide in me what your mission is?”
“I can’t. Sorry.”
“I thought you’d say that,” said Lupin despondently. “But I could still be of some use to you. You know what I am and what I can do. I could come with you to provide protection. There would be no need to tell me exactly what you were up to.”
Hermione felt her face pull into a frown as she considered him confoundingly. “But what about Tonks?”
“What about her?” Lupin raised his brows.
“Well,” she said hesitantly, “you’re married; how does she feel about you going away with us?”
The tone with which he replied sent a shiver down her spine: “Tonks will be perfectly safe,” he said coldly, “She’ll be at her parents’ house.”
“Remus... is everything all right...you know...between you and—”
“Everything is fine, thank you,” he snapped acerbically.
Her face burned, and she stared diligently at her knee, even as she itched to squirm –
“Tonks is going to have a baby.”
– Her head snapped up to gape at Lupin. “Oh, how wonderful!” she cried.
Lupin smiled tightly, as though it pained him to do so, and then – “So... do you think Harry will accept my offer?” On seeing Hermione’s look of astonishment, he closed his eyes. “I-I made a grave mistake in marrying Tonks. I did it against my better judgment and I have regretted it very much ever since. She... the child... they deserve better than me.”

It struck her like a flash of lightning: Why he had accepted Malfoy’s deal... Why he was so morbidly unhappy... Why he could bring himself to leave Tonks...
She’d never had him to begin with. Lupin belonged to a dead man, and... And Hermione’s heart broke for all the players stuck in such an awful tragedy. But before she could say anything, Harry’s rough voice erupted from the doorway: “I see. So you’re just going to dump her and the kid and run off with us?”

The scene that followed involved a lot of livid yelling and spiteful words (coward... bastard...).
Hermione was barely aware of what was being said, and desperate to restore peace, she threw herself between the raving men. It came to an end when Lupin charged out of the house in a
towering rage, eyes full of hurt.

“Harry!” Hermione keened, “How could you?”

“It was easy,” he spat, shaking with anger, “Don’t look at me like that!”

Ron, it appeared, had been drawn back downstairs by the hubbub, and he barked, “You shouldn’t have said that stuff to Lupin.”

“Oh shut up. He had it coming to him,” Harry snapped, “Parents shouldn’t leave their kids unless – unless they’ve got to.”

Pity curdled in Hermione’s gut. “Harry—” she whispered, reaching out to touch him, but he shrugged her hand off and stomped away to stare into the fire grate. Ron turned his back on both of them and began rifling through the pantry.

Hermione sat down again, keeping her eyes on the ground.

The three ‘best friends’ stewed in silence and resentment.

The silence rang on for two more days… And it was agony.

One night, not being able to keep it together, Hermione locked herself up in the loo and cried. She clutched her DA Galleon in her hand, wanting so badly to send a message, just so she had someone to communicate with. Maybe Luna would give her Galleon to Theo, and even one word from him would be a boon.

But then, there was a loud crack from outside, and on running pell-mell to the kitchen, she found that Kreacher had returned, with a frenzied Mundungus in tow.

And with that, suddenly, they had everything in the world to talk about.

Something had fissured, irrevocably, between Ron and her. While pieces of her feelings for him had been falling away all year, Ron had suffered a single moment of disenchantment. Ever since the night of Lupin’s disastrous visit, there were moments when she’d catch him watching at her in a way that made her skin crawl. He was amiable enough otherwise, as the three of them got involved in preparing for operation Trounce the Toad, but ever so often, he’d lash out at her with jibes more poisonous than ever before, and as a result of which, Hermione was the one who’d volunteer to watch the Ministry entrance most often.

She apparated back to the doorstep of Grimmauld place just as the sun had begun to set, careful to stay hidden under the invisibility cloak; there were four menacing Death Eaters on the street. Her co-conspirators were seated at the now disconcertingly spotless kitchen table, pouring over their plan and the bits of Intel they had collected thus far, while munching on some scrumptious walnut cake.

“Everything okay?” Harry asked as she slipped tiredly into a chair.

“Yes, I – oh, thank you, Kreacher!” she gushed, eying the slice of cake he’d placed in front of her. Kreacher grunted, which was a marked improvement on his usual oh no, the mudblood is speaking to Kreacher, doom, gloom, kaboom reaction. “Anyway,” Hermione soldiered on, “I know where Umbridge’s office is. I overheard that big, bearded man telling his friend, ‘I’ll be up on level one,
Dolores wants to see me,’... So round here, most probably.” She marked a tentative ‘x’ on their roughly drawn map.

“That’s great!” Harry cheered, “Now we just need to figure out a way in...”

Over the past two weeks, they’d learned that nobody, (save for the most senior officials,) was allowed to connect their homes to the Floo Network. Apparating in and out of the Ministry had been banned. The only way in was by using newly issued tokens. They had, maybe, possibly, identified three people who took the same route to the Ministry every day...

Unlike Kreacher’s excellent cake, their scheme was disturbingly half-baked.

Three days later, after Hermione had spent six hours crouched in front of the Ministry, she decided to throw caution to the wind, and just walk.

She pulled the cloak tightly around her and ambulated down Whitehall, breathing in the cool evening air, and pensively watching the traffic rush by.

There were a surprising number of people out that evening, and as she neared St. James’s Park, the crowd thickened. She looked about her in surprise; many people appeared to be crying, and nearly everybody was holding flowers.

Utterly perplexed, Hermione dived deeper into the swarm, hoping to find her way to the epicentre.........

It was two hours after dark when she finally made it back to Grimmauld place.

“Where the hell were you?” Ron demanded, but Hermione held up her hand pleadingly.

“Kreacher,” she whispered, “Would there be any... um... firewhiskey in the house?”

Not looking directly at her, the House-Elf nodded, and vanished. He rematerialised a second later with a bottle of Ogden’s Old, and three glasses.

It was only after she’d had taken a couple of brisk sips that Hermione turned to her two anxious friends and said, “Princess Diana died.”

“Who?” said Ron unsurprisingly.

Harry’s forehead creased with worry, “Was it Death Ea–”

“No,” Hermione said, “Car crash in Paris.”

“Oh,” Harry mumbled.

Hermione stared at the bright amber liquid in her glass while Harry (ineptly) told Ron about the monarchy. Somehow, holed up in that dingy house, she’d become myopic. She’d forgotten that while the British magical community was paralyzed, the rest of the world was carrying on.

Princesses were dying, people were mourning. In some other part of the world, people must’ve had a cause for celebration. Children were being born. The sun was rising in Japan.

She wondered what dentists in Australia were up to.
Another three days later, Harry returned with a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, from which they learned that Snape had been appointed the new Headmaster of Hogwarts, and that attendance was mandatory.

Hermione shot up the stairs immediately, (secretly applauding her presence of mind,) to shove Phineas Nigellus’ portrait into her trusted beaded bag. When she returned, the boys were quiet and sombre, and she knew that they were thinking about the same person as she was – Ginny.

“I think we should do it tomorrow,” Harry declared softly, but firmly.

She would never get used to inhabiting someone else’s body. Mafalda Hopkirk was not much larger than her, but she definitely had a touch of rheumatoid arthritis. The pointy kitten heels weren’t helping. They click-clacked with every step she took, trailing behind Dolores Umbridge down to the Ministry court chambers. Hermione-as-Mafalda felt an urge to laugh hysterically. God, but her life was absurd.

However, that untimely urge left her the moment they stepped into the passage outside the courtrooms. It was brimming with dementors. She felt so terribly cold... until Umbridge snapped her fingers, and the whole swarm of black-cloaked soul-suckers disappeared into the other end of the hall.

“This way, Mafalda,” Umbridge trilled. She patted the hideous velvet bow sitting on her head, and led them into a room to the left of the passageway.

It was a small room with a high rounded ceiling, like a giant bell jar. A fresh assault of despair alerted Hermione-as-Mafalda to the presence of more dementors here, on a raised podium but the wall. She followed Umbridge to a bench behind a banister, where a self-important looking man was already seated.

“Morning Yaxley,” Umbridge sang, “I’ve got Mafalda along for record keeping.” She then proceeded to summon a patronus (a silver Persian cat) and instructed it to pace before the banister. Instantly, the air around them warmed.

The “trials” Hermione-as-Mafalda witnessed were worse than she’d ever imagined. This was the build-up to a holocaust. She could barely keep herself from screaming in outrage, from hexing the two depraved monsters next to her. She needed to escape... And she needed to help out as many muggle-borns as possible...

“No, no! I’m a half-blood; I’m a half-blood, I tell you! My father was a wizard, he was, look him up! Arkie Alderton… he’s a well-known broomstick designer! Look him up, I tell you—get your hands off me, get your hands off—”

Hermione-as-Mafalda bit the insides of her cheeks as Jimmy Alderton was dragged away by the dementors. It was good that she was so adept at taking notes, because she was hardly focusing on what she was writing.

“Next!” Umbridge called out, “Mary Cattermole.”

*Oh fuck.* Hermione-as-Mafalda blinked in horror at the slim, petrified woman who’d just sat down on the lone chair in the middle of the room.
“You are Mary Elizabeth Cattermole?” Umbridge asked authoritatively.
Mrs. Cattermole nodded meekly.
“Married to Reginald Cattermole of the Magical Maintenance Department?”
Mrs. Cattermole burst into tears. “I don’t know where he is, he was supposed to meet me here!”
Hermione-as-Mafalda’s hand was shaking. If they had just waited a little longer, they might’ve found someone else for Ron to impersonate...
“Mother to Maisie, Ellie, and Alfred Cattermole?” Umbridge continued ruthlessly.
“They’re frightened,” wailed Mrs. Cattermole, “They think I might not come home—”
“Spare us,” Yaxley sneered, “The brats of Mudbloods do not stir our sympathies.”

Okay, she absolutely had to help this woman... but what could she do? It was two against one, not to mention the army of dementors outside, and the entire ministry above...
Her eyes darted to the door... perhaps she could use a Decoy Detonator... cast a quick patronus...
“I’m behind you,” came a whisper from behind her.
Hermione-as-Mafalda’s hands flew up in the air. Her bottle of ink tipped over. She gasped in alarm.
But after all that came immense relief – she knew that voice belonged to Harry-as-Runcorn.
Thank heavens.
And luckily, Umbridge and Yaxley were too busy interrogating to notice her little accident. Now, all she had to do was wait...

They were sprinting across the Atrium like madmen; Yaxley and his vengeful entourage hot on their tail.

“Come on!” Harry-as-Runcorn bellowed. His abnormally hand was in hers, slick with sweat, and they dived into the closest fireplace.
They were tossed, a moment later, out of a toilet, and outside the cubicle, they were reunited with Ron-as-Cattermole, trying to get away from his supposed wife.
“Reg, I don’t understand—”
“Let go, I’m not your husband, you’ve got to go home!”

“LET’S GO,” Harry-as-Runcorn yelled, over the noise of multiple cubicle doors crashing open.
Hermione-as-Malfalda felt his fingers tighten around her, and he disapparated, landing them squarely in front of 12, Grimmauld Place.
No sooner did they land, than yet another clamour arose. Death Eaters – one, two, three, shit, too many of them – “Incarcer–”
She gripped Harry’s hand, focused on the first place that popped into her head, and spun.
Hello. In case you, like Hermione, (and me,) miss Theo, I've made a scribbly little drawing of the two of them:

This chapter contains many snippets of dialogue "borrowed" from DH. I've done my best to give you a whole new perspective.

... "What… What's happened to him?"
"Splinched. Quickly, in my bag, there's a small bottle labelled 'Essence of Dittany'—"
"Bag – right –"
"He's fainted...! Unstopper it for me, Harry, my hands are shaking..."

* 

"Why are we here? I thought we were going back to Grimmauld Place?"
"I don't think we're going to be able to go back there."
"What d'you –?"
"As we disapparated, Yaxley and a couple of other Death Eaters caught hold of me and I couldn't get rid of them… they were still holding on when we arrived at Grimmauld Place, and then – well, they were going to attack, so I brought us here instead."
"But then, where are they? Hang on... You don't mean they're at Grimmauld Place? They can't get in there?"
"I think they can. They got inside the Fidelius Charm's protection. Since Dumbledore died, we're the Secret-Keepers… Harry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"
"Don't be stupid, it wasn't your fault! If anything, it was mine..."

The air before Hermione's wand hazed and shimmered with magic. "Salvio Hexia... Protego Totalum ...Repello Muggletum... Muffliato..." she murmured, as she walked in a rough circle around the small clearing.

Harry was busy setting up their tent, and Ron remained sprawled on the forest floor, winded and in pain, the wound on his arm being the only part of his skin that had some colour.
She could hardly believe that this was the same place that, three years ago, had housed a quidditch stadium large enough to accommodate a hundred thousand people. It was also the place where
she'd seen what the Death Eaters were capable of for the first time. It seemed that those woods were destined to induce a rush of adrenaline, be it from excitement, or terror, or the uncontainable anxiety of being on the run.

With a final "Cave Imunicium," she turned to the boys. "That's as much as I can do," she told them, nervously tapping her wand against her knee, "At the very least, we should know if they're coming. I can't guarantee it will keep out Vol–"

"Don't say the name!" Ron cut in severely, sitting up a touch and looking fierce. "I'm... sorry," he added, somewhat diffidently, "but it feels like a – a jinx or something. Can't we call him You-Know-Who – please?"

Harry's eyes darted towards Hermione, before settling on Ron in bewilderment. "Dumbledore said fear of a name –"

"In case you hadn't noticed, mate," Ron retorted impatiently, "calling You-Know-Who by his name didn't do Dumbledore much good in the end. Just – just show You-Know-Who some respect, will you?"

"Respect?" Harry sputtered, "What the –"

But then he decided to heed the cautionary look Hermione aimed at him.

She blessed him a hundred times as they lugged Ron into the musty tent; she absolutely could not endure any more days of bitter brooding. They gently helped Ron down onto the lower berth of a bunk bed, where he immediately fell against the pillows with a groan of pain. Desperately wanting to make things better, and adhering to the tactic her Grandmother swore by, Hermione muttered, "I'll make some tea," and rushed into the tiny attached kitchen. From there, she could hear Harry and Ron fretting over the possible fate of the Cattermoles, and she let herself hope that henceforth, the tears in their rapport would begin to mend.

Why had she forgotten what the omniscient 'they' said about speaking too soon?

It was among her most favourite places: Hareshaw Linn. When she was eight, her parents and she had trekked over to see the gorgeous waterfalls, awed by the gushing, frothy cascades... by the fern green, and the jade green, and the flickers of deep olive green and emerald green...

It was where she was now, sat on a rock, marvelling at the contrast between the streams of silvery water and the raw-umber rocks they rushed down.

"Oh!" Luna cried standing by the edge of a brook, "It's an Augurey!" She pointed to a distant tree, "If it sings, one of us is doomed to die."

"That's an old myth, Luna," Hermione said patiently, but Luna just gave her an 'oh-you-naive-child' look.

"I think I could stay here forever," Theo sighed, suddenly draped across a carpet of moss near Hermione's rock.

"Why don't we?" Luna smiled, walking over to curl into Theo's side.

"Indeed, why don't we?" Theo said, throwing an arm around her.
Hermione blinked at them, a bit disorientated. "But..." she mumbled, "The war..."
"If you're talking about your unrelenting war against your hair, Herms, that will never end," Ginny said with a mischievous grin, walking out from behind a tree.
"No... Um. No... I mean... the war... Voldemort..."
"Stuttering again, Granger? Shit, you're a dreadful conversationalist."
She jumped, and whipped her head to the other side. Malfoy, it appeared, was sharing her rock-seat. He smirked at her burgeoning confusion; his pale gold hair was being scattered this way and that by the wind.
"What?" she shook her head to settle her thoughts, "No... this isn't... Harry and Ron... the tent..."
"Do shut up," Malfoy suggested, "Don't try talking – it's clearly beyond your capabilities. Here, have an apple. Go on."
He held a bright, blood-red one out to her, a single eyebrow arched in challenge, and she looked from his face to the apple... and back to his face...

"AHHHHH!"
Hermione's eyes flew open in alarm, and the book on her lap fell to the floor with a thud. She glanced, wide-eyed, at Ron who was attempting to sit up in his bed.
"Harry...!" he exclaimed, "Outside!"
She charged out, nearly tripping on the way, and found her tormented friend slumped on the forest floor, alternatively twitching, muttering, and crying out.
"Harry!" She knelt by his side, shaking him desperately. He clearly was back in Voldemort's head, and she needed to bring him back. Shit, she –
"Harry!" she yelled.

He woke up with a gasp. At first, he stared up at her with fright and mystification on his face, but little by little recognition dawned, and he sat up in a hurry.
"Dream," he stuttered promptly, "Must've dozed off, sorry."
Hermione's worry turned into anger at the barefaced lie. "I know it was your scar! I can tell by the look on your face! You were looking into Vol–"
From within the tent came an infuriated shout: "Don't say his name!"
"Fuck – Fine," Hermione growled, "You-Know-Who's mind, then!"
Harry's own eyes flashed with irritation. "I didn't mean for it to happen!" he protested vehemently, "It was a bloody dream! Can you control what you dream about, Hermione?"
Hermione's felt herself flush deeply, but she persisted, "If you just learned to apply Occlumency –"
"He's found Gregorovitch, Hermione," Harry rushed out, cutting her short, "and I think he's killed him... but before he killed him he read Gregorovitch's mind and I saw—"
Since one good turn deserved another, she cut him short too. "I think I’d better take over the watch if you're so tired you're falling asleep."
"I can finish the watch!" he objected indignantly.
"No," Hermione snapped dismissively, "You're obviously exhausted. Go and lie down."

So he went, with a parting vituperative glare. Hermione was sure that he and Ron would have a ball dissecting his "dream," (a "dream" she was nearly sure was another of Voldemort's - successful - attempts to derail and distract Harry).
And she – alone in the dark with nothing but shadowy trees before her – felt herself sink into a deep hole of isolation, where all there was to do was gaze dully at the blue-black, and the grey-black, and the flickers of deep charry black and sooty black...
The very next morning, they packed up and apparated to the outskirts of the town of Nantwich. Ron claimed he didn't particularly care where they camped, as long as it was near enough to civilisation, so that they might get something to eat.

Hermione repeated the same cycle of protective enchantments, their tent was set up once more, and then Harry wrapped himself up in his Invisibility Cloak and went off in search for provisions.

To bide the time till he returned, Hermione plunged back into *The Wizard and The Hopping Pot*. She was getting better at deciphering the runes, and it wasn't long before she reached the end:

*But from that day forward, the wizard helped the villagers like his father before him, lest the pot cast off its slipper, and begin to hop once more.*

Well, wasn't that precious. Was Dumbledore trying to teach her tolerance towards Muggles? If she had but one failing, it was certainly her prejudice, right? With a soft scoff, Hermione turned the page... and was confronted by an interleaf that was crammed with writing. The words were – thankfully – in English, and written in brilliant purple ink. *...Notes! Dumbledore's notes!* Brimming with excitement, Hermione read; it was a fascinating history of the tale, and how it altered as Wizardkind's opinions of Muggles changed.

She was just about to get started on *The Fountain of Fair Fortune*, when Harry stumbled, panting and wheezing, into the tent. "Dementors," he breathed, and collapsed into the nearest armchair. Ron looked profoundly aggrieved, and whined pitifully, "But you can make a brilliant Patronus!"

"I couldn't...make one," Harry gasped, "Wouldn't...come..."

"So we still haven't got any food," Ron grumbled.

"Shut up," Hermione told him, "Harry, what happened? Why do you think you couldn't make your Patronus? You managed perfectly yesterday..."

"I don't know," he replied, looking chagrined.

Then there was an almighty clatter of wood on floor as Ron kicked a small side table. She gaped at him in absolute disbelief – what sort of imbecilic child had he turned into?

"What?" he roared, "I'm starving! All I've had since I bled half to death is a couple of toadstools!"

"I would, but my arm's in a bloody sling, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"That's convenient."

(Oh god, Hermione groaned. A testosterone-fuelled showdown. Harry hadn't been this touchy since fifth-year when...)

"And what the fuck is that supposed to –?"

"Of course!" she exclaimed, jumping onto her feet. "Harry," she said, rushing over to his side, "give me the locket! Come on!" Harry stared at her blankly, and she snapped her fingers in front of his face. "The Horcrux, Harry, you're still wearing it!" And when he finally relinquished the locket she asked, "Better?"

"Yeah, loads better!" Harry said in wonder. Cautiously, she put forth her next question – "You don't think you've been possessed, do you?"

"What? No!" he averred immediately, "I remember everything we've done while I've been wearing it. I wouldn't know what I'd done if I'd been possessed, yeah? Ginny told me there were times when she couldn't remember anything."

Hermione looked closely at the chunky adornment, and just the notion of what it was... and that it was in her hand... made her shiver. "Well," she mulled, "maybe we ought not to wear it. We can
just keep it in the tent."
"We are not leaving that Horcrux lying around," Harry said decisively, "If we lose it, if it gets
stolen--"
"Oh, all right, all right."
Without giving too much thought to what she was doing, Hermione set the locked around her neck
and tucked in under her shirt. "We'll take turns wearing it, okay? So nobody keeps it on for too
long."
"Great," Ron resurfaced, just as prickly as before. "And now we've sorted that out, can we please
get some sodding food?"
"Fine," Hermione relented, "but we'll go somewhere else to find it. There's no point staying where
we know dementors are swooping around."

They were camped in the Hexamshire moors, and it was Hermione's turn to keep guard outside the
tent. She looked at her watch – eleven fifty-eight PM.
The flatlands seemed to stretch for billions of miles, and the moon was full. It was the sort of place
where Macbeth's witches may congregate when storm clouds gathered, or where a Highwayman
may come riding... riding, riding...
There was a rustling sound from within a nearby shrub, and a snake darted out. It slithered across
the plains without looking her way. A gust of cool wind swept by, gently caressing her face. She
looked at her watch – midnight.
She was officially an adult in both the worlds she inhabited.

She wondered what this day might have been like had the war not befallen them. She'd be at
Hogwarts... in the Gryffindor common room with Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, Dean, and Seamus.
Maybe she'd have mended fences with Parvati and Lavender too. They've have all gotten her food
from Hogsmeade, and they'd have had a small party.
The next morning, the parcel from home would've arrived, along with a long letter, ("...would you
please STOP growing up, my darling? ...don't listen to your father, Hermione; have a wonderful
day...").
Theo had promised her a unicorn, hadn't he?
Fred and George would've sent her something mad and (as much as it would pain her to admit,)ingenious.
Mrs. Weasley would've knitted her something.
Professor McGonagall would've stealthily handed her a parcel, (without a doubt some interesting
book on her subject,) after class...

Another nippy breeze wafted across the empty moorland. Hermione jerked oddly when she felt
something burn against her thigh. She stuck her hand into her pocket and pulled out the old DA
Galleon, and printed on its facade was: 'Happy birthday buddy.'
She was crying before she'd even fully understood what she'd read. Clutching the coin to her heart,
she took in a dozen shuddering breaths, overwhelmed by that strange feeling of happy sadness that
had all the potency of a heart attack.

She replied: 'U O me a unicorn.'

A minute later: 'How bout a Wrackspurt?'

'Nothing Invisible, prat.'
In the morning, Harry asked her if Vol – ("DIDN'T I ASK YOU TO STOP SAYING THAT?" "FINE, YOU-KNOW-WHO THEN!") could have hidden a Horcrux in Albania, where he'd spent his years of exile.

"Yeah, let's go to Albania," Ron snarked, "Shouldn't take more than an afternoon to search an entire country."

Hermione ignored him. "There can't be anything there," she said to Harry, "He'd already made five of his Horcruxes before he went into exile, and Dumbledore was certain the snake is the sixth. We know the snake's not in Albania, it's usually with Vol—"

"Oi!"

"For god's sake! The snake is usually with You-Know-Who – happy?"

"Not particularly." Ron scowled into the distance. "So where next?"

They were camped in Epping Forest, under a large oak tree. It was early in the evening, Harry was keeping watch, and Hermione once again curled up with The Tales of Beedle the Bard. She couldn't focus. Ron was sitting across from her bunk, silently glowering at her.

"What is it, Ron?" she asked tersely.

"Do you reckon Harry has any idea what he's doing?"

Hermione put away the book with a sigh. "Look," she whispered, glancing nervously at the entrance of the tent, "None of us have any—"

"Oh, stop that!" Ron snapped loudly, and she quickly cast a wandless muffliato around them, "Stop fucking coddling him. He's completely clueless, and he's dragging us around on leashes like we're pathetic little puppies."

"He's... he's doing his best, Ron..."

"WELL THAT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH."

Hermione clenched her fists. She wanted to punch him. She wanted to douse him in cold – freezing cold – water. "What do you want me to say?"

Ron sneered, "For starters, maybe you could bloody well admit that you thought he knew what he was doing! That Dumbledore had actually told him... something... that would justify dragging us –"

"He isn't dragging us anywhere! We volunteered! We –"

"YES, because we thought he had a plan. How long are we supposed to bugger around like this?"

Hermione stood up and walked away.

"HEY? WHERE ARE YOU GOING?"

"To get food," she replied coldly.

Under the invisibility cloak, Hermione apparated to a small alley in Essex. She crept down a sparsely populated street till she found a convenience store, which she entered smoothly alongside
an elderly couple.

Once inside, she went straight to the loo so that she could remove the cloak without scaring the life out of unsuspecting bystanders. Yes, she was well aware that it wasn't quite prudent to walk around so freely, even within some random muggle shop... but just the illusion of temporary freedom was something worth cherishing.

She drifted down the aisles, looking dispassionately at all the goods for the sale. The neat and clean shelves, the bright fluorescent lights, and the perfect, controlled temperature all seemed so alien to her. She filled her basket with things that she thought the boys would like, which resulted in her spending the longest time in front of the shelf stocked with sweets. She picked up some instant noodle soup, a small loaf of bread... She had to remember that her funds were very limited and that their quest was nowhere close to being over.

Eventually, she went and stood in the line leading up to the cashier. The sky was just beginning to darken, and she knew she had to get back. Idly, she glanced to her left... and froze. She was confronted with, in the glass door of a refrigerator full of beverages, her reflection. Her hair looked awful, even though she'd tried so hard to braid it neatly. Her frayed and faded jumper hung off her shoulders, and her jeans were stained with dirt. Hermione Granger in the prime of her youth, ladies and gentlemen! Pointedly, she looked away. There was girl before her in the line, who looked about the same age as Hermione. Her hair was bleached blond and tied up in a high ponytail. She wore a tight denim dress and platform heels, and her toes were painted electric blue, and she pulled out a shiny pink snakeskin wallet to pay for her... her bottle of vodka and cigarettes.

The cashier was a man of about forty, with soft, hazel eyes. "Alright lass?" he asked kindly, and Hermione nodded with a wan smile.

_I mind me of my youth and sigh,_
_Alas for youth, for youth gone by!_
and learn about the warlocks of the Xia dynasty. In Varanasi, she could live with Yogis and discover the secrets of Vedic magic. She was mired in mediocrity here, because of some vagrant boy who wanted to play hero, and –

WHAT WAS SHE THINKING?
She exhaled hard, horrified at her herself. With a snuffle, she pulled the Horcrux-locket away from her skin, in the vain hope that that would stem its evil influence.

'I hate Ron.'
'Finally! Thank Theo!'
'CANNOT BECOME A THING.'
'Too late. May Theo bless u.'

They were camped on the bank of River Clwyd, and they were out of food again. The cicadas were chirruping, the river was quietly bubbling... inside the tent, the air was thick with animosity.

Ron was picking dourly at the food on his plate as he said, "My mother can make good fear appear out of thin air."
From the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Harry aim a ferocious frown at him, but somehow, he summoned the forbearance to stay quiet. She, however, had no patience left for him. "Your mother can't produce food out of thin air," she snapped, "No one can. Food is one of the first of five Principal Exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfigur—"
"Oh, speak English, can't you?" Ron erupted with a full mouth.
Hermione grit her teeth. "It's impossible to make good food out of nothing! You can summon it if you know where it is, you can transform it, you can increase the quantity if you've already got some —"
"Well, don't bother increasing this shite. It's disgusting."
And that was it. She set her fork down and glared daggers at the perpetually malcontent pain in her arse. "Harry caught the fish and I did my best with it! I notice I'm always the one who ends up sorting out the food, because I'm a girl, I suppose!"
"No, it's because you're supposed to be the best at magic!" Ron retorted baldly.
She leapt to her feet, uncaring as some of her fish landed on the floor. "You can do the cooking tomorrow, Ron! You can forage around for ingredients and try and charm them into something worth eating, and I'll sit here and pull faces and moan and you can see how you —"
"Shut up! Shut up now!" It was Harry who had expostulated roughly, and she felt a sharp sting of betrayal. She turned to him in indignation. "How can you side with him, he hardly ever does the cook—"
"Hermione, be quiet! I can hear someone!"

She ran to her bag and took out three extendable ears, and tossed the boys one each. Then, with her knuckles pressed against her lips and her eyes fixed on Harry, she listened.
Her terror ebbed when she found out that their 'visitors' were goblins; it turned into intrigue when she realised that Ted Tonks was with them, and then, when she heard Dean's voice, it took all the
self-control she had not to run out and meet him. Then it got thrilling – there was a bit about Neville, Ginny, and Seamus trying to steal Gryffindor's sword from Snape's office... the fact that The Quibbler had become a mouthpiece for rebellion...

When they drifted away, Harry gaped at her. "Ginny – the sword –" he stammered. "I know!" she squealed.

She ran, once again, to her bag; there was a portrait of a former headmaster of Hogwarts within, with whom they might possibly have an illuminating chat.

Jubilant over the discovery that the sword of Gryffindor could destroy Horcruxes, Hermione and Harry were pitching ideas about its probable location.

"Think!" she rasped excitedly, "Think! Where would Dumbledore have left it?"
"Not at Hogwarts," Harry said, pacing in his exhilaration.
"Somewhere in Hogsmeade?"
"The Shrieking Shack? Nobody ever goes in there."
"But Snape knows how to get in... wouldn't that be a bit risky?"
"Dumbledore trusted Snape."
"Not enough to tell him that he had swapped the swords."
"Yeah, you're right!" Harry grinned brightly, "So, would he have hidden the sword well away from Hogsmeade then? What d'you reckon, Ron? ...Ron?"

Ron? Where was he? Hermione spun in a circle, scanning the tent, and came to an abrupt stop when Ron's low voice emitted from his shadowy bunk. "Oh, remembered me, have you?"
"What?" Harry asked, moving closer to him.
Ron waved him away, "You two carry on. Don't let me spoil your fun."

Harry looked at Hermione pleadingly, but she was just as much at a loss as he was. It had begun to drizzle outside, and the drops falling on the roof of the tent marked the 7... 8... 9 seconds they stewed in confusion. Hermione was sure that Ron would be pleased that they finally had something to go on.
"What's the problem?" asked Harry, by and by.
"Problem?" Ron spat, "There's no problem. Not according to you, anyway."
"Well, you've obviously got a problem. Spit it out, will you?"
Slowly, Ron sat up. His face – half in shadow, half doused in candlelight – looked more sinister than she had ever seen it. And by god, he did spit. He spewed venom like she'd never imagined him capable of... and there she'd thought she'd seen the worst of his nastiness.

* 

A forceful shield charm stretched between: her and Harry on one side and Ron on the other. For 12... 13... 14 raindrops, Harry and Ron looked at each other, their expressions full of intense loathing.
"Leave the Horcrux," Harry commanded sharply.
Ron yanked the chain off his neck, and threw it onto a chair. Then he turned to Hermione, raising
his eyebrows. "What are you doing?"
"What – what do you mean?" she whispered.
"Are you staying or what?" he barked.
"I'm staying, Ron. WE said we'd go with Harry, remember. WE said we'd help–"
"Shut the fuck up. I'm so sick of your righteous bullshit. You choose him. Fine."
"No – please – just listen –"
"I get it, alright?!" he yelled, "If you could choose Malf_oy over me... of course this is a no brainer."
With that, Ron burst out of the tent. Unable to help herself, Hermione ran after him. She saw him charging to the edge of their protective barrier, and she gave chase, blinking as raindrops fell onto her eyelashes. "RON!" she called... but he disapparated. Her voice travelled over empty cold night air, down the churning black river, into ether...

She walked back inside with heavy, sodden steps, her muddy shoes squelching sickeningly. She kicked them off and lowered herself into an armchair, and pulled her knees up to hug them to her chest.
"He's gone," she told Harry quiveringly.
Harry looked too stunned to speak. With jerky motions, he draped a blanket over her hunched form, and then slipped into his bed on the other side of the tent.
Thanks to you, I've somehow made it to the finals of the 2018 Enchanted Awards! I still don't believe it. There are still a couple more days left to vote, if you'd like to do so... there are some truly wonderful stories to choose from.

Link to vote: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1dmntWZsZIADBkHcQqaBs1ocDVpIJZ2pee?usp=sharing

She used her last two teabags the next morning.

Hermione and Harry didn't say a word as they sat across from each other, delicately sipping from their cups. He still had some of that gobsmacked air about him, and his eyes, from time to time, would glance at Ron's empty bunk, before quickly looking away.

She took the Horcrux from him, and put it around her own neck; his demons needed no more feeding.

They didn't speak as they packed their bags, nor as they dismantled the tent, nor as they erased all their footprints from the ground. They both dawdled deliberately, and they both kept eyeing the small copse across the river – foolishly thinking that a gangly, red-haired figure might emerge from within its depths – again and again, until finally, they simply stood side by side on the cleared riverbank, staring at the trees.

They both sighed, and they both reached out to grasp hands simultaneously. Hermione apparated them to a hillside in Surrey, whereupon they immediately began setting up their camp and putting up their enchantments. Not a word was spoken.

Had you asked her the day before, "When, Hermione, did you fall out of love?" she'd have hemmed and hawed and fed you some rambling, cryptic bullshit about feelings not being absolute, and how you can never really pinpoint an exact moment, and 'it's all a process, really, you know...?' But, as she stared out at the carpet of heather that rolled up and down hills, Hermione could most decisively state – "I do not love Ron Weasley."

All her misgivings had been cemented, her doubts turned to certainties, and that twinge of longing – the one that told her that being with one of her oldest friends might just be the best happiest ever after she could hope for – died.

He'd left. He'd actually gone. He'd abandoned her. He'd... chucked up everything and just cleared off.

Surely a person's true character was revealed when things got difficult? It was in the way a strident underachiever like Harry would always rise to the challenge when faced with danger... the way meek old Neville and frivolous old Seamus were leading the rebellion in Hogwarts... the way
Theo, without demur, had stuck with them to defend the school against Death Eaters... the way Malfoy was risking his life to pass information to the Order...
...The way Lupin tried to run away when Tonks got pregnant; the way Fleur stood by Bill after his run-in with Greyback...
...The way Regulus Black decided to destroy Voldemort's Horcrux...
And Ron had left Harry and Hermione to their fate.

Yes, she knew the Horcrux had played a part in this. But come on, Ron... is thy honourable mettle so easily wrought from that it is disposed? She had the locket around her neck right at that moment, and she could feel it's insidious coils of influence in the back of her mind... yet, her loyalty to Harry, and to the cause for which they were fighting would always, always triumph over them.

"I don't love you," she whispered, so soft that it became one with the wind. For the first time since that whole horrible ordeal, a tear rolled down her cheek.

Hermione and Harry still weren't speaking very much. Over the next week, they moved from one hill to the other in the same locality, dithering really, wondering what to do next.

One evening, as they ate eggs that Harry had filched from a nearby farmhouse, ("Don't worry, I left some money by the coop.") they wondered, once more, where Dumbledore could've left the sword:
"...with Professor McGonagall?"
"...a vault in Gringotts?"
"...maybe gave it to Moody?"
"...could it be with batty old Mrs. Figg?"
Needless to say, they weren't getting anywhere.

The evenings were doused entirely in silence. She felt that Harry was afraid that if they spoke too much, she'd bring up Ron, or tell him that she'd had enough and was leaving too. There was no way to tell him how silly he was being without, well, bringing up Ron.

By the end of the week, she was so desperate that she brought out Phineas Nigellus' portrait to join them from dinner.
"Your insolence is simply staggering," he drawled disdainfully, batting uselessly at the blindfold she'd conjured over his eyes.
"What you call insolence, Professor, I call discretion," Hermione replied, matching his tone.
"It's that muggleborn upbringing, I'm afraid," he sniffed, "Beastly."
"Stop that. How're things at Hogwarts?" Harry demanded angrily.
"I refuse to say a word until I am treated with more respect!"

Hermione added that experiment to her long list of failed endeavours.

Their reticence bled into weeks, and Hermione felt cold and debilitating loneliness wrap around her like a vice. Sitting vigilant outside the tent in the damp Lincolnshire Marsh, she wrote an
imaginary letter to her parents. It was eleven pages long.

When Harry came out to take over from her, he gave her a curious look. "Do you think it's possible that Dumbledore gave the sword to Fawks?"
"The... his phoenix?" Hermione asked wonderingly. "Yeah," said Harry, "Like in second year. Fawks delivered the sword to me in the Chamber of Secrets."
"Er, that seems highly improbable, Harry. Where would a phoenix store a sword for so long?"

Still, from that day on, Harry spent long portions of the day staring upwards. Hermione would sit by quietly, peering down at *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. There was such a vast lot of distance between the earth and the sky.

High up in the Yorkshire Dales, she lay on the dwindling grass and held a strand of her hair against the setting sun. The weather was getting colder and colder; she wouldn't be surprised if it began snowing in a week or so. She let her hair drop and took out her current most prized procession: her DA Galleon.

'Babbitty Rabbitty & her Cacking STUMP?!
'Aha! I of my favourites!'
'Magicfolk are mad.'
'Shut up. Delightful story.'
'She was an animagus?'
'Yes.'
'What animal would u be?'
'Puma.' — 'No. Husky.' — 'No. Fox.' — 'Falcon.' — 'THEO!'
— 'Jaguar.' — 'Gazelle.' — 'Giant English Mastiff.' —

On Great Gable, sleet and rain tumbled down upon them seemingly out of nowhere. Hermione rushed into the tent as fast as her legs could go. She entered, and the warmth within was the greatest relief she had ever known. Shaking chunks of ice out of her hair, she walked over to her bunk and lay down on her stomach, burying her frozen nose in her pillow. Once she'd thawed, she peeked at Harry, who was sprawled in his own bunk, immersed in the Marauder's map.

"What's happening at Hogwarts today?" she asked.
With a slight frown, he replied, "The lot of them – Ginny, Neville, Seamus... The Patils, Lavender... Boot, Corner, Ernie – went one by one to the seventh floor... and then disappeared."
"Into the Room of Requirement? I mean, of course! So Dumbledore's Army is still going strong!" Hermione bit her lip, scared for her friends, but so, so proud...
"And I think Peeves is helping by keeping the Carrows busy."
"...Wow."
"That's not the strange part. Malfoy and Tracey Davis went in too."
"Well, that's... not all that strange, Harry."
"Yeah," Harry grunted, "I suppose not. Nothing seems all that strange now anyway."
He went on to mumble something about Dumbledore under his breath, which Hermione didn't quite catch, and then they lapsed into their usual silence.

Tired of the harsh mountainous terrain and climate, Harry and Hermione set up camp in Rossendale Valley. But while the conditions were marginally better, the strain between them was at its worst. Hermione suffered for a day and a half, but then something in her snapped.

Enough.
Ron didn't deserve to have so much power over them.
"Harry," she said, sometime around five in the evening, "I'm going to pop over to the nearest town... pick up something to eat."
"Alright," he said dully.

She didn't let herself get distracted while shopping this time. The place she was in was smaller and more homely than the last one, and she quickly picked up some teabags, sugar, milk powder, spaghetti, a jar of Bolognese sauce, and tinned fruit.
Her final purchase was the main reason she'd bothered to make that excursion. She held the bottle close to her chest as she hurried out of the shop and into a corner alley, from where she apparated back to their campsite.

Long after darkness had fallen and a steady hailstorm had commenced outside, Hermione set her purchase down on the coffee table in front of Harry. He looked up from the Marauder's map, and eyed the bottle distrustfully.
"What's that?"
"Egregiously cheap whiskey," Hermione replied, placing two glasses on the table as well.
"Er... Are we going to drink it?"
"Yes."
"Is that wise?" Harry asked in that tired, sanity-questioning tone of his.
Hermione sighed in defeat. "Probably not," she whispered, staring down at her hands. Well, that was that. She was done trying; tired of failing. They'd just spend the rest of forever stewing in silence and discomfort, and --
"Pour us a glass then."

Her head snapped up in shock. Harry shot a small smile at her, baffled and amused, looking like he still wasn't convinced she was sane. But nonetheless, he held out a hand expectantly, "And don't be stingy, yeah?"

"Isn't it a terrible, terrible pity," Hermione lamented dramatically, "That you can never tell your
story to the muggle world?"
She was sitting across an armchair, with her legs hanging off one arm and her head tipped over the other. She looked at upside-down Harry with large, earnest eyes. He was slumped so low in his chair that his chin was resting on his chest.
"It'd be a pity to get arrested," he mumbled, "Stat – Stat – Sta-choot of secrecy and all that..."
"No, but just think! They'd go wild! Blooming Hollywood would lap you up! Harry! You'd become a cultural icon... a... a... fucking billion dollar franchise! You'd be bigger than – OH!" In her excitement, Hermione had sat up; the sudden rush of blood made her wonderfully giddy, "...was I saying?"
"Bigger," Harry supplied obligingly, spreading his arms wide.
"Right. You'd be bigger than James Bond!"
He snorted, "I'm not the Hollywood type, 'ermione."
Hermione didn't think that was a cause for concern. "Oh they'll find some dashing young lad to play you. No problem."
"And what about you?" Harry grinned, "There'll have to be a pretty girl sidekick sort who –"
"Bite your tongue, Harry Potter. I would never let my character be reduced to mere eye-candy!"
His grin was the closest thing she'd seen to a Glasgow smile. "Fuck, you'd make the director's life hell. You'd never leave, boss everyone around, and... and take over everything, and –"
"AND I," Hermione declared, pointing a finger at him, "Would be the reason the film'll be a roaring success –"
"Oh, sure, sure –"
"Harry, you'll be famous."
"Yeah. Famous. I wonder what that's like," he said dryly. Hermione broke into a fit of giggles.

He slid of his chair like he hadn't a single bone in his body, landing on the carpet with a grunt of surprise. Hermione's giggles intensified.

Who – seriously who – said that alcohol doesn't solve any problems?

"Last call," Harry announced, shaking the bottle. The golden liquid sloshed about hypnotically.
Hermione gave Harry her empty glass and got shakily onto her feet. "Where're you going?" he asked.
"Loo."
She staggered across the tent, grabbing whatever was in her way for support. There was a scratched up and foggy mirror in the tiny, under-lit bathroom, and after she'd finished her business, she stared into it. Her face was extremely flushed, her eyelids were heavy, but the corners of her mouth were turned up.

When she returned to the main room, Harry was comfortably stretched out on the carpet, leaning against the chair he had previously occupied. Hermione fell back into her own, and picked up her freshly refilled glass gratefully, robbing it of a generous sip.

"I miss Ginny," Harry said in a low voice.
"I miss her too," Hermione murmured. "I miss Theo."
He peered at her inquisitively through his glasses. "Are you in love with him?"
She laughed softly, "No. But I do love him."
"So weird."
"...'tis. But 'tisn't. He's wonderful, Harry, really. You should..." then she sat up, suddenly energised, "You should be his friend too!"
"Wha–"
"Wait. I'll tell him."
Ignoring Harry's inane questions, Hermione reached into her pock to pull out her wand and DA Galleon.
'Harry wants to be your friend'

"He's got one too?" Harry asked.
"Luna's," Hermione nodded.

'What the fuck?!
Hermione frowned. 'Harry wants to b friends okay'
'Isthisajoke?'
'NO.'
'What.' — 'WHAT.' — 'Seriously?'

"Harry," Hermione cried dsmally, "He doesn't believe me!"
"Gimmi that," Harry demanded. She handed him the Galleon, and he held it in front of his face and blinked, before yelling, "YES SERIOUSLY."
"It doesn't work like that, you idiot!" Hermione stumbled over and dropped onto the floor next to him. "Like this, see..." She tapped it with her wand.
'YES SERIOUSLY. FRIENDS.'
'?— 'Are you drunk?'
"YES," Hermione and Harry both shouted at the coin. Then they looked at each other, before simultaneously tapping it with their wands.
'YES yes'
'Bloody fuck.' — 'Here I am worried sick' — '& U R out there getting pissed' — 'This is bullshit.'
Hermione, distressed, gasped; "Sorry, Theo!"
'Luna = sanest person I know' — 'Going to bed. Goodnight.'

"Oh no," Hermione wailed.
Harry patted her hand consolingly. "He's not being very friendly," he said crossly.
"It's okay," she sniffed, "We're going to have to be persistent. Like he was with me... and look at us now." She sighed and laid her head on Harry's shoulder. He put an arm around her and gently began stroking her hair.

"Harry," she whispered, after... some?... a lot of?... time, "We'll get through this, you know? You'll kill that sadistic bastard, and we'll all be able to live again."
Harry let out a slow breath. "It doesn't fucking feel that way. I mean, we're not even close... And I feel like such a twat... donno what to do..."
"Shhh," she chided. "You'll figure it out. I believe in you. And I'll help... I promise. I won't leave you like... like... I won't leave you."
"I know," Harry sighed.

Her head slid down to his chest, and she could feel his every inhale and exhale; she could hear the muffled beating of his heart. He was so incontestably alive...

She woke up with a parched throat and a throbbing head. Her eyes were in no mood to open. Still,
she sat up and stretched... holy hell, her back hurt. They'd fallen asleep right there on the floor.

Hermione looked at Harry, who was still out cold, and lightly snoring. His neck and arm were bent at distressingly uncomfortable looking angles, so she straightened them out, then summoned his blanket from his bed and spread it over him. All the while, he remained fast asleep. After washing up, she dragged herself into the kitchen and prepared two cups of sweet, strong tea. She left one hovering in front of Harry, fortified with a lasting warming charm; she knew he'd greatly appreciate it when he'd resurface.

Bundled up in her thickest coat, Hermione stepped out of the tent, and took a deep gulp of fresh and cold early morning air. There was a lot of fog about, and the world was divided into multicoloured streaks like a sedimentary rock – deep blue on top... then lighter... purple... mauve... one thin bright stripe of tangerine... a pale line of snow covered hills... the near-black silhouette of the distant town... the dark but gold-lined layer of barren trees... the blue-brown-grey foreground... Clusters of lightly glowing fairies fluttered above the thistle bushes scattered around.

She stood in the midst of that whirlwind of colour and watched the new day blossom.

'Hi.'
'Hi?' — 'You're saying hi?' — 'What the fuck was all that?'
'I'm sorry.' — 'Had a rough couple of days' — 'Needed a break.'
'I see.'

For a full five minutes, she shilly-shallied over what to say next, feeling like a chastised little girl... but then:

'Are you okay, Hermione?'
'Yes. Miss you. But yes.'
'Miss you too. Every day.' — 'Potter REALLY wants to b friends?'
She laughed out loud.
'Of course. Who wouldn't?'
'True. You're right.' — 'Will make him grovel though'
'Wouldn't expect anything less.'

Hermione couldn't stop laughing as Harry tried to almost-swallow his riddle-incrusted snitch for the second time. His bulging eyes and throat gave him the appearance of a much startled frog... "ACK!" He coughed, sputtered, and spat the tiny golden ball into his palm.

Shuddering at the cosmic amount of saliva that coated it, Hermione contained her chuckles and said, "Well, that didn't work."
"Holy cuntling hell," he croaked, "No... didn't work... gah... water!"
Hermione obliged, and he gulped down an entire bottle.
"You really think Dumbledore hid the sword's location in the snitch?" Harry asked once his face was less red, and his breathing was under control.
"I have no idea, Harry."
"Hmph," he scowled, "I can't believe I let you convince me to try swallowing it."
Helpless, Hermione starting laughing again. "I can't believe it either."
"Huh?"
"Harry," she sniggered, "I was joking."
"What? WHAT?" He stood up looking most insulted, "You cow!"
"Oh, oh," she gasped, doubling over.

It was snowing heavily. They were cosseted in the tent that was covered in snow that stretched across the island that sat in the middle of Loch Maree that was situated in the Northwest Scottish Highlands (that lay in the house that Jack built).

With The Tales of Beedle the Bard resting on her knees, Hermione emerged from a period of deep contemplation with a subtle shake of her head.
"Harry," she said, jolting him out of his own ponderings, "could you help me with something?" He nodded and so she held the book out towards him and pointed to the top of the open page. "Look at the symbol."
Harry assessed the strange triangular-looking eye with its vertically bisected pupil. "I never took Ancient Runes, Hermione," he said eventually.
"I know that, but it's not a rune and it's not in the Syllabary, either," she told him in a rush, "At first I thought it was a picture of an eye, but I don't think it is! It's been inked in; Dumbledore – or – somebody's drawn it there... it isn't really part of the book. Think! Have you ever seen it before?"
"No," he stated. But then he leaned a little closer... "No, wait a moment... Isn't it the same symbol Luna's dad was wearing around his neck?"
"That's what I thought too!" she exclaimed eagerly.
"Then it's Grindelwald's mark!"
"...What?"
"Krum told me," Harry replied, "Apparently, Grindelvald had carved it into a wall at Durmstrang when he was a pupil there. It became his... mark."
Hermione stared at the odd symbol in astonishment. "I've never heard that Grindelwald had a mark. There's no mention of it in anything I've read about him. It's all... very odd. And why has it been drawn in a book of children's stories?"
Harry scratched the back of his head. "Yeah," he agreed, "it is weird."

She traced the shapes with her fingernail, thinking furiously. It had to have been Dumbledore who put that symbol there... but why? It had to mean something; why else –
"Hermione?"
"Hmm?"
She looked back up at Harry, and he was nervously tapping his fist against his knee.
"I've been thinking. I – I want to go to Godric's Hollow."
And there they were at last. "Yes," she sighed, "Yes. I really think we'll have to."
"Did you hear me right?" He blinked at her.
"Of course I did," she said, rolling her eyes, "You want to go to Godric's Hollow. I agree; I think we should. I mean, I can't think of anywhere else it could be either. It'll be dangerous, but the more I think about it, the more likely it seems it's there."
"Er – what's there?"
She stared at him. Where was his mind? "The sword, Harry! Dumbledore must have known you'd want to go there... and I mean, Godric's Hollow is Godric Gryffindor's birthplace –"
"Really? Gryffindor came from Godric's Hollow?"
"Harry," she ground out, quickly losing her patience, "Did you ever even open *A History of Magic*?"
He smiled at her very sheepishly. "Erm... I might've opened you know, when I bought it... just the once."
"Well," she said tartly (but also smiling a bit,) "As the village is named after him I'd have thought you might have made the connection. But you see? Godric's Hollow, Godric Gryffindor, Gryffindor's sword; don't you think Dumbledore would have expected –?"
"Sure," Harry shrugged, and a pall fell over his face as it always did when the topic of Dumbledore's possible designs came up. "Remember what Muriel said?"
"Huh?"
"You know... er... Ginny's great-aunt. At the wedding. The one who said you had skinny ankles."
"Oh."
Hermione squirmed, but Harry didn't let the name he didn't say linger: "She said Bathilda Bagshot still lives in Godric's Hollow."
"Hm. Well, I suppose – OH!"
Harry jumped to his feet, wand drawn...

"What did you do that for?" he snapped, after calming down, "I thought you'd seen a bloody Death Eater unzipping the tent, at least –"
"What if Bathilda's got the sword?" she gushed, too excited to be embarrassed, "What if Dumbledore entrusted it to her?"
Harry sat slowly back down and frowned. "Yeah... he might have done. So, are we going to go to Godric's Hollow?"
Now, Hermione stood up. They had a PLAN – how glorious! "We'll have to think it through carefully, Harry. We'll need to practice disapparating together under the Invisibility Cloak for a start..." She began pacing up and down across the tent, aware that Harry was only half listening, but who cares, they had a PLAN! "...and perhaps disillusionment charms would be sensible too, unless you think we should go the whole hog and use Polyjuice Potion? In that case we'll need to collect hair from somebody. I actually think we'd better do that, Harry, the thicker our disguises the better..."

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**DAY 1:**
"Why the hell are we doing this?" Harry raged after their sixth attempt to disapparate together under the cloak had resulted in him falling flat on his face, "Let's just GO."
"I *told you* Harry... You-Know-Who'll expect you to show up there! We need to be fully prepared!"

**DAY 2:**
Harry came back from the nearby village with a small plum cake and two strands of hair.

**DAY 3:**
'Your scarf saved my life today'
'What happened?'
'Xeno tried to test his new shaving charm' — 'On me. Bounced off the scarf' — 'sliced the tassel off his hat' — 'You're the best.'
'Oh my god!'

**DAY 4:**
They managed to successfully apparate under the cloak. Hermione insisted that they do it again fifteen more times.

**DAY 5:**
"Come on, Hermione... we're ready!"
"Yes... yes. I think we've done all we can."
"Brilliant! So we can go?"
"Just let it get dark..."

The graveyard was filled with shadows and eerie serenity. In the distance, tiny houses decked with twinkling lights seemed to belong to a different world.

Hermione, hunched in her guise of an aging, mousy little woman, wondered among the gravestones feeling both scared and solemn. Dumbledore's mother's and sister's graves were the only noteworthy ones she'd found so far. Up ahead, Harry (a broad, balding man) was moving a lot faster, with much more purpose. She could only try to understand what he was feeling...

That is, until another tombstone stopped her in her tracks.

"Harry, come back a moment," she called softly.
"What?" he huffed impatiently, trudging through the snow towards her.
She crouched to look more closely at the weather-beaten grave; "Look at this! It's the mark in the book!"
He squatted beside her, and peered at where she was pointing. "Yeah... it could be..."
"It says I—Ignotus, I think —"
"I'm going to keep looking for my parents, all right?" Old-Man-Harry said with some irritation, and he stood up and rushed away.
She followed, with a sigh.

She'd never spent much time in a graveyard. Her grandparents had died, one by one, when she was very young, and she remembered their funerals only vaguely. In her memories, graveyards were peeked at from behind the pleats of her mother's black dress, or over her father's shoulder as he carried her. And here she was walking over hundreds of skeletons, passing by hundreds of tiny memorials... a bit of stone to commemorate a entire life, a whole person, a –

"Harry, they're here... right here."
She waited before the modest little tomb of pristine white marble, (JAMES POTTER; LILLY POTTER; The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death,) and when he had joined her, she took his hand in hers.
They stood there for a long, long moment, hand in hand. He was struggling to breathe, she could tell; he squeezed her fingers in distress.
She spun her hand in a circle and conjured a small wreath of Hellebores, which he gently laid on before the headstone.
Then he stepped back, put his arm around her and walked them away from the grave... from all the graves... back out into the village square.
She didn't like this. She didn't like this at all.

If Old-Woman-Hermione was old, then the woman they were following was prehistoric. Old-Man-Harry had a grasp on her elbow, and was ardently dragging her along behind the hobbling relic. He was quite convinced that she was Bathilda Bagshot... and (Not-That-)Old-Woman-Hermione... well, she didn't like it. Not one bit.

They entered her house, and Old-Woman-Hermione's hand flew up to her tiny, beak-like nose. The place smelled terrible; simultaneously like rotting food and open drains.

Bathilda's colour was off. While it was true that people turned grey with age, they certainly didn't obtain that delightful green tinge on their skin unless it was necrotic.

The mottled Bag...shot shambled into an adjoining room, leaving Old-People-Harry-and-Hermione in the hall staring nervously at each other.

"Harry, I'm not sure about this," she whispered.

He shook his head. "Look at the size of her; I think we could overpower her if we had to... Listen, I should have told you, I knew she wasn't all there. Muriel called her 'gaga'—" A sudden loud and creepy hissing sound shot out of the room Bathilda had just entered, "—It's okay," he said calmly, and dragged her into the room.

She didn't like this... At. All.

The room was dark and extremely filthy. The unbearable stench was much worse in there. Bathilda was bent by a dusty fireplace, mishandling a stack of logs. Old-Woman-Hermione precariously approached her and murmured, "Er – shall I...?"

Ghostly, filmy eyes surveyed her impassively; she swallowed. But then Bathilda stepped aside, and let Old-Woman-Hermione light the fire.

Just as she finished, she heard Old-Man-Harry say, "Ms. Bagshot?" and turned to see him shoving a framed photograph in front of the corpse-like woman's face. "Who is this person?" he asked eagerly, "Do you know who this is? This man? Do you know him? What's he called? Who is this man?"

"Harry, what are you doing?" she asked incredulously.

"This picture, Hermione... it's the thief, the thief who stole from Gregorovitch! Please! Bathilda! Who is this?"

Bathilda just gazed at him mutely. She hadn't spoken a single word thus far... Old-Woman-Hermione didn't like that at all.

"Why did you ask us to come with you, Ms. Bagshot? Was there something you wanted to tell us?"

She spoke deliberately loudly... only to be ignored. Bathilda hobbled closer to Old-Man-Harry, and began gesturing inelegantly.

"You want us to leave?" he asked. "Oh, right...Hermione, I think she wants me to go upstairs with her."

Old-Woman-Hermione groaned to herself. "All right," she sighed, "Let's go."

"She wants me to go with her, alone."

"Why?"

"Maybe Dumbledore told her to give the sword to me, and only me?"

She didn't like this. She didn't like this at all. "Do you really think she knows who you are?"

"...Yes... I think she does."

"Well, okay then. But be quick, Harry." Please.
They left her alone in the dim, dirty, smelly little room. She wrapped her arms around herself, shaking and bouncing on the balls of her feet. She really wished they'd be quick about it all... She carefully took a turn about the room, stopping in front of Bathilda's bookshelf. Floor to ceiling, it was filled with tomes from... wow!... from the Ptolemaic Kingdom, the Achaemenid Empire... On the small table by the shelf, was another very intriguing book, *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*. Setting her scruples aside, she shoved it into her bag.

*THUD.*
It was muffled, but there was definitely a *thud*, and it came from upstairs. Her entire frame tingled with apprehension. She walked back into the hall and cautiously began climbing up the stairs. "Harry?" she called. No response.

*CRASH!*
She nearly fell backwards down the stairs. "Fuck!" she breathed and charged ahead... really, this so wasn't the time to be stuck with Old-Woman-Joints...

The scene that greeted her upstairs knocked the wind out of her.
"*STUPEFY!*" she shrieked, aiming straight for the giant snake's head, but it lashed out of the way. Luckily, the motion caused it to forfeit its hold on Old-Man-Harry, and he fell heavily onto the floor. "*Stupefy!*" she tried once again, and the snake darted towards her menacingly. "*Expulso!*" she shouted, but had to dive behind a chest of drawers before she could aim properly... There was the sound of glass shattering...

Cowering behind her hiding place, she let herself inhale once...
"*Everte Statum!*"
The snake flew back, uncoiling, thrashing wildly...
"He's coming! Hermione, he's coming!" Old-Man-Harry's voice carried over the serpents mad hissing... and suddenly he was there, beside her. Scant hair and wrinkled face caked with sweat, he pulled her bodily toward a window...

The snake was still having paroxysms. Its tail was flaying wildly, smashing, crashing... furniture and ornaments were flying all over the place...

With her in his arms, Old-Man-Harry jumped atop a broken dresser. The snake flew at them, spitting venom and – "*Confringo!*" Old-Woman-Hermione screamed.
Bright light exploded out of her wand and scattered all over the room, bouncing off *everything*...

And they leapt out of the window.

He fell the moment they materialised on Hay Bluff, and he took her down with him.

Old-Woman-Hermione lay panting, wheezing, coughing on the snow covered ground, with Old-Man-Harry half on top of her; by the time she emerged out of her state of shock, she was back to being Hermione, the original.
"Harry," she whispered, shaking Harry (the original's) arm, "Come on, Harry, move... we've got to put the protective spells up."
"Almost... Almost..." he hissed, but didn't move.
"What – HARRY?"
With much effort, she rolled him off herself and onto his back... he lay limp and unconscious, quite blue in the face.
"Oh god, Oh no ... Harry! Harry!" She shook him harder and harder, but all he did was moan and twitch. She touched his forehead, and found it to be burning hot. An anguished, panicked "SHIT!" tore out of her throat, and like a tornado she spun around Harry's inert body, casting enchantments, pitching the tent...

"Locomotor!" She levitated him inside the tent, laying him gently on his bunk.
"No no no no no no NO," he chanted, and suddenly his back arched and he roared. His wand – in two pieces – fell with a clatter-clatter onto the floor.
"Oh god oh fuck..."
Hermione's internal organs all clumped together to form a giant orb of terror inside her. Damn it. What was she to do?
"AHHHH, NO STOP!" Harry screamed, writhing like one in need of an exorcism. He clutched his chest, clawing at – Oh – the Horcrux! She wrenched his hands away, difficult as it was, and pulled... pulled... pulled... It seemed to have fused into his skin. Tears flooded her eyes and she whimpered, "diffendo," severing the fucking locket off his chest. He yelled in agony.
"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Harry," she sobbed, pouting dittany on his wound. Then abruptly, he began to laugh. It was a cold, sinister, evil laugh that made her skin prickle. Oh what was she to do? What – What – The power of Christ compels you, the power of Christ compels you, the power of Christ compels you, her tears were falling onto his shirt as, just as abruptly, he began to cry.
"No... please... MUM," he wailed. He curled into a fetal position and trembled, weeping... weeping along with him, Hermione conjured a washcloth and dabbed at his face.
"Please wake up, Harry, please wake up!"
"No," he moaned.
"Harry, Harry – please! You're okay..."
"No..."
"Harry, it's all right; you're all right."
"No... I dropped it... I dropped it..."
"Harry... wake up, wake up!"

He opened his eyes with a gasp, and looked straight into hers. The sight of that bright, wonderful green filled her with so much relief that it hurt. She gasped, too.
"Harry," she murmured tremulously, "Do you feel all –all right?"
"Yes?"
His voice was rough and unsure. Staring up into nothing, he raised a shaky hand to wipe the sweat off his brow.
"We got away," he breathed.
"Yes."
“You’re still really angry at me, aren’t you?” Hermione asked with no little resentment. Harry, who’d been staring stonily at the broken fragments of his wand for hours, said, “No. No, Hermione… I know it was an accident. You were trying to get us out of there, and you were incredible. I’d be dead if you hadn’t been there to help me.”

His words did nothing to ease her mind, for his expression, cold and aloof, belied all that he had said. He was still angry with her. The little joy they had amassed before their excursion to Godric’s Hollow lay in ashes.

Her dreams were haunted by visions of giant darting snakes, and rows of graves bearing the names of all her near and dear ones.

Sheets of snow were falling down from the dreary sky, the air was bitterly cold, the ground was barren... altogether an enchanting little assortment of allegories for misery. While Harry wallowed, Hermione perused *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*. It was prime Skeetershite: Dramatic and deeply in love with its own sensationalism. It certainly painted an awful picture of Dumbledore’s family life. She kept a metaphorical bucket of salt beside her as she read. When she reached a bit about Dumbledore’s friendship with Grindelwald, she rushed to share it with Harry. He was horrified, deeply disturbed, and felt, most prominently, angered and betrayed. It was a fall of the idol, *God is dead* moment for him, and she understood his rage, but... But.

To her, it seemed eminently forgivable; a childish folly, a dangerous but passing dalliance that Dumbledore clearly grew out of. For which hot-blooded youth was immune to the impressionability, the zeal, and the hubris of being young and brilliant? The difficulty of his circumstance must certainly have played a part. As much as Hermione liked to believe that her mind wasn’t all that malleable, it might just have been her pride that had set up that conviction. Who knew how she might change as she got older? Who could say what pieces of her might fall off, what notions she might abandon, what ideals she may stow away? It was her situation – as a muggleborn and hence a target – that had brought her to the right side of the war. Would she have been the same if she had been born to a conservative, pureblood family like... um, certain people she knew? And he... um, those certain people... were now fighting for the light. She hated that division; *light* and *dark*. It was too simplistic... too idealised. If anything, war was one big monochromatic slab of impenetrable black. She didn’t have any righteousness left in her. What a bleak world it would be if people weren’t allowed to change... if they were bound eternally to their fledgling principles... if they were never permitted to break away from their past... It was the ones that didn’t change that deserved censure. Those that stuck staunchly by their regressive or twisted ideals even when they could – and should – have known better.

She didn’t say any of that to Harry. It wasn’t the time for a debate about ethics.

“Harry, I’m sorry, but I think the real reason you’re so angry is that Dumbledore never told you any of this himself.”

He threw his hands over his head and shouted, “Maybe I am! Look what he asked from me, Hermione! Risk your life, Harry! And again! And fucking again! And don’t expect me to explain everything, just trust me blindly, trust that I know what I’m doing, trust me even though I don’t trust you! Never the whole truth! Never!”
The stretch of pristine, virgin snow between them seemed to expand as they stared at each other. Somewhere in the distance, a crow cawed.
“He loved you,” Hermione murmured, “I know he loved you.”
“I don’t know who he loved, Hermione, but it was never me. This isn’t love, the mess he’s left me in.”

He turned away then, and she didn’t follow. For older Dumbledore’s secrecy and shiftiness, she had no justifications.

Hermione’s blood was gushing and her breathing was shallow. She shone the bright like emanating from her wand all across the hillside, as her heart, vibrating with palpitations, climbed up her throat. It appeared that she was alone... but she had thought... she was almost sure she had seen a shadow pass through the thorny bramble...

Harry emerged from the tent after what seemed like a decade had passed, looking like his nap hadn’t done him any good. By then, daylight had seeped into the gloom, lighting up the snow, and proving once and for all that there was, in fact, nobody there.
“How about we pack up early and move on?”
She agreed readily.

Five-year-old Hermione Granger stood between mum and dad as they all stared up at a thick, lush canopy of green leaves.

“Well, there goes our afternoon of cloud-watching,” dad said, sounding sad, “Bollocks!”
“Language, Robert!” mum scolded.
“Ahh, sorry marm. Anyhoo. Lemonade, anyone?”
“Oh, yes, please!” Hermione chimed.

While mum and dad went to rummage around in the cooler by their tent, Hermione glared angrily up at the branches that were blocking the view of the sky. How dare the silly things ruin dad’s plans? She raised her hands and wished that they’d shift around just a little...

And lo and behold they did! They did!
“DAD! MUM! CLOUDS!” Hermione cried with delight.
They came running out, bewildered, as Hermione clapped her hands and laughed.
“Wha – What on earth?” Dad stared up at the branches with big, wide eyes.
“How did that happen? How is that possible?” mum asked, grabbing dad’s arm, “Robert, How –”
“Wind?” suggested dad, weakly.
“Wind?!” mum repeated, “Those boughs are massive! How are they bending like that? It isn’t physica –”

“Look!” Hermione, who had lain down on the forest floor, exclaimed, “That cloud looks just like Grandpa Bruce with his pipe!”
Eighteen-year-old Hermione Granger cast a warming charm on the icy ground of the Forest of Dean and lay down with a sigh. The leafless, naked branches overhead formed a thick mesh through which tiny mosaiced chunks of sky were visible. She raised her wand and pushed them aside, braiding them together intricately so that they formed a circlet, and the firmament was fully revealed. There was not a single cloud to be seen. But then again, she had more than enough of the symbolic sort in her life.

And a new day will dawn for those who stand long,  
And the forests will echo with laughter.

Harry’s sulking was driving her barmy. They’d been sharing her wand for the past three days, and every time he’d ask for hers he’d have this woe-is-me-and-a-plague-upon-thee look on his face that was so bloody irksome that Hermione itched to tell him to shove off.

She tried something a little more productive.

“Summon this,” she ordered, and placed her copy of *The History of Magic* a short distance away from him.  
“Wha – why?” he asked, frowning.  
“Just do it, will you!”

It was obvious that he wanted to say, ‘You’re mental, fuck off,’ but he gathered the fortitude to mutter, “Give me your wand then.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“But – what – how the hell do you expect me to summon that stupid book?”

“It is not a stupid book, Harry. Summon it wandlessly.”

“That’s impossible,” he exclaimed in irritation, “What are you playing at?”

“No impo–”

“Oh fine! Bloody hell. Only really powerful and accomplished wizards and witches can –”

His mouth snapped shut when the book zoomed into Hermione’s open hand. She arched a brow at him.

“When did you learn to do that?!” he spluttered.

“Last year,” she replied.

“How?”

“I don’t know Harry... I practiced.” Feeling quite impatient, Hermione put the book down again, “Now it’s your turn. Go on. Summon the book.”

“I can’t!”

“You haven’t even tried!”

“Damn it, Hermione,” Harry growled, “I’m not as good at magic as you are! I can’t –”

“Oh, shut up!” she cried, rolling her eyes heavily, “Your humility is very endearing, Harry, but honestly... just... shut up. You’re a very capable wizard. Look at what you’ve done! You’ve faced the Darkest wizard alive on so many occasions, and lived to tell the tale.”

“That was BECAUSE of my wand,” Harry spat, “The protection of the twin cores –”

“THE WAND IS ONLY AS GOOD AS THE WIZARD! BUT ANYWAY, YOUR WAND’S GONE
OKAY? IT’S BROKEN. IT’S USELESS. STOP LanguishIng IN SELF-PITY AND SUMMON THE STUPID BOOK!"
She hadn’t realised how loudly she’d been yelling, till she caught the stunned look on Harry’s face.
“Sorry,” she mumbled.
“I thought we weren’t allowed to call the book stupid.”
“Harry!”
“Oh alright,” he grumbled sullenly, “How am I supposed to do this? What do I do with my hands?
Do I point?”
“Whatever feels comfortable,” she said tiredly.
“Er,” he raised his right hand limply and fixed a distrustful eye on the book, “Accio!”
Nothing happened.
“This is stupid.”
“Keep. Trying.”
She didn’t relent for over an hour and a half. Harry’s temper rose with every unsuccessful attempt.
“Sod it,” he raged, “Seriously. Enough. This isn’t going to work.”
“It will!” she insisted fervently, “Harry, it will. It’s like learning to swim. Once you figure out the
trick, you’ll be able to do more than just summon things. Now come... once more...”
“Bloody bullshit,” he muttered, but complied.

Another fruitless hour went by.
“That’s it. I’m done. DONE. Good day to you.”
“Harry,” she snapped, “Get back here! You are not done –”
“Oh yes I am!”
“Listen to me, this isn’t a joke – you need to learn to do this!”
“I CAN’T! OBVIOUSLY, I CAN’T –”
“– JUST TRY –”
“– BEEN AT IT FOR HOURS AND –”
“– SO UNWILLING TO MAKE AN EFFORT –”
“– JUST ISN’T WORKING – WHAT, UNWILLING?! ARE YOU –”
“– IT WILL WORK! YOU CAN DO THIS –”
“– SHIT, YOU’RE SUCH A... FUCKING ACCIO!”
And the History of Magic rose from its place and shot towards Harry, who caught it with a gasp of
ultimate shock. For a long moment, they both stared at it, breathing hard.
Finally, Hermione whispered, “Oh my god. You did it. You did it.”
“I – I did it. I did it,” Harry parroted dumbly, “Er, will I have to be in a strop every time for this to
work?”
“No,” Hermione laughed breathlessly, “You want to try again?”
“Yeah.”

They tried a dozen more times, and Harry suffered failure only thrice. Each time he got it right,
Hermione moved the book a little further, until finally, he was able to tear it away from her while
she hugged it tightly to her chest.
“Brilliant!” she cheered, and he grinned.
“So what next?” he asked.
“Bigger objects, heavier objects, until you’ve got it perfected,” Hermione gushed excitedly, “Thing
is, wandless magic is markedly less potent than that which is channelled through a wand, so I
think, for emergencies, you should practice stunning and disarming. The latter should be easy...
you have a rather strong, um, affinity for expelliarmus...”
... And Death spoke to them. He was angry that he had been cheated out of three new victims, for travellers usually drowned in the river. But Death was cunning. He pretended to congratulate the three brothers upon their...'

Death looked an awful lot like Dumbledore, but with an inky black beard and obsidian eyes. Stern and hooded, he stood like the statue of Giordano Bruno on a bridge over troubled waters. Before him were Harry, Lupin, and Malfoy, all seeped in the hazy glow of twilight.

“I need to defeat Voldemort!” Harry cried, “You promised you’d help! Give me the power to kill Voldemort!”

“He’s dead!” Lupin howled, “You promised he’d be safe! Sirius... Oh, bring him back! Bring him back!”

“I need to get out!” Malfoy roared, “You promised me a way out! Tell me where to hide... Tell me how!”

But Dumbledore simply smiled – his calm, serene smile, which looked nothing less than ominous in his current getup.

From her distant vantage point, (...was she standing on a ledge? A cloud? She didn’t dare look down...) Hermione watched as the three men got more and more agitated.

“Ridiculous, isn’t it?”
She looked over her shoulder at Theo, who gave her a deeply morose half-smile.

“What?” she asked.

“They,” he replied, gesturing with his chin, “Putting their faith in him. Death bestows only one gift, and one gift alone. Isn’t it ridiculous, Hermione?”

Hermione?.?.?
....Hermione?.
...Hermione?.

“Hermione!”

She awoke with a choking gasp; The Tales of Beedle the Bard slipped out of her hands and fell with a thud on the floor.

“Hermione!” Harry’s face came into focus. He was flushed, bright eyed, and his hair was... dripping wet?

“What’s wrong?” she croaked, “Are you alright?”

“It’s okay, everything’s fine. More than fine. I’m great. There’s someone here.”

“What do you mean? Who –?”

And then she saw him, standing hunched and soaked in the middle of the tent, holding Gryffindor’s sword in his hand.

She ought to have asked questions... oh she had at least hundred questions... but she could only stare at the tense looking young man with fiery hair. She walked towards him, staring. gaping, and with each step her wonder ebbed, and cool anger (which was a strangely contrary emotion,) took over. She stopped right in front of him, and he smiled nervously. His hands twitched, as though itching to reach for her.

“You complete arse Ronald Weasley,” she hissed lowly... dangerously.

“Um, hey,” he mumbled stupidly. She sneered.

“Look, Hermione, I’m sorry!” he exclaimed, but Hermione had already walked away.

Without looking back she said, “I’ll keep watch now, Harry,” and went out into the biting cold.
How was it that Harry, who’d been in a huff for days after she’d accidentally broken his wand while saving his life, had welcomed Ron back with such conviviality and enthusiasm?

Because Ron has saved Harry’s life. Right. And he’d even given him a replacement wand.

They were back to being the best of friends, like nothing awry had ever occurred. Like Ron hadn’t said the most horrible things, like he hadn’t abandoned them at all. Hermione watched them wander about, smiling and chatting, foraging for berries like a couple of merry fucking wood dwellers from the small sunlit spot where she sat with an open book which she wasn’t reading. She felt, once again, like an add-on. There were Harry and Ron, reunited… and Hermione too, I suppose. With her nose in a book, of course, ha ha ha.

There was an unforgiving pain in her chest; how she missed her best friend. She missed him. She really, really missed him.

‘Hello,’ she spelled on her Galleon.

For the first time since their unconventional correspondence began, Theo didn’t reply.

“Hermione! Come on. Just listen to me. Please!”
“What do you want, Ron?”
“I’m sorry, okay? I’m so... I’m really, really fucking sorry!”
“Sorry? You crawl back here after weeks and weeks and say sorry? I went running after you! I called you! I begged you to come back!”
“I know! I... Hermione, I’m sorry, I’m really—”
“Stop saying that! You think it’s all going to be all right if you just say sorry?”
“Well, what else do you want me to say? I came back, yeah? I’m here, aren’t I?”
“Yes. You’re here. Fantastic. Harry’s well pleased. Leave me alone.”
“What about – are you... are you, er, pleased?”
“What do you think?”
“What can I do Hermione? What do you want–”
“I want Harry to be happy. You’re here. So be it.”
“Hermio –”
“Fuck off, Ronald.”

‘Hi. Sorry. Something came up.’
‘Theo, please tell me you’re safe?’
‘I am! Perfectly safe.’ — ‘Did I worry you?’
While Harry tried to levitate spoons with his new blackthorn wand, and Ron fiddled with a wireless, Hermione lay in her bunk immersed once more in *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*. On the page she was examining was a photograph of the letter that Dumbledore had written to Grindelwald. Her eyes travelled across the thin, slanting handwriting, (…) *for the greater good…*) and when she got to his signature at the end, she froze. The ‘A’ of Albus had been replaced by that same strange triangular eye-like symbol.

She jumped out of her bunk and rushed to Harry, saying, “We need to talk.” He cast a leery look at the book in her hand. “What?” he asked. “I want to go and see Xenophilius Lovegood.”

He started, “Sorry?” “Xenophilius Lovegood, Luna’s father,” she said calmly, “I want to go and talk to him.” “Er – why?” “It’s that mark, the mark in Beedle the Bard. Look at this!” She held the book before him. “The signature… Look at the signature, Harry.”

It took him a while to compute it all. In the meanwhile, Ron tried to ask, “Er – what are you –?” but she shut him up with a ferocious look. “It keeps cropping up, doesn’t it?” she said to Harry, “And since we can’t talk to Dumbledore or Grindelwald, we can ask Mr. Lovegood what it means. I’m quite sure this is important.”

Harry considered her mutely for a few seconds. Then, looking grave, he muttered, “You just want to go see Nott, don’t you?” “What?” she spluttered, stung, “Do you really think I’d do that? Make up a ridiculous excuse, drag you out of hiding…” “Hermione,” he reasoned, “we don’t need another Godric’s Hollow. We talked ourselves into going there, and –” “But it keeps appearing!” she rushed out edgily, “Dumbledore left me *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, how do you know we’re not supposed to find out about the sign?” “Here we go again!” Harry exclaimed in a long-suffering way, “We keep trying to convince ourselves Dumbledore left us secret signs and clues –” “The Deluminator,” Ron interrupted, “turned out to be pretty useful. I think Hermione’s right, I think we ought to go and see Lovegood. It won’t be like Godric’s Hollow –” (As if he knew anything about that) “– Lovegood’s on your side, Harry. *The Quibbler*’s been for you all along; it keeps telling everyone they’ve got to help you!” “I’m sure this is important!” threw in Hermione, “I’m sure we ought to know about this!”

Ron clapped his hands together and said briskly, “I think we should vote on it. Those in favour of going to see Lovegood –” He raised his hand. In spite of herself, Hermione felt the smallest quiver of amusement… she put up her hand, too. “Outvoted, Harry, sorry.” Ron grinned. “Fine,” Harry grunted, but even he had the ghost of a smile on his face, “Where do the Lovegoods live, anyway?” “Luna told me… she’s the Secret-Keeper,” Hermione said, and took out Mr. Weasley’s map from her bag. “Their house is under the Fidelus charm, but I’m sure there’ll be some Death Eaters skulking around. We should apparate here,” she pointed at a dense looking grove on the map, “Harry, you stay under the cloak. If we do come across any Death Eaters, stun or confound them.
immediately. Okay?"
“Okay,” said Ron bracingly, and Harry unenthusiastically.

‘LISTEN.’
‘Yes?’
‘Tell Potter to end the bloody war already’
‘Getting bored, are you?’
‘Terribly. It’s all so tiring.’
‘I’m sorry u r having such a tough time’
‘Well then do something about it’ — ‘I miss you buddy.’
‘Do you now?’
‘Fucking YES.’

Hermione beamed like an idiot.

“Of course that’s Luna’s house,” Ron chuckled, “Who else would live in a place like that? It’s like a giant rook!”
Hermione puckered her brow as she stared at the black tower-like structure behind which loomed a giant moon at three in the afternoon. “It looks nothing like a bird.”
“I was talking about a chess rook. A castle to you.”

They approached the small mossy gate, upon which were nailed three signs, ‘THE QUIBBLER, EDITOR: X. LOVEGOOD,’ ‘PICK YOUR OWN MISTLETOE,’ and ‘KEEP OFF THE DIRIGIBLE PLUMS.’
The Lovegoods had a charming garden, dusted with snow, poetically overgrown, and full of wild plants that she wished she could spend more time exploring. Neville would’ve loved it here, she thought wistfully. She could imagine what it might look like in spring… a lush, violent explosion of green, with Luna wandering about in floaty linen robes…
Two large crab-apple trees, leafless but laden with bright red fruit arched on either side of the front door. As Hermione knocked, a tight ball of anticipation formed in her stomach. Her reason for visiting was utterly sincere, but god, Theo was here. He was here, just on the other side of the door. She’d be seeing Theo. Oh yes.
They heard footsteps, and slowly the door creaked open.
“Oh!” gasped Luna. And again, “Oh!”
Hermione sprang forward and hugged her. “Hi, Luna,” she whispered.
“Well… hullo,” Luna greeted, sounding like she’d quite recovered from the shock of seeing them, “Harry, Ron. What a lovely surprise. Do come in.”
The room they entered was a semicircular sitting room, with one bright blue sofa covered with a print of tropical birds, and a pair of purple armchairs, and another one in magenta. The coffee table was yellow and dotted with red flowers. The walls depicted a jungle scene, à la Rousseau.
“Nice place,” said Harry with a grin.
“Thank you,” Luna replied happily, “I painted the walls, you know. Please sit. It’s so lovely to see you all again…”
While she was speaking, Hermione nodded vacantly as her eyes scanned the room. Where was he?
There was a moving iron staircase – much like a spiral-shaped escalator – in one side of the room... perhaps he was upstairs?
“...Hermione.” She refocused her attention back on Luna, who was smiling. “He’s over there,” she pointed towards a door that was painted like the walls, and so was almost unnoticeable, “In the kitchen.”

She shuffled towards the door as though in a trance, like she was walking through something much denser than air. Gingerly, she pushed opened the door and stood stock still at the threshold.
He was sitting with his back to her, at a (bright orange) table, working on something she couldn’t see. His hair was longer than she remembered, falling over ‘her’ scarf around his neck and brushing the top of his collar. Stepping into the room and letting the door close silently, she simply watched him for a few seconds. Then she gently cleared her throat.

“Nearly done, Luna-love,” he said, “This batch is impossibly fiddly.”
Hermione’s heart contracted at the sound of his voice. “Not Luna, sorry,” she said softly.

His chair scraped back deafeningly, and he jumped to his feet and spun around. His mouth was hanging open as though he were silently screaming.

“Hi, Theo,” she said with a grin.

“Oh, bugger,” he choked, “What the fuck did Xenophilius put in my tea this time?”

“Excuse me?”

“It was that grassy shite he puts in his pipe, wasn’t it? Fuck’s sake!” The rubbed at his eyes furiously, and then blinked at her.

“What are you raving about?” Hermione demanded.

“You’re a hallucination, yeah? Damn that devious old madman to hell.”

“Heh. Right.”

She rolled her eyes. With deliberate and resolute steps, she walked right up to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. She rested her head on his chest and murmured, “See?”

Slowly, his hands rose and landed on her back. “You’re real,” he breathed, “You’re here.”

Suddenly, he pulled away, and gripped her shoulders. “You’re here!” he shouted, “What – Why – How the hell are you here?!?”

“Um,” she said, but then he hugged her again, much harder and tighter than before.

“Holy Hippogriff dung! I don’t believe it!”

Her giggle was muffled, and eventually she had to say, “Theo... you’re crushing me.”

“Oh sorry.” He let go and they both sat, and Hermione finally saw what he had been bent over on the table.

“Frumpleberries,” said Theo with a grimace.

“They look revolting.”

“They look like they taste. Where’s your baggage?”

“Huh?”

“Potter and Weasley.”

“Oh. Ha ha. They’re in the other room, with Luna.”

“How are you,” they blurted simultaneously, and then laughed.

“You first,” he insisted.

“I’m... oh, do I have to? Fine. It’s been awful, and difficult, but I’m alive. I’m... okay.”

“You look... very skinny,” Theo frowned.

“Look who’s talking.”

“I’ll have you know,” he said with his nose in the air, “I am very muscular and fit. Ask Luna.”

“No thank you.”

“Humph.”
“Your turn now,” she laughed, delighted at the lovely sullen expression he was wearing, “How are you?”
“Great. My girlfriend’s dad wants me dead, but as you can see, it hasn’t worked out for him yet.”
“You’re so dramatic.”
“I am not!” he cried indignantly, “He’s an insufferable... er,” he glanced furtively around the room, and lowered his voice significantly, “He’s an insufferable wanker. And I can’t even say anything, because Luna bloody well adores him. It gets marginally better when Draco visits, because, obviously, he never holds back. Old Xeno hates him more than he does me.”
“Yeah, when he has information for Remus. There’s a passageway between the Room of Requirement and Hog’s Head; Draco sneaks away at night. The choice was between coming here or the Burrow... well, not really much of a choice, if you think about it.”
As hard as she tried, Hermione just couldn’t picture a mondain like Draco Malfoy sat in that eccentric, riotous house at all. And once again, she was stunned by the reality of the world outside their little campsites. So much was happening... so many players... all struggling, striving, rebelling...

Theo’s hand gripped hers and pulled her back to the present.
“You have no idea how good it is to see you,” he said with a soft smile.
“Believe me,” she murmured, “I know exactly how that feels.”

Harry and Ron were getting a highly detailed explanation from Luna about all the elements in her mural when Hermione and Theo walked into the sitting room, and they looked exceedingly grateful to have it interrupted.

“All caught up?” Luna asked, “Good. Daddy is on his way down; he’s just bundling up the final lot of tomorrow’s edition.”
As she went to sit on a purple armchair, Hermione gushed, “We heard what your dad’s doing with The Quibbler... It’s amazing. So brave...”
Luna smiled, “Yes. And it helps that we’re so well hidden, otherwise daddy says we’d have been killed a long time ago.”
“Alright, Weasley... Potter...?” Theo muttered.
“Yeah,” they both grunted.

There was a minute of awkward silence, after which Hermione saw (with a sinking heart) a broad, evil grin break across Theo’s face.
“Potter,” he crooned.
“What?” said Harry suspiciously.
“Potter.”
“What?!”
“So.”
“...So?! Have you lost your mind?”
“So you want to be friends, eh?”
Oh god. Harry’s groan drowned out Hermione’s. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Look, Nott –”
“Call me Theo, Harry.”
“Nott. Can we just pretend all... that... never happened.”
“Oh no! After all, you were so adamant –”
“Theo, please,” Hermione begged.  
“No, no, no. How can I forget all those capitalised ‘yesses’ and ‘seriouslies’? So friends, yeah, Harry?”

Harry buried his face in his hands. 
“What a lovely idea!” Luna chimed, even as Ron burst out with, “What the hell is he talking about, Harry?”
“I’m talking about Harry’s plan to replace you with me, of course!”
“What... What?!”

Oh god.

But somehow, the universe had a rare – such a rare – fit of compassion. Their ‘discussion’ was deterred by a shocked cry of “HARRY? RON? HERMIONE?!” from the foot of the spiral staircase. They all jumped, and gaped in absolute discombobulation at a wide-eyed, and very heavily pregnant Nymphadora Tonks.

“What are you doing here?!” Harry, Hermione, and Tonks shouted all at once.
“Blimey, you’re huge!” said Ron with awe.
“Yeah, Weasley,” Theo sniped, “That tends to happen when a woman is with child.”
“Merlin, do you ever shut u–”
“Typical that you show up,” Tonks ranted as she waddled over, “On the day that Remus is away on a mission. Oh GAH,” she moaned as she eased herself into an armchair, “Anyway... how are you? Where have you been? Why are you here? Is everything okay?”

“We’re fine, Tonks,” Harry said reassuringly, “And we’ve been... pretty much all over England. We’re here to talk to Mr. Lovegood. It’s... well... you’ll see soon enough. But how are you here?”
She mournfully rubbed her belly and sighed. “The Death Eaters came for dad. I wasn’t at home... I think that was deliberate...” She paused to lick her lips, “They tore the house down. Tortured mum and left her in... in... well, a state. Then they took dad away.”
“He’s okay!” Hermione said hurriedly, “He got away. He was hiding out in Wales with Dean Thomas and Dirk Cresswell –”

“What? You saw him?”
Ron shook his head, “Not exactly. We couldn’t reveal ourselves. But we heard them talk. He sounded... alright.”

Tonks let out a sound that was made purely of utter relief. “Thank... thank... fuck... Thank you.”
There were tears in her eyes.

“How’s your mother?” Hermione enquired.

“Not good,” Tonks rasped, sobbing gently, “She doesn’t leave her room, doesn’t eat... I’d tell her about dad, but she’s finally sleeping now after weeks...”
Hermione reached across and squeezed her hand. “You know... Ron’s right. You’re huge. When are you due?”

Tonks huffed a watery laugh and wiped her eyes. “Six weeks. Can’t bloody wait. The little terror’s a kicker. Apparently I was too –”

It was then that the elusive Xenophilius Lovegood finally made his entrance. 
“Mr. Potter,” he proclaimed with a bow (Theo rolled his eyes), “Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger. Good afternoon. Sorry for making you wait.” He strode over to a cabinet by the wall, and began tinkering with bottles. “Infusion of Gurdyroots for everyone?” (~Theo’s fingers clenched tightly around Hermione’s wrist ~) “Ah, except you, of course, Tonks. It’s time for your bat milk brew.”

“Ah! Xenophilius, do I have to?”

“Yes, my dear. You will thank me when your child is born a seer. Now, Mr. Potter... how may I help you?”
Everybody had gathered in the garden to say goodbye.

The sun was a burning ember floating between two distant hills, turning the snow into gold. Outside the boundary of the Lovegood’s property, the Death Eater sentries that they’d stunned three hours ago were still snoozing in a heap on the ground.

Hermione and Theo stood slightly apart from the rest of the group.
“Did you really come here to talk about a children’s story,” Theo mumbled.
Hermione huffed. “Please don’t. I feel stupid enough as it is.”
“If you say this jaunt was a waste, I will shove you into a bush,” he warned.
“Of course not,” she said with mock solemnity, “I finally got a chance to sample some Gurdyroot infusion!”
Theo stuck his tongue out at her. “Awful, innit?”
“Truly,” she agreed, “I feel sincerely sorry for you now.”
“Why, thank you.”
They hugged, and there was nothing sweet about the sorrow of parting. She then hugged Tonks and Luna as well, nodded at Xenophilius, and took her place between Harry and Ron.
“Stay safe you three,” said Tonks.
“And you,” Harry nodded, “All of you.”
“Will do, friend,” Theo quipped with a sarcastic salute.

Laughing, Hermione took hold of Harry and Ron’s hands. The last thing she saw before disapparating were Theo and Luna, arm in arm, smiling at her.
Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue here has been borrowed from DH.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.*

Hermione was sure that all prophecies were, in effect, self-fulfilling. They didn't so much tell the future as much as influence it. They triggered events, planted ideas in people's minds, and hence, inevitably proved themselves to be true.

Take a pinch of arithmancy, a handful of vague symbolism, liberally douse them in concentrated theatrics... and there you have it: A recipe for a simple prophecy. Harry was the Chosen One because Voldemort had decided to believe Trelawney's prediction. And once he'd decided that, everything else fell in accordance.

There was a reason Time-Turners could only take you into the past – there was no possible way of establishing a concrete future. Hermione remembered reading an article in *The Theoretical Review* that had claimed that (with certain modifications,) a device *could* be conceived that constructed a future based on probability and the users own predilections. Yet, it categorically stated that it would be catastrophic to allow the creation of a timeline based on just one person's vision. (*No, really?*)

Now, if this... this practicality... made her *limited, narrow, and close-minded,* then so be it. Xenophilius Lovegood was welcome to go off on a glorious quest, riding on the back of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack, to pull the all-powerful elder wand out of a (resurrection, undoubtedly) stone, and gleefully lord over his court of blibblering whatsit's.

"All right... Say the cloak existed. **But what about the stone, Mr. Lovegood? The thing you call the Resurrection Stone?**"
"What of it?"
"Well, how can that be real?"
"Prove that it is not."
"But that's – I'm sorry, but that's completely ridiculous! How can I possibly prove it doesn't exist? Do you expect me to get hold of – **of all the pebbles in the world and test them? I mean, you could claim that anything's real if the only basis for believing in it is that nobody's proved it doesn't exist!**"
"Yes, you could. I am glad to see that you are opening your mind a little."

A stone that brought back the dead: preposterous! A wand that could vanquish one and all: beyond fanciful. And if surviving was as simple as hiding under a powerful Invisibility Cloak, they already had everything they needed.

Inane, woolly, insufferable man... she completely understood why Theo regarded him with such scorn.
The biggest problem at the moment, however, was that Harry had bought into the legend of the Deathly Hallows completely. In fact, when he spoke of them, his face and tone had an unnervingly greedy quality about them; she knew it to be the inception of a whole new fixation for him. He believed he owned the cloak, was convinced that the stone lay in his snitch, and so he hungered for the wand... the wand he believed You-Know-Who was currently seeking as well. Harry desired to be the master of death. Was there anything more frightening than that? Hadn't Voldemort's devastating pursuit of immortality taught him anything?

Bizarrely enough, it was Ron who brought a bit of equability to the table. With staggeringly uncharacteristic diplomacy, he agreed that Harry's theory sounded very plausible, but insisted that Hermione was right about needing to focus on the Horcruxes. This policy of appeasement did not appease Harry.

"But don't you understand?" he said urgently, passionately, "If we have the Hallows, nothing else will matter! We'll be invincible!"
"We still need to destroy the Horcruxes, Harry!" Hermione seethed, "You can't conveniently ignore them!"
"Um, I think she's right," Ron mumbled.
"God... look at the bigger picture! This obsession with Hor–"
"Obsession?" Hermione spat fiercely, "We're not the ones with an obsession! We're the ones trying to do what Dumbledore wanted us to do!"
"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death," Harry recited superciliously.
"Oh, I thought it was You-Know-Who we were supposed to be fighting?"

He threw his hands up in the air and walked away.

Days bled into days at a furious pace, like time was a feather caught in a gale. But so many things remained constant, that even as weeks went by, it hadn't felt like they'd moved forward by even an hour.

Harry could not – would not – stop thinking about the Hallows. In fact, his preoccupation had taken an even more dangerous turn: He'd begun to deliberately try and infiltrate Voldemort's mind to figure out his whereabouts, and consequently discover the location of the Elder wand. Hermione had fought with him about that on three separate occasions. Not one of those occasions led to anything positive.

As a stark contrast, there was Ron. A new, improved version of Ron made of sunshine and optimism. Fired up by his triumph over Slytherin's locket, he spent most of his time pouring over his father's map, picking out places where he thought the remaining Horcruxes might be. On six separate occasions, the three of them ventured out to explore his supposition... Not one of those occasions led to anything fruitful.

And Hermione? She read. She read words that had meanings, which fell upon each other like dominoes across pages... meanings that she, perhaps, picked up on. A little.

They were, once more, stuck in a state of complete cluelessness. Well, I hope it's nice and toasty in hell, Professor Dumbledore.

"Ron... Ron!" Hermione hissed, "Get... down." She pulled him back into a crouch and glared. "Are
you insane? Do you want them to catch us?"
"Bloody hell, calm down! I was just having a look..."
"And giving them a look in return?"
"They didn't fucking see me!" Ron retorted in a furious whisper, "I just –"
"Both of you shut up!" Harry growled lowly.

They were hunkered down behind an old, dilapidated cabinet inside the Riddle House. After an hour of futile Horcrux-hunting, they were just set to leave when a gang of Snatchers barged in and forced them to duck for cover. There were five of them – grungy droogs in tattered black robes – and they were obviously more than a little intoxicated. Swaying and teetering, they banged about the room talking in loud voices. One of them was singing a song about a man who'd lost his lover to a Kelpie.

"Oh me bonnie floaterway wiff the ol 'orse..."

"Fuckin' runt took a chunk off me leg! Blimey! It 'urts!" said one with a grimy rag tied around his calf.

"...me pretty lamb ter the bottom o the sea..."

"Oh button it. We'll 'ave yer ter a 'ealer tomorrow," replied another tall one with Jim Morrison hair, "Need ter sleep now. There's beds upstairs, yeah then, eh, guv?"

"...He took 'er away, the demon 'orse..."

The largest, leader-type Snatcher slurred, "Aye, there's beds. Let's go. Cop off yer arse, right Sammy. We need ter be back in business early t'morrow! Struth!"

"...'er entrails be flotsam, ridin' em waves fer'all eternityyyy..."

Hermione, Harry, and Ron waited while the Snatchers ascended, (there were many thuds and ooofs involved,) and then shot out of the house the second all was quiet.

She had the History of Magic open on her lap, and she was looking for any and every mention of the Elder wand, the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny, etc. Her own wand was clamped between her teeth as she attempted to gather her hair into a bun. She jumped up in the air – wand, book fell to the ground – when, most unexpectedly and horrifyingly, she felt... something... tickle the back of her neck. She spun around and saw Ron, holding a thin strand of her hair between two of his fingers.
"Er, sorry," he muttered shyly, "You left this out..."
He walked closer, (far too close,) and wound that strand around her bun, while she stared dumbly at the buttons on his shirt.
"There," he whispered thickly, "Perfect."

Hermione backed away rapidly, barely rushing out a "thanks," before jogging out of the tent. She felt irritated and uncomfortable and...

...Outside, Harry was muttering and twitching while sat on a tree stump with his eyes closed...
...and tired. She felt so very tired.
*Tired, tired with nothing, tired with everything, tired with the world's weight she had never chosen to bear.*

In Wimbourne they had another run in with some Snatchers. The only reason they were there was because Ron felt that Voldemort *might've wanted to live there, I mean, you never know!* A foolish proposition, but it was all they had.

Harry, fortunately, was under his invisibility cloak while Hermione and Ron stood back to back with seven wands trained on them. It happened in a flash: One moment the Snatchers were leering down at her, and in the next, they were flat on their backs, unconscious.

Harry gripped her shoulders hard when they'd apparated away to a distant, rainy marsh.

"The blackthorn didn't work Hermione! I tried and... Shit... but I got them all! I stunned them *all* wandlessly! I got them all!"

With a slightly hysterical laugh, Hermione hugged him tightly.

The rain was unrelenting. The sound of water-pellets falling on the roof of their tent was the sound of hundreds of machine guns on a rampage. Said roof kept springing leaks, so the three restless inhabitants kept having to run around casting *reparos*.

Hermione was meticulously polishing Gryffindor's sword until the blade shone like a mirror. Something burned in her pocket, and instantly her fingers sought the DA Galleon within.

'HALLOW, my dear buddy,' it read.
Rolling her eyes, Hermione replied, 'Sod off.'
'Don't be unpleasant.' — 'Why don't you visit again?' — 'Ask Xeno where the legendary Hopping Pot's at'
'SOD. OFF.'
'No. — 'All well?'
Her wand hovered over the coin for a moment... um... 'Well enough?' — 'What's happening at your end?'
'Draco's here.' — 'Tonks is chasing him round the kitchen.'
'Why?'
'Wants him to feel his unborn cousin's kicking prowess'

Of course Hermione pictured it. Harry and Ron stared at her like she was insane when she began giggling to herself.

With nothing better to do, they were moving on a daily basis. Sometimes just a few miles away, and sometimes to the other side of the country. The process of packing up and setting up their
In Chiddingfold Forest, Lee Jordan's voice rolled out of Ron's wireless:
"It is with great regret that we inform our listeners of the murders of Ted Tonks and Dirk Cresswell. A goblin by the name of Gornuk was also killed. It is believed that muggleborn Dean Thomas and a second goblin, both believed to have been travelling with Tonks, Cresswell, and Gornuk, may have escaped. If Dean is listening, or if anyone has any knowledge of his whereabouts, his parents and sisters are desperate for news. Meanwhile, in Gaddley, a muggle family of five has been found dead in their home..."

Why had they told Tonks that her father was well? Why had they made her happy and gotten her hopes up? What business did they have saying it when they'd only briefly heard the man's voice months ago? Hermione felt like she might be sick.

And Dean... oh god. He had to be alive. She couldn't even think of the alternative.

There was Kingsley: "Muggles remain ignorant of the source of their suffering as they continue to sustain heavy casualties..."

A bittersweet stab of relief; mum and dad were far, far away from all this.

Finally, Fred: "...Point is, people, don't get lulled into a false sense of security, thinking he's out of the country. Maybe he is, maybe he isn't, but the fact remains he can move faster than Severus Snape confronted with shampoo when he wants to, so don't count on him being a long way away if you're planning to take any risks. I never thought I'd hear myself say it, but safety first!"

And then they were laughing.
"Good, eh?" Ron chortled.
"Brilliant!" Harry exclaimed.

Hermione sighed, "It's so brave of them... If they were found..."
"Well," said Ron, "they keep on the move, don't they? Like us."

Harry rubbed his hands together eagerly. "But did you hear what Fred said? He's abroad! He's still looking for the Wand, I knew it!"

"Harry –"
"Come on, Hermione, why are you so determined not to admit it? Vol–"
"HARRY, NO!"

"–demort's after the Elder Wand!"

Ron was on his feet, screaming, "THE NAME'S TABOO! I told you, Harry! I told you we can't say it anymore – we've got to put the protection back around us –quickly – it's how they find –"

But before Harry or Hermione could as much as move, there came a thunderous Crack! from outside the tent.
"Come out of there with your hands up! We know you're in there! You've got half a dozen wands pointing at you and we don't care who we curse!"

"Fuck!" Ron growled through gritted teeth.

There was a rustling outside... someone was tearing through the tent flap... Hermione's heart had stopped beating. With barely a thought, she turned her wand onto Harry; "Aculeatum!" He doubled
over, and his face was rapidly swelling up right before her eyes...

They were in the tent now, Snatchers, three in number and, shit, oh fuck, one of them was Fenrir Greyback. His eyes lit up when he saw her, and his sick tongue flicked out and dragged over his upper lip.

"Well well," he rasped, and grabbed her by the arm. She resisted – clawed at his hands, put all her weight behind pulling away – but to no avail.

Their wands were apprehended, and they were all dragged outside, where two more Snatchers stood waiting.

"That's it then, eh, mate? Three kids? Pathetic 'aul this evenin'," said one.

("Gerrof me, gerrof me, GERROF ME," screamed Ron.)

"Oh I don't know. That girl's a raver not so bad 'un..."

"Back off, Scabior," Greyback barked. He pulled Hermione closer and traced his nose down her cheek, "This one's mine. Delicious girl... what a treat... I do enjoy the softness of the skin..."

She whimpered; her stomach turned. It was truly terrible how primal fear was one of the few things that her system just didn't seem to get desensitised to.

"Get – Off – Her!" Ron bellowed, and immediately received a blow to the face.

"No!" Hermione moaned.

"Search the tent," Scabior ordered.

*

Their false identities seemed to have convinced the band of Scary Men, and Hermione, Harry, and Ron were bound and thrown onto the forest floor with their backs to two other captives.

"Anyone still got a wand?" Harry whispered.

"No," Hermione and Ron replied.

"This is all my fault," Harry lamented, "I said the name. I'm sorry..."

"Harry?" the person behind her gasped, and she desperately tried to twist and get a look, because his voice... his voice...

"Dean?" Harry spluttered.

"It is you! Well, shit! If they find out who they've got –! They're only looking for truants to sell for gold but –"

Dean stopped speaking as Greyback and two other Snatchers came closer.

"Well, Ugly," he spat at Harry. "If you're telling the truth, you've got nothing to fear from a trip to the Ministry. I expect your father, Mister Dudley, will reward us just for picking you up."

"Hey!" someone shouted from just outside their tent, "Look at this!"

A Snatcher built like a bulldozer barrelled over, cradling Gryffindor's sword. Well... they were truly done for now. Truly truly truly done. Hermione couldn't breathe –

"Ve-e-ery nice," Greyback purred, examining the sword, "Oh, very nice indeed. Looks goblin-made, that. Where did you get something like this?"

"It's my father's," Harry said too quickly, "We borrowed it to cut firewood–"

"'Ang on a chuffin' minute, Greyback! Look at this, in the Prophet!" Scabior cried, tearing out of the tent, "ermione Granger, the Mudblood who is known to be travelling with 'arry Potter."

Hermione Granger's muddy eyes closed in horror. Done for. Done. Fucking. For.

Greyback squatted in front of her, peering at her face. "You know what, little girly," he crooned, "This picture looks a hell of a lot like you."

"It isn't!" she yelped, "It isn't me!"
"...known to be travelling with Harry Potter." Greyback looked at the three of them in awful silence for a long moment, (Oh, they were done for.) "Well, this changes things, doesn't it?" He shifted so that he was crouched in front of Harry, and asked in a dangerously mellow voice, "What's that on your forehead, Vernon?"

He lifted a finger and touched –
"Don't touch it!" Harry roared.
"I thought you wore glasses, Potter?"
"I found glasses! There was glasses in the tent, Greyback, wait—" Bulldozer-Snatcher disappeared back inside, and then returned, brandishing Harry's glasses.
The glasses where then rammed onto Harry's face.
Greyback hummed in delight; "It is! We've caught Potter!"

They were so, so done for.

It was terribly dark and Hermione could hear music. Not some vaguely cadenced buzzing in her ears, no; there was a full-fledged orchestra in her head. Every note, every treble and sharp was so clear...
The doomed progression down the driveway was set to the tune of Berlioz's *March to The Scaffold.*

It was most likely a quiet night. Most likely, the sound of footsteps and the mewls of startled peacocks was the only noise for miles. But the music in Hermione's head was at its crescendo. Loud and wild! Symbols and trumpets! She wanted to pretend her wand was a baton, and she was a wild-haired conductor. Fuck being a good man in a storm – she was a woman on the edge of an *ataque de nervios.*

Greyback's filthy talons had broken through the skin on her arm.

Malfoy Manor erupted suddenly from between decorative foliage. It was indubitably a beautiful building – Jacobean architecture, diamond-paned windows, tiny peaked turrets – but in Hermione's head, the symphony morphed into the Addam's Family theme. Fittingly, the large front doors opened with a dramatic creak. Hermione almost hoped that Narcissa Malfoy would snap her fingers.

Instead she demanded, "What is this?"
"We're here to see He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" Greyback announced.
"Who are you?" Mrs. Malfoy sneered coldly.
"You know me," the feral werewolf rumbled, "Fenrir Greyback! We've caught Harry Potter!"

Harry was shoved into the light spilling out from inside the Manor.
"I know 'es swollen, ma'am, but it's 'im!" said Scabior. "If you look a bit closer, you'll see 'is scar. And this 'ere, see the girl? The Mudblood who's been travelling around with 'im, ma'am. There's no doubt it's 'im, and we've got 'is wand as well! 'Ere, ma'am –"

Tinkling chimes and little claps.

Narcissa Malfoy lowered her head to examine Harry. "Bring them in," she said.
They were shoved into a long hallway where twin rows of Malfoy ancestors bared their teeth at them.

*Everyday it's a-getting closer,*
The drawing room was resplendent. A crystal chandelier bathed the vast, vault-like space in golden light. The walls were dark purple and full of gilded mirrors. Hermione was tossed from Greyback to Scabior. Her head was forced downwards, (a gorgeous Afghani carpet covered the floor,) and Scabior gripped her tightly around the ribs, his fingers pressed against the underside of her breasts.

"What is this?" Lucius Malfoy's icy, imperious voice called out.
"They say they've got Potter," his wife replied, "Draco, come here."

*Come on baby, don't fear the reaper*

*Baby take my hand, don't fear the reaper*

*We'll be able to fly, don't fear the reaper*

*Baby I'm your man*

*La, la, la –*

Hermione's head was jerked back with a forceful tug of her hair, and there before her, pale faced and panic-stricken, was Draco Malfoy. She'd never been this close to him before.

"Yes – yes," Mrs. Malfoy was saying, "She was in Madam Malkin's with Potter! I saw her picture in the Prophet! Look, Draco, isn't it the Granger girl?"

Draco looked at the Granger girl, and the Granger girl looked at Draco. *Come on* she pleaded, *Please, please, please.* Could he hear her? His eyes widened, just a touch... oh but they were grey... And unbidden, the sound of Chopin (as played by Malfoy,) filled her head. *Please.* Chopin, crashing into *...don't fear the reaper*, cut through with static... oh god. She wanted to slap her hands against her ears. Malfoy's grey eyes... searching... She let out a whisper of a sob, and he turned his face away. The golden light in the room fell on his profile, throwing the distressed twist of his mouth into prominence.

"I ...maybe ...yeah."

"But then, that's the Weasley boy!" the elder Malfoy shouted, pulling Ron by the scruff of his neck, "It's them, Potter's friends – Draco, look at him, isn't it Arthur Weasley's son... what's his name–?"

"Yeah. It could be."

Then Draco Malfoy turned his back to them.

Suddenly, the drawing room door flew open, and a new face pushed itself in front of Hermione's. Bellatrix Lestrange's heavy-lidded eyes considered her penetratingly, until a glimmer appeared in their inky depths.

"But surely," she murmured, "this is the Mudblood girl? This is Granger?"

"Yes, yes, it's Granger! And beside her, we think, Potter!" Lucius Malfoy exclaimed, "Potter and his friends, caught at last!"

"Potter?! Are you sure? Well then, the Dark Lord must be informed at once!"

A kerfuffle broke out regarding who exactly would get the honour of summoning The Dark Lord. Hermione panted, waiting, because *it won't be long, yeah, yeah, yeah,* but while they bickered and nattered, they were all still alive...
And that's when Bellatrix spotted Gryffindor's sword in the bulldozer-Snatcher's grubby hands.

Pain.
Had she ever really known pain? Pain; pain that drives you insane, pain like the rain –

_I want to know, have you ever seen the rain?_

"CRUCIO!"

Pain. Daggers are mundane, broken limbs - don't complain.
Oh what are those? Not painful – not at all.

"WHERE DID YOU GET THIS SWORD? WHERE?"
"We found it—we found it—PLEASE!"
"CRUCIO!"

Pain. It was inside her, it was a part of her, it _was_ her.
_Thine are the lidless eyes of night that stare upon our tears;_ mum and dad, glassy-eyed and blanched, washed upon some nameless shore... Theo, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Luna, Neville...

"YOU'RE LYING, FILTHY MUDBLOOD, AND I KNOW IT! YOU HAVE BEEN INSIDE MY VAULT AT GRINGOTTS! TELL THE TRUTH, TELL THE TRUTH! CRUCIO!"

…hanging limply like strange fruit on a barren tree.
Pain. Oh god, the pain. Make it stop. Let me go. PLEASE let me go –
_Bismillah, NO... we will not let you go!_
Let me go.

"WHAT ELSE DID YOU TAKE? WHAT ELSE HAVE YOU GOT? TEL ME THE TRUTH OR, I SWEAR, I SHALL RUN YOU THROUGH WITH THIS KNIFE! CRUCIO! CRUCIO!"

Pain like rain, pain like fire, pain like every unfulfilled desire; pain like Dix's Verwundeter; pain like rain, pain like acid, pain that's absolute and tacit; pain like _pain_ like pai–

"HOW DID YOU GET INTO MY VAULT? DID THAT DIRTY LITTLE GOBLIN IN THE CELLAR HELP YOU?"
"We only met him tonight! We've never been inside your vault... It isn't the real sword! It's a copy, just a copy!"
"CRUCIO!"

Electric pain, eclectic pain. Arising pain, surprising pain, utterly paralyzing pain...

And

Then

It

Stopped
"Draco, fetch the goblin! He can tell us whether the sword is real or not!"

And

Everything

Was

Black

From the blackness emerged a thread.
Fine and delicate like spider silk, it drifted towards her... but what was she? One with the shadows, one with the blackness... she was nothing.
Her disembodied, nebulous sense of self watched the thin strand undulate.

But wait – she had a form. She had a head, and on it was hair, because she was dead certain that something was stroking it. A large hand – a familiar, warm, soothing hand...

Dad? Dad?

"Dah –!"

She blinked up at the face looming above hers; it wasn't her father's, but one that was nearly as comforting.
Theo's eyes were tired and foggy, his nose was red, his hair was a wreck, but his lips pulled into a soft, tremulous smile.
"Hello, darling," he rasped.
"Wha – Wha –" Hermione breathed.
"Shhh," he whispered, "You're safe. It's alright."
Safe? What? She frowned... but then she remembered. Malfoy Manor – Bellatrix – *Fuck*. Theo, however, anticipated her move, and pressed her back into bed the moment she tried to jump out of it.
"Hermione! Calm down!"
"No! No – I – Harry! Ron! ...Dean!"
"They're FINE," Theo asserted, "They're all fine. Please, Hermione. Listen to me. You got away. You all got away!"
"We... got... away," she gasped, "How?"
"I'll tell you in a bit. First... I need to get Fleur. I'm under orders, see?"
"Wait... Fleur?"
"Yeah, this is her and Bill's place. Now stay right here, okay?"

She looked about her in the interim. It was a pretty little room she was in, the walls were unfinished and roughly whitewashed with tiny white shells embedded in the dados, turquoise curtains hung in front of the windows, and a large vase full of yellow gerberas sat on the teak dresser.
She was safe.

Fleur bustled in with a tray laden with phials, with Theo following close behind. She looked like
she'd been sleeping, yet still, in her silk dressing gown, she was radiant.
"Ermione," she said kindly, "ow are you?"
"I'm... fine?"
"Zat cannot be true," Fleur sniffed.
"No, really... I... I'm not in pain," she said with wonder, "I'm not in pain."
Fleur pursed her lips. "Ave zis. Eet will make sure ze pain stays away –" She handed Hermione some pale blue potion, "– and zis –" A colourless pungent potion, "– and zis –" A bright orange potion. The last one tasted like sweet orange syrup.
"Where is everyone?" Hermione asked.
"Azleep," answered Fleur, "Eet's four in ze morning."
"What!" Hermione sputtered, "You mean I've been out for –"
"Eight hours, oui."
"Holy shit."
Both Fleur and Theo smirked at that.
"You're telling me?" Theo demanded, "You've been comatose. I'm the one who's been sitting at your bedside... Eight hours of looking dour... it's probably given me wrinkles."
"I 'ave a potion for zat, too."
"Oh, you're a goddess, Fleur. Truly, a divine being, a spectacular woman –"
"Stop eet, silly boy," she laughed pertly, "Ermione, you will need three more doses... I will see you in a few hours."
"Thank you so much, Fleur. Goodnight."
"Yeah, sweet dreams, Fle–"
Theo's ardent wishes died out as Fleur had already left the room. Aiming an exasperated smile at him, Hermione said, "Et tu?"
"What?"
"Just like every other male, you turn into an idiot around her."
He reared back resentfully. "Um, no. Actually, as you very well know, I'm always an idiot."
"Oh right," she conceded laughingly.

His look of good humour abruptly changed to one of anguish.
"Oh Hermione," he bemoaned, "How could you get caught? Fucking hell."
She lowered her eyes and stared at the pale blue duvet covering her legs. "It was an accident. Ha – someone said You-Know-Who's name, and –"
"Come off it," he spat, "Someone. I know it was Potter. He admitted it."
"It was an accident!"
"Obviously it was an accident. I know he bloody well wouldn't call on the Snatchers because he fancied some company. I'm just saying he's too boneheaded to think before he fucking speaks!"
"What happened, Theo?" she mumbled thickly, "How did we escape?"
He sighed. "Well, the moment you arrived at Malfoy Manor, the Order's contingency plan kicked into action –"
"Contingency plan?" Hermione parroted, puzzled.
"Well, yes!" Theo exclaimed incredulously, "The three of you really do live in your own little bubble, don't you? Did you honestly think the Order wouldn't have something planned for if... when... you heroes got yourself caught?!
"Oh," she whispered weakly.

His hardened expression melted a bit as he sat down on the chair beside her bed. Taking her hand in his, he continued, "Draco informed Lupin as soon as he could – yes, Draco. How can you still look surprised?!
"I thought... At the Manor... He sold us out..."
"For Merlin's sake, what else could he have done? He would've hardly been able to do any good if he'd blown his cover! So, the moment he could get away, he informed Lupin, who in turn rallied the rest of us, and –"
"You as well?"
"Of course!" he said indignantly.
"Who else – "
"Luna, Shacklebolt, some Weasleys, Jones, Diggle... We called Dobby to get us through the Malfoy wards –"
"Wait! Dobby the House-Elf?"
"Exactly how many Dobby's do you know?" he huffed, "Yeah, Dobby the House-Elf. Anyway, when we got to the Manor... you were already unconscious... Draco had just let Potter, Weasley, and Thomas out of the cellar...
"Then, well, we charged. There was a big, old mêlée, while Dobby brought people back here in turns. We had them outnumbered... But fucking Bellatrix called You-Know-Who. We were out of time. Panicked. And then, Dobby saved us. He was... unbelievable. He dropped a blooming chandelier on Bellatrix. He disarmed – he actually disarmed – Narcissa. He brought us here, I think, seconds before You-Know-Who reached the Manor."
Hermione was reeling. She swallowed a few times, before shakily whispering, "Wow."
"Yeah," Theo said, but uncomfortably... there was still something he hadn't told her.
"What?" she asked at once.
He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. "Dobby... didn't make it."
No. No. "NO," she groaned.
He shook his head; "Bellatrix chucked her knife at him just as he was disapparating. It... met its mark."
"Oh god," she moaned, tears pooling in her eyes, "How – Harry –?"
"Not good. Kept trying to shake him awake..." he sighed, "We spent nearly the entire night digging his grave manually. Luna made a speech... Potter thought he'd have liked that."
"Yes," she sobbed, "He would've."
"I'll take you to see it... later..."
"Yes, please."
"...but you need to sleep now. Hell, I need to sleep." He stood up, and then bent to lightly kiss her forehead.
"Theo," she murmured, "Thank you."
He laid his palm against her cheek, and said, "Thank you for not dying."

When she awoke, daylight was filtering through the curtains, and it had turned the whole room greenish-blue. She got uncertainly onto her feet, her legs wobbled and she had to grasp the bedside table to keep from falling. Slowly, she inched towards the window and looked outside. Bill and Fleur's house was perched on the edge of a cliff, surrounded by stalks of lavender. The sky was pale blue, and beneath it was the sea, frothing and churning.

After a quick shower, she felt rejuvenated and much more stable. Stark naked, she peered closely at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. There was a scrape on her knee, nail marks on her arm, and multiple shallow cuts on her neck. She wanted to erase them completely; she wanted no residues of that awful night to claim any part of her body... that's when she realised her wand had been taken away by Greyback.
It was true what they said – the feeling of losing one's wand is akin to losing a limb.
It took her twice as long as usual to climb down stairs. She stood for a moment in the airy hallway, listening to the sound of the crashing waves. The muted drone of conversation emitted from a room to her left, so that's where she went.

It was a fairly small kitchen, with a fairly small table that was crowded with people pouring over breakfast. There were Harry and Ron, Theo and Luna, Bill and Fleur, Dean and... Ollivander? Perplexed Hermione knocked on the doorjamb to get their attention.

Harry got to her first and wrapped her up in his arms. "How are you?" he said, "You were amazing – coming up with that story when she was hurting you like that –"

"I'm okay," she replied softly, and then Ron took hold of her. He didn't say anything, but held her long and tightly and when he lightly brushed his lips against her cheek she pulled away quickly. She squeezed into a tiny open space between Dean and Luna, both of whom patted her back and smiled.

"It's good to see you, Dean," she said, helping herself to some hot scrambled eggs.
"Yeah," he grinned, scratching the back of his neck, (his arm, she noticed, was heavily bandaged,) "Not exactly how I'd prefer to be reunited with my friends, though."
Hermione laughed. "What, trauma and torture aren't your idea of fun?"
"Nah. I say we grab a pint or something next time."
"Sure."

"I should warn you, Thomas," Theo threw in, "Drunk Hermione will prove to be only a little less traumatising –"
"Shut up, Theo."
"And drunk Hermione and Potter – ooooh la. You might not survive it –"
"Shut up, Nott."

"ERMIONE," Fleur yelled over Dean, Theo, Bill, and Luna's laughter, "'urry up and eat please. Eet's time for your potions."

But suddenly, the loud sound of someone apparating came from outside. Instantly, they were all alert and on their feet, (with the exception of Ollivander, who made even blinking look tiring,) and jumbled out of the room to the main door. Hermione missed her wand desperately.
"Who is it?" Bill called, pressing his ear against the wood. No reply. "Who is it?" he tried again. Nothing.
Tentatively, he peeled back the door, wand gripped tightly in his hand...
He gasped. Then he charged outside.

The rest of them all crowded around the open door. Hermione grabbed onto Harry's upper arms for leverage and peered over his shoulder. She saw a cloaked figure lying limply on the ground just beyond the large veranda. Bill scooped the wilted, unconscious stranger up, and pulled one of their arms over his shoulder; their head lolled forward limply.
"Who is that?" Ron shouted, but Bill didn't seem to hear.
Hermione was unexpectedly jostled into Harry's back as Theo tore through the lot of them, looking very white in the face. He took the stranger's other arm and braced one of his own around their waist...
The stranger's hood fell back.

Draco Malfoy had arrived at Shell Cottage.
If you need a palate cleanser, I recently wrote a very silly, very fluffy drabble called Fly Me To The Moon.
Though the hallway was open and draughty, the air felt thick. Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Luna stood in a line by the wall, all with tension in their postures. Bill and Theo had carried the unconscious Malfoy upstairs, and Fleur had hastily followed, with her medical supplies in tow. Then, old Ollivander had wheezed and shuffled his way up three steps before Dean hurried to help him climb.

“I hope he’s alright.” Hermione muttered, wringing her hands uneasily.

Ron clicked his tongue dismissively, and brusquely demanded, “What the fuck is he doing here?”

“He’s hurt!”

“Yeah, and? Couldn’t his mummy take care of him?”

“Ron! He’s been helping us…”

“Please. You were out cold, but he didn’t do much helping at his precious manor. Just stood there like a sodding chump.”

Luna pushed away from the wall and faced Ron while wearing an abnormally sharp expression.

“He’s done a lot, Ron,” she said forcefully, “He used to show up hurt at my house too. But... it was never this bad…”

She bit her lip and gazed up the staircase.

Then Dean reappeared and sat himself on the lowest step. “Fleur’s working on him, I think,” he said, “The door’s closed, and I couldn’t hear anything…”

All of a sudden, with great thundering treads, Bill charged down the stairs with a wild look about him. “They’re planning to attack the Burrow,” he cried frantically, “We have half an hour to move everyone to Muriel’s... I have to go…”

“What?” Ron spluttered, “How –”

“Malfoy had this in his hand,” Bill chucked a wad of parchment at Ron, as he pulled his boots and cloak on. Ron held the parchment out so they could all see; Attack on Weasley home 10 AM, it read, written in a hand Hermione was vaguely familiar with.

“I’m coming with you,” Ron stated strongly.

“Yes,” Harry began, “Me t –”

“No,” Bill declared.

“Bill –!”

“Harry, no. You know what we all went through to get you here! And you’re going to STAY here. Oh, stuff it, Ron. There’s time enough right now to get everyone to safety... It’s a good thing that Ginny’s on holiday… If she’d been at Hogwarts they could have taken her before we reached her…”

With that Bill walked out of the cottage. They heard the crack as he disapparated.

Ron let out a shuddering sigh and fell back heavily against the wall. Thinking about the Weasleys being in the line of fire made Hermione’s insides squirm too, and she touched Ron’s arm and offered a weakly consoling, “They’ll be okay.”

But he shook her hand away and growled, “Sure. You’re more worried about Malfoy anyway.”
“Ron, that’s not true—”
“Yeah, yeah,” he sniped, and then stomped off towards the back of the house, possibly to escape into the back garden.

Two tiny pulsing spots of pain developed in Hermione’s temples as she slid down to the ground. Head pressed against her knees, she groaned. Ron simply did not understand that Theo wouldn’t ever be the same again if something were to happen to Malfoy.

Then Ginny’s face bloomed in her mind’s eye, and she was overcome with guilt.

Dumbledore could rave about the glory of love all he wanted, but sometimes, Hermione wished that she really could stop herself from caring. From worrying. From being god damned incapacitated by anxiety.

In the midst of her agonizing, Harry sat on his heels next to her… she was surprised; she thought he’d have gone after Ron…

“Listen, Hermione,” he whispered, “While everyone’s busy, we should go talk to Griphook… and Ollivander.”
She paused, wiping her tears (where did those come from?) on her sleeve, and blinked at him.
“What about?”
“Just… You’ll see.”
“But what about Ron?”
“We’ll fill him in later. Come on.”

Griphook the Goblin hadn’t bothered to wash, and he was splayed defiantly on Fleur’s pretty floral bed sheet when Hermione and Harry entered ‘his’ room. In one hand he held the sword of Gryffindor, and he used the other to stroke his short, pointy black beard. His beady little eyes watched as Hermione sat on the chair by the dressing table, and Harry stood with his arms crossed at the foot of the bed.

“Sorry to bother you,” said Harry, “How are your legs?”
“Painful, but mending.”

It was astonishing, how quickly his eyes were darting between his two unwanted guests. He looked hostile, yes… but there was a definite undercurrent of curiosity in his gaze.
“Griphook,” Harry commenced gravely, “I need to ask—”
“You rescued me. A goblin,” Griphook interrupted bitterly.
“What?”
“You brought me here,” he spat, “Saved me.”
“Well, I take it you’re not sorry?” Harry asked with annoyance.
“No, Harry Potter,” Griphook replied slowly, “but… you are a very odd wizard.”
“Right. Well,” Harry muttered, “I need some help, Griphook, and you can give it to me…” He stalled, and the Goblin frowned, “…I need to break into a Gringotts vault.”
During the short journey between Griphook’s room and Ollivander’s, Hermione grabbed Harry’s wrist and asked in a zealous whisper: “Are you saying what I think you’re saying? There’s a Horcrux in the Lestrange’s vault?”

“Yes! Bellatrix was terrified when she thought we’d been in there; she was beside herself. Why? What did she think we’d seen, what else did she think we might have taken? Something she was petrified You-Know-Who would find out about… I don’t think he’d have told Bellatrix it was a Horcrux, though… probably told her it was a treasured possession and asked her to place it in her vault. The safest place in the world for anything you want to hide, Hagrid told me… except for Hogwarts… Come on – Ollivander now.”

Ollivander’s room was crammed with single beds, five of them to be precise, and Hermione inferred that it was where all the boys… the men… slept.

It was dark inside; all the curtains had been tightly drawn, and the weary wandmaker was lying on the bed furthest from the window, as though even the slightest hint of light would cause him pain. Spending a year in a cellar would do that to a person.

“Mr. Ollivander,” Harry murmured as he sat on the empty bed next to his, “I hope we’re not disturbing you terribly…”

“My dear boy,” the skeletal old man croaked, “I thought I was doomed to die in that place. If you hadn’t come, I would never have escaped. I am happy to help you in any way I can.”

Harry nodded, and from his mokeskin pouch he took out the broken fragments of his wand. “Mr. Ollivander,” he beseeched, “Can you mend this.”

Ollivander surveyed the pieces carefully, and then shook his head with no little regret. “No. I am sorry… very sorry… but a wand that has suffered this degree of damage cannot be repaired by any means that I know of.”

Harry hung his head for a moment; Hermione yearned to comfort him, but didn’t know how. Nonetheless, he recovered soon, and then took out two more wands.

“Can you identify these?”

Ollivander took the first in his hand and held it close to his clouded eyes; “Twelve-and-three-quarter inches. Unyielding. This wand belongs to Bellatrix Lestrange.”

“And this one?”

“Hawthorn and unicorn hair. Ten inches precisely. Reasonably springy. This was the wand of Draco Malfoy.”

Harry started. “Was? Isn’t it still his?”

“Perhaps not. If you took it –”

“–I did–”

“–then it may be yours. Of course, the manner of taking matters. Much also depends upon the wand itself. In general, however, where a wand has been won, its allegiance will change.”

Harry pursed his lips. This, apparently, was exactly the preface he’d hoped for. The situation was primed for a conversation about wand loyalties, and how they are won… in particular, how the loyalty of the most powerful wand in the world may be won.
Bunches of light purple lavender, tall shoots of vivid blue viper’s bugloss, clusters of pretty pink sea thrift, stalks of bright yellow mullein, multiple shrubs of spindly green rosemary dotted with pale blue flowers, wrinkly silvery-green clumps of sea kale... the tiny garden outside Shell Cottage had a wild, rustic charm.

Ron was sitting atop the low boundary wall, swinging his legs vacantly. As he saw Hermione and Harry making their way towards him, he waved somewhat sheepishly.

“Hey,” he began, then cleared his throat, “Er, sorry for having a go at you, Hermione.”

She hopped up on the wall next to him and bumped his shoulder. “We saw Bill in the kitchen on the way out... Seems your family’s all settled in at Muriel’s.”

“Hah,” he barked, “Not for long. Fred and George aren’t going to let things remain settled. You have no idea how much they love fucking with that old bat.”

“Oh, I can imagine,” Hermione smiled.

They both then looked at Harry, who hadn’t partaken in their amusement. He was staring out at the heap of dirt under which poor Dobby lay. So Hermione took it upon herself to tell Ron about everything they’d gleaned from their conversations with Griphook and Ollivander.

“Wow,” Ron breathed, looking awestruck, “So the Elder Wand really does exist.”

“It would...” Hermione muttered grudgingly, “...seem so.”

Then Harry spoke, and as he did, he kept rubbing his scar distractedly. She knew immediately that he was half inside Voldemort’s head, and she had to bite her tongue to stop herself from railing at him.

“Gregorovitch had the Elder Wand a long time ago,” he said in a hushed tone, “I saw You-Know-Who trying to find him. When he tracked him down, he found that Gregorovitch didn’t have it anymore: It was stolen from him by Grindelwald and –” Harry paused and lightly shook his head, “– and Grindelwald used the Elder Wand to become powerful. Then, at the height of his power, when Dumbledore knew he was the only one who could stop him, he duelled Grindelwald and beat him, and he took the Elder Wand.”

“Dumbledore had the Elder Wand?” Ron exclaimed, “But then – where is it now?”

“At Hogwarts,” Harry muttered, eyes shut.

Ron sprang off the wall; “But then, let’s go! Harry! Let’s go and get it before he does!”

Harry opened his eyes and looked dazedly at Ron. “It’s too late for that.” He pressed his fingers against his forehead. “He knows where it is. He’s there now.”

Ron turned purple. “Harry!” he raged, “How long have you known this – why have you been wasting time? Why did you talk to Griphook first? We could have gone – we could still go –”

“Ron,” Hermione cut in sharply; Harry had fallen to his knees.

“No,” he moaned, “Hermione’s right... Dumbledore didn’t want me to have it... didn’t want me to take it. He wanted me to get the Horcruxes... I’m not supposed to...I’m supposed to get the Horcruxes...” He slumped forward in a faint.

“Harry!” Hermione cried, leaping to his side, “Ron... Ron, help me!”

Together, they laid him on his back on the soft grass.

“Shall we take him inside?” Ron asked, his brow puckered.

“No,” she sighed, “There’ll be too many questions. We’ll just have to wait it out here.”

And so they did.

The universe had such a perverse way of maintaining its supposed balance.
There was an evil, unhinged woman who had a powerful wand, and she used that powerful wand to torture a girl, and two days later, the girl was given that same wand to use. Twelve-and-three-quarter inches. Unyielding. When Hermione looked at it, all she knew, heard, and felt was crucio crucio crucio. Something horrible bubbled under her skin. If help hadn’t arrived, that wand would’ve done to her what it had done to Frank and Alice Longbottom. Or if luck had been on her side, it would have done to her what it had done to Sirius. She picked it up, reluctantly, and it felt wrong and vile and icy cold, even though the rational part of her knew that, just like any other wand, it was as good or bad as the one who wields it. “Engorgio,” she chanted, aiming at a beautifully formed thrift flower. It grew, but all its petals fell off – all its beauty was lost. That wand was too accustomed to destruction... she hated it. She really hated it.

Setting it down on the garden table, she sat on a wrought iron chair and pulled a small corked vial out of her beaded bag. The single strand of deep black hair within was like a helminth primed to suck the blood out of any and everyone. How lucky it was that Fleur still hadn’t gotten around to washing their clothes... how lucky it was that they’d found Bellatrix’s hair caught in the fibres of Hermione’s sweater. Lucky, lucky, lucky. She’d get the chance to inhabit the body that had tormented her. Seriously, naff sense of justice, oh world.

It was then that the one who claimed to be (as dictated by semantics,) the creator of the warped, callous world they lived in, joined her. “Hi, Theo,” she greeted softly. “Hello,” he replied, sitting next to her. “How is he?” Theo ran a hand down his tired-looking face. “Better. Woke up for a bit, then Fleur potioned him up again, so he fell asleep.” Hermione watched him as he chewed his tongue and scratched at the uncharacteristic scruff that lined his jaw. “But he’ll be... all right?” “Yes.” “What happened, exactly?” “The usual,” Theo shrugged with affected airiness, “You-Know-Who went a bit potty after the Chosen Potty escaped his clutches for the millionth time. Then Draco decided to use the last of his strength to apparate here so that Bill could be warned about the attack on the Burrow.” The gaze he fixed on her was both expectant and challenging, and she had to look away. There was a lump in her throat made of guilt, empathy, and admiration – but she could neither expel it nor swallow it down. It sat in her windpipe until her lungs were liquid; long after Theo had left her and gone back inside.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron stood in the shadowy landing talking in heated whispers. They’d just had a short, unpleasant meeting with Griphook, where the goblin, sitting like a proud Lord on his overlarge bed, had refused to let them see the map of Gringotts that he had drawn, until they promised to let him have Gryffindor’s sword. It was a setback they hadn’t anticipated at all.

“He’s having a laugh,” Ron scoffed, “We can’t let him have that sword.” Harry looked at Hermione uneasily, “Is it true? Was the sword stolen by Gryffindor?”
“I don’t know,” she muttered dejectedly, “Wizarding history often skates over what the wizards have done to other magical races, but there’s no account that I know of that says Gryffindor stole the sword.”

“Codswallop. It’ll be one of those goblin stories,” said Ron indifferently, “about how the wizards are always trying to get one over on them. I suppose we should think ourselves lucky he hasn’t asked for one of our wands.”

“Goblins have got good reason to dislike wizards, Ron! They’ve been treated brutally in the past.”

“Well, they aren’t exactly fluffy little bunnies, though, are they? They’ve killed plenty of us. They’ve fought dirty too.”

“But arguing with Griphook about whose race is most underhanded and violent isn’t going to make him more likely to help us, is it?” Hermione snapped.

“Okay,” he said, throwing his hands up like he couldn’t deal with how difficult she was being, “how’s this? We tell Griphook we need the sword until we get inside the vault and then he can have it. There’s a fake in there, isn’t there? We switch them, and give him the fake.”

“He’d know the difference better than we would!” Hermione said with disbelief, “He’s the only one who realized there had been a swap!”

“Yeah, but we could scarper before he realizes –”

Well, apparently, her glare still held some power, because Ron’s jaw snapped shut and his head lowered. “That... is despicable. Ask for his help, then double-cross him? And you wonder why goblins don’t like wizards, Ron?”

“Alright, alright!” he growled, “It was the only thing I could think of! What’s your solution, then?”

“We need to offer him something else, something just as valuable.”

“Brilliant, I’ll go and get one of our ancient goblin-made swords and you can gift wrap it.”

As Hermione and Ron glared at each other, Harry spoke up – “Maybe he’s lying. Griphook, I mean. Maybe Gryffindor didn’t take the sword. How do we know the goblin version of history’s right?”

“Does it make a difference?” Hermione sighed.

“Changes how I feel about it,” Harry muttered, “We’ll... tell him he can have the sword after he’s helped us get into the vault – but we’ll be careful to avoid telling him exactly when he can have it.”

“Harry!” Hermione exclaimed, “We can’t –”

“He can have it,” Harry said over her, “After we’ve used it on all of the Horcruxes. I’ll make sure he gets it then. I’ll keep my word.”

“But that could be years!”

“I know that, but he needn’t. I won’t be lying... really.”

“I don’t like it,” Hermione said angrily.

“Nor do I, much,” Harry confessed.

“Well, I think its genius,” Ron chirruped with a grin, “Let’s go and tell –”

Suddenly, the door at the opposite end of the hallway flew open with a bang. And there, pale and lean, in striped pajamas and bare feet, stood Draco Malfoy in his considerably diminished glory. He was glowering at Harry; his entire frame seemed to be trembling with strain.

“Give me my wand,” he rasped dangerously.

It took Harry a few seconds to gather his wits... then he squared his shoulders and said, “No.”

Malfoy’s eyes flashed. He took two steps forward and levelled the wand he was holding at Harry.


Theo and Luna appeared behind Malfoy, looking hassled.

“It’s not your wand anymore, Malfoy,” Harry said loftily, “Winners, keepers. Who lent you theirs?”

“My mother.”

Harry laughed, which really wasn’t the best thing to do in such situations.
“I told you,” Harry snapped, “it isn’t your wand anymore! It won’t answer to you now... I won it from you –”
“Won it?! You snatched it out of my hand –”
(“Draco,” Theo called pleadingly, but was completely ignored.)
“Well, you were attacking –”
“I was not attacking ANYONE. Expelliarmus!”
Harry’s shield charm held. Ron sniggered, “Right. You were cowering in a corner. Served you right, having your wand taken away.”
Silence iced over the walls, the stairs, the railing, and them. Malfoy turned his enraged gaze on Ron, and asked in a voice that was fittingly frosty, “What would you have had me do, Weasley? Attack? Maybe I should have helped dear Aunt Bella while she had her fun with Granger here?”
“Shut the fuck up!” Ron thundered, “You should have fought with us! You’re supposed to be on our side, aren’t you? I knew that was all bullshit – You coward!”
“COWARD?” Malfoy stalked forward, brandishing his mother’s wand, and Ron quickly whipped out his own, “You wanted me to fight with you? Given myself away? You fucking bellend... who’d have told you about the plan to burn your pathetic little hovel to the ground then? Your family would all be dead now. Or worse. That pretty little sister of yours would be very popular among –”
“Stop it!” Hermione shrieked, “STOP!”
“Incisura!”
“BACK OFF, WEASLEY!” Theo snarled, storming ahead to stand next to Malfoy.
“Expelliarmus, Expelliarmus, EXPELLIARMUS!” Malfoy was unrelenting, and Harry was forced to put his shield back up.

There was a strange suctioning noise, a flash of blue light, and all four boys were pinned against the walls.
Luna, evidently, had had the good sense to run down and call Bill.
“You idiots,” he panted, glaring at each of them in turn, “What the hell is wrong with all of you?”
With the exception of Theo, they all struggled against the invisible force that held them.
“Sorry, Bill –”
“– this arsehole Death Eater –”
“– my wand back –”
“NOT a fucking chance!”
“Shut up!” Bill bellowed. And they did. Hermione was more than a little awed by the forcefulness the usually laidback man could summon.
“Bill,” Ron began ardently, “You need to get rid of this Death Eater here –”
“Not another word! I’m not going to ask you to get along, because obviously that involves more maturity than you are capable of showing. But I will NOT allow you to tear my house down. We’re all on the same side here... Yes, Ron... nobody here is a Death Eater.”
“...Thank you,” Malfoy muttered, frowning like he didn’t quite believe the old man.

After a long moment of silence, Bill let his prisoners down. Malfoy stormed back into his room, Theo followed listlessly, Luna cautiously... Ron shoved past Bill and Harry and disappeared downstairs. Sharing a hopeless look with Hermione, Bill went on to help Ollivander back into bed.

And that left two – Hermione and Harry – staring uncomfortably at all the closed doors.

“Tea?”
Fleur grinned up at them from the foot of the stairs, next to a nervous looking Dean and, oh... sure. Why not? Tea!

“Honestly, Fleur,” Hermione beseeched, “You and Bill should take this room. Luna and I will be perfectly comfortable sleeping in the living room.”

From her table-transfigured-into-a-cot, Luna nodded in fervent agreement.
“Nonsense,” Fleur chided, “You are our guests. You must ‘ave ze room.”
“No, please –”
“I weel not eart it,” Fleur added firmly, “Sleep well.”
And with that, she breezed out of the room, closing the door behind her.
“Oh well,” Hermione sighed.
“You tried,” Luna smiled consolingly, “Goodnight, Hermione.”
“Goodnight.”
Luna curled up under her duvet and Hermione doused the lamps... it took three tries with Bellatrix’s wand. She wandered over to her bed, but didn’t get in; she wasn’t ready for sleep yet. Her mind was burdened, and she knew that if she closed her eyes, she risked reliving that awful night at Malfoy Manor. So she strolled over to the window and gazed outside, where slowly, silently, now the moon, walks the night in her silvery shoon.
The scene outside was all silver and black. Beyond the garden wall, at the edge of the cliff, stood a tall, male figure facing the swirling sea, and it was like the moonlight itself had been spun into fine gossamer strands and placed on his head. A few minutes later, he was joined by another tall, Theo-shaped figure. They watched the sea, and Hermione watched them.

Yawning like a lion, (...because it was a very wide yawn; she was in no way alluding to her Gryffindor-ness, thank you very much...) Hermione dragged her feet all the way down to the kitchen, desperate for a large mug of very, very sweet coffee.

Luna had been all sunshine and butterflies in the morning, skipping off to wake Theo in her very special way, the details of which Hermione had expunged from her mind. She stopped dead at the kitchen door, and dread pooled in her very empty belly. Couldn’t she catch a break? Why did Malfoy have to be the only person at the table. Where were Bill and Fleur? Dean? Ollivander.
He appeared to be engrossed in reading the paper, and she considered waiting for someone else to show up, but her stomach and head both protested so vehemently at that notion that she straightened her spine, and marched her way to the chair furthest away from Malfoy. She didn’t look up to see if he’d acknowledged her presence.

The French press was full and steaming, much to Hermione’s relief. The delicious smell of coffee filled the room as she poured the liquid into her mug. Then she added milk... just the right amount... and then sugar... sugar...

Sugar...?

_Oh honey honey._

The sugar was at the other end of the table, tightly wrapped up in long, pale fingers. Slowly, her eyes lifted up to Malfoy’s face, and he was looking right at her. His expression was utterly blank, but Hermione recognised a dare when she saw one. Her blood boiled a little.

“Pass the sugar, Malfoy.”

Her inflection was crisp and clear; perhaps a little higher than necessary, but two out of three wasn’t bad.

“I think,” Malfoy said snootily, “You forgot a word there, Granger.”

“Please,” she uttered through gritted teeth.

“Hmm,” he spun the canister around thoughtfully, “If I give it to you, will you thank me?”

“Excuse me?”

“I just really want to know what earns your gratitude,” he continued lightly, “I mean, I’ve saved your life on two occasions so far, and haven’t received a word of thanks. So will handing you this little canister do it?”

Hermione stared at the ridiculous, coolly inquisitive facade he was presenting her with. She had expected, if they spoke at all, another explosive showdown... but this... this was...

“Oh honey honey.”

Theo and Luna walked slowly into the kitchen, looking bright and lively.

“Just what I like to see early in the morning,” Theo quipped as he pulled a chair out for his
girlfriend, “Two of my favourite people looking like they want to kill each other.” He paused, as though an unexpected thought had struck him, “That’s what it was, right? You weren’t about to jump at each other and have it off, yeah?”

“THEO!” two voices - one high, one low – cried, harmonized by their tone of horror. Hermione sat back down quickly; she would never, ever in her whole entire life look at Malfoy again.

“I was just making sure,” Theo said defensively, “Thin line, and all that.”

“You’re an arse,” Malfoy snapped, and in her head, Hermione agreed with ardour.

“Draco, could you pass me the sugar?” Luna asked.

It couldn’t be helped, Hermione looked at Malfoy. Again, she found him looking back at her.

“What, Luna... didn’t I give you more than enough sugar earlier?”

Malfoy’s face twisted in a way that surely mirrored her own. “Here,” he barked, pushing the canister towards Luna.

“Thank you, Draco.”

He – bugger it all – smirked, and Hermione looked away. Luna began humming Greensleeves.

With many a thumps and bumps, them of the ungraceful gait - Harry, Ron, and Dean - appeared at the kitchen door, and like Hermione, they froze.

“For fuck’s sake,” Theo lamented, “Just come sit down. Show Bill that you really are capable of behaving like adults.”

Ron’s ears turned red, Harry scowled, Dean sniffed, but they all (surprisingly) obeyed.

“Where are Bill and Fleur?” Hermione asked.

“Muriel’s,” Ron muttered, “Needed to restock their potions stash.”

There was a long stretch of silence, during which everybody busied themselves with their mugs (and Hermione finally got hold of some sugar.) There must have been moments in her life that had been more uncomfortable than this, but she couldn’t remember them.

“So,” Theo drawled eventually, “What’s next, my young heroes?”

“What d’you mean?” Ron demanded pugnaciously.

“I mean, what are your plans? I doubt you’re going to stay here for much longer.”

“None of your fucking business.”

“Alright,” Theo pronounced, looking down his nose at Ron, “Just keep in mind that I’m coming with you.”

“NO,” shouted Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Malfoy.

“Oh,” Theo gasped, looking most unconvincingly startled, “Er, actually, I am.”

“Absolutely not,” declared Hermione and Malfoy.

“Listen to me,” Theo said, suddenly terribly serious, “In the past two days, I have come this close to losing both my best friends. I’m not going to let that happen again. I AM going with you.”

“– Theo –”

“And you’re what?” Harry said, “Some kind of... Super-Wizard? If you’re with us, nothing bad will happen?”

“Yes,” Theo snapped, “I’m also extraordinarily intelligent and astonishingly virile.”

“Twat,” Harry muttered.

“Um, Theo,” Hermione hedged, “I really don’t think –”

“I don’t care!” He slammed a fist on the table, “I can’t just sit around anymore, while you... you... Hermione, please. I have to come with you. And – Merlin, just listen to me – I’m not dead weight! I can duel! And while I’m not some sodding Super-Wizard, I can help!”

“These three here,” Malfoy cut in, “Are the epitome of hare-brained, asinine, Gryffindor recklessness. Since when did you become suicidal, Theo –”

“Well, Draco, they’re obviously in desperate need of a Slytherin sidekick.”

“We don’t need you,” Ron grumbled.
“Yeah,” Harry seconded, “We’ve been managing just fine –”
“Oh sure. Fine. You got yourself caught by snatchers and Hermione nearly died.”

Harry and Theo glared at each other across the table. There was, however, a glint of that old guilt in
Harry’s eyes that was the albatross around his neck. Hermione knew that he’d conceded a beat
before he said, “Okay, listen...”
“What?!?” Ron spluttered.
“...So here’s the plan...”
“HARRY?!”

* *

“You’re all barmy,” Dean breathed after Harry had finished, “Can I come too?”
“No.”
“Well, then!”
“We can’t have a small army barging into Gringotts.”
“You’ve got polyjuice, yeah?” Theo asked. Harry nodded. “Well, excellent. I have a few strands of
my father’s hair.”
“You just carry those around?” Ron asked, appalled.
“For emergencies,” Theo affirmed.
“Bloody weird.”
“Excuse me, as my father’s heir, I am entitled to some of his hair.”
A groan went around the table. Luna giggled.
“That,” Malfoy said, “Wasn’t funny the first time you said it, and it hasn’t been funny the
subsequent four-hundred times.”
“Luna laughed,” said Theo insolently.
Malfoy arched his brow. (Hermione stopped herself from doing the same just in time.)
“If you’ve got your father’s hair,” Ron slated, “Why don’t you go watch over Malfoy instead?”
Theo opened his mouth, but Malfoy held up a hand before he could speak.
“No,” he said, “Let me, please.”
“Go on.”
“See, Weasley, the Dark Lord and his followers may not be as brilliant as you, but I assure you that
they will notice if suddenly there are two Nott Seniors in their midst.”
Dean, Luna, and Theo laughed, and... Hermione bit the insides of her cheeks.
Shaking his head, Harry looked at Malfoy from the corner of his eye, and after clearing his throat
asked, “We’re right, aren’t we? There’s something in the Lestrange vault?”
Malfoy nodded once, sharply. “Something that scares her shitless.”

Later that day, in the early evening, Ollivander left. He was moving to Muriel’s house where Molly
would be able to take better care of him.

Exactly thirty hours later, when the stars were just beginning to dot the sky, Bill walked into the
cottage with a slim parcel that he handed to Malfoy.
“Your new wand,” he said, and laughed when Malfoy’s eyes widened.

Malfoy shredded through the paper enthusiastically, and then, with great reverence, he beheld the glossy stick that emerged. He drew an arc over his head, conjuring a stream of twinkling golden dust that reflected in his awe-stricken eyes.

Hermione turned away, overwhelmed by bitter, bitter envy.

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Bracing herself, she sat at the edge of her bed and called out to Luna just as she was settling into hers.

“Yes, Hermione?”

“Look,” she ventured, “I’m sure if you talked to Theo, he might agree to drop out of our... um... operation. He would listen to you.”

“Why would I do that?” Luna asked.

“He’s... I mean... he’s leaving you behind...” Hermione stammered, wincing at herself.

“Yes,” Luna agreed, “And that makes me sad, but I trust you to keep him safe. You will do that, won’t you?”

“Of course! With everything I have! But you’re... okay... with...”

“Have you heard of Amazonian Atar Pixies?”

“Um... no?”

“Well, they’re very rare. And they have a very special power: They reveal your soulmate.”

“Soulmate,” Hermione repeated. Well, there went her attempt to have a serious conversation.

“Yes. And I’m almost sure that you are Theo’s soulmate.”

“Luna...”

“People have the wrong idea, you know. Soulmates aren’t your romantic ideal. They’re the person you have the strongest bond with. It can be romantic, yes... but it can also be platonic, filial, maternal...

“I thought it was Draco, at first; but then I saw the way he lights up around you... Come to think of it, Theo’s heart is big enough for two soul mates,” Luna finished with a smile.

“Right,” Hermione murmured, for it was the only thing she could think to say.

“I know Theo loves me, Hermione. And I love him. And that is why I can’t ask him to stay.”

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Bill held up his goblet of wine and he gushed, “To Teddy Remus Lupin... a great wizard in the making!”

“To Teddy!”

Hermione had never seen Lupin beam so. He was walking on air. He went through four helpings of wine in quick succession, before finally insisting he had to leave.

“Goodbye, goodbye – I’ll try and bring some pictures in a few days’ time. Draco, would you come by before you return to Hogwarts? Dora really wants you to meet Teddy.”

“Yeah, alright,” Malfoy agreed, his manner just short of credibly nonchalant.

“Give Tonks our love,” Hermione said.

“Of course. Well. Goodbye.”
They all watched him walk across the veranda, down the rubbly path to the boundary wall... the spring in his step was just lovely.

The drinking didn’t stop after Lupin had gone. They were all just so glad to have a reason to celebrate. By and by, Fleur went into the kitchen to prepare dinner, and Hermione followed wanting to help...
“Non please. I prepare meals by myself, zank you very much!”

So she trundled back into the living room, and found that Ron was the only one there.
“Where,” Hermione asked, “has everyone gone.”
Ron took a large sip from his glass. “Bill wanted a private word with Harry... I think he knows we’ve made some sort of deal with Griphook; isn’t too happy about that. Griphook slipped away ages ago. Everybody... else went to sit in the garden.”
“Shall we go join them?”
“No.”
“Oh, come on, Ron. At least try and –”
“No.”
“Well, fine. But I’m going.”
He shrugged. “Then go.”

The small group in the garden looked up when Hermione joined them, of which three offered her smiles, and one a haughty raised brow.
She sat on the empty wrought iron chair next to Dean, across from Luna, Theo, and Malfoy.
“Guess what, Hermione,” Dean said, “Lupin’s going to take me to see my family day after.”
“That’s wonderful!”
“Yeah,” Dean sighed, staring out at the sea with narrowed eyes, “My dad just woke up from a coma.”
“What happened to him?” Luna asked carefully.
“Death Eaters. They went after him just after I ran away,” he said in a low, gruff voice, “Right outside the magistrate’s office, in full view of about a hundred steel mill workers who were protesting out there. He’d gone to offer them legal representation... Honestly, I don’t know how he survived... All because he has the shit buggering misfortune of being my father. And he isn’t even my father, really. God knows where that arsehole ran off to.”

Nobody knew what to say. Twilight simmered around them, a wash of Payne’s grey shot with pink, hovering over ever-moving waters. The distant screeching of seagulls harmonised with the metrically gushing waves.
“He always says, ‘Dean, fight for what’s right, and everything will be fine.’ What a load of bollocks, yeah?” he added, louder and clearer than before, “He’s fed me so much bullshit... for years I believed that my real father was Nelson Mandela.”
A loud, surprised laugh tore out of Hermione’s throat, and she slapped her palm over her mouth in horror. She turned wide, guilty eyes towards Dean, but he was grinning.
“S’alright. He’d also convinced me that our postman was an Ukranian spy.”
Glad that she was free to be amused, Hermione said, “Mine told me the scar on his chin was from when Johnny Rotten had punched him in the mouth. Later I found out that he’d simply walked into
a pole.”
“Mine told me the empty bulb sockets in our house where government installed surveillance
cameras,” said Dean.
“My dad told me that Thatcher was secretly a cannibal,” Hermione counteracted.
“My dad told me that if you leave cheese in water overnight, it turns into milk.”
“My dad told me money plant leaves are universally viable currency.”
Malfoy muttered, something something “muggles,” but it was drowned out by Dean and
Hermione’s chuckles.
“My dad,” Theo said loudly, “Told me that his personal House-Elf was a child-devouring Erkling.
I didn’t sleep for months.”
Now that wasn’t funny at all, but for some reason, the laughter swelled.
“That’s terrible!” Hermione choked over gasping peals of mirth.
“I KNOW,” Theo cackled, “He also told me that I was... I was.... a dung beetle that he’d
transfigured into a little boy, and if I’d set even a toe out of line, he’d turn me back into one.”
“My father,” Malfoy intoned, (even he was wearing a small grin,) “Told me it would be a really
brilliant idea to pledge eternal fealty to an evil, sadistic, ophiophilistic tyrant.”
“Oafy-wha – ?” Dean wheezed, laughing; still laughing.
Malfoy’s shoulders were shaking as he went on, “It’s my fault really, for believing him. This is the
man who, before first year, told me I was to befriend Potter as he was going to be the next Dark
Lord.”
They were in hysterics, actual hysterics...
Then: “My dad,” Luna piped up, “Hasn’t ever told me a single lie.”

And they exploded. For a moment, Hermione was worried that Luna’s feelings might be hurt, but
the girl was watching Theo throw his head back and cachinate with rapt adoration. Dean had tears
in his eyes, and if, maybe, they were not all laughter-induced, this moment was exactly what he’d
needed.
Giggling and gasping into the back of her hand, Hermione got inexplicably caught up in the bizarre
sight of Malfoy laughing, not meanly, not contemptuously, but genuinely. He was all bright eyes,
and white teeth, and rosy cheeks, and it was...
Unsettling.
Yes, that’s what it was. Unsettling.

“By the way,” Malfoy asked two days later, “How exactly do you plan to double-cross a goblin?”
They were all holed up in Theo and Malfoy’s room, pouring over their plans for the twentieth time.
“Um,” said Harry, “We’re not sure about that yet.”
“Wonderful,” Malfoy carped.
“Truly,” Theo added.
“Well, do you have a better idea then?” Harry demanded angrily.
“Sure,” Malfoy replied glibly, “Not trying to double-cross a goblin.”
“Yes!” Hermione exclaimed before she could stop herself, “Thank you!”
Then she bit her lip in dismay.
A slow, evil grin spread across Malfoy’s stupid face. “Why, Granger,” he drawled.
“Shut up. That’s not what I –”
“Shut up!”
“No, really, I –”
“Can we get back to work?” Ron snapped.

Hermione waited till the last possible moment before downing the tar like substance that Bellatrix’s hair had turned polyjuice into. It was the worst thing she had ever tasted – no exceptions.

She felt the change happen; her limbs grew, her hair turned stringy, her face felt... heavier. She didn’t look down as she changed into black, velvet robes.

She glanced out the window, and in the semi-darkness of dawn, she saw a sliver of her new face reflected in the glass: A ripple of black hair, a single hooded eye.

“Crucio,” she whispered, and it came out in Bellatrix’s low rasp.

It was time to go; it was time to go.

Hermionetrix was trying very hard not to lose her temper as she went about altering Ron’s appearance with a bit of transfiguration.

“I don’t like the beard too long”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, this isn’t about looking handsome”

“It’s not that, it gets in the way! And I’d like my nose a bit shorter...”

Jesus Christ.

“There!” she said finally, “how does he look, Harry?

Harry looked him up and down. “Well, he’s not my type, but he’ll do. Where the hell is Nott?”

“Here!”

His voice was harsh and steely, nothing like she was expecting. Nott Sr., had bequeathed nothing but his jaw line to his son, which was a very good thing.

“You look awful,” Hermionetrix proclaimed.

“Me?!” Not-Sr. spluttered, “Look at you!”

“Would you like me to kiss you, Theo?” Luna asked sweetly.

“Looking like this? NO!”

“I don’t mind...”

“What the fuck, Luna! NO!”

“We are wasting time,” Griphook grumbled over Ron’s sniggers.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, “Let’s go...”

“Just... one moment, Harry,” Hermionetrix whispered. She walked briskly over to Malfoy, who’d been standing a small distance away, eyeing them all stonily. He watched her approach him with a sneer.

“Um,” she said.

“What?!” he countered.

She breathed in, deeply. “Thank you, Malfoy. For... everything.”

But his sneer remained. “I don’t know what’s weirder,” he muttered, “Hermione Granger thanking me, or fucking Aunt Bellatrix thanking me.”
Hermionetrix attempted her best Bellatrix impression: her nose tipped upwards, her eyebrows arched, and she said in the coldest, snootiest way she could, “I should think that that’s obvious.”

She thought he might scowl, or sneer some more, or say something cutting. Instead, what she got from him was the ghost of a smirk.
Some of the dialogue here has been borrowed from DH.

It was unnerving, owning the power that Bellatrix possessed and exerted on anyone in her path. Silence fell in the Leaky Cauldron when Hermione, Not-Sr., Transfigured-Ron, (dubbed Dragomir Despard – Luna’s idea, much to Ron and Malfoy’s displeasure,) entered. Harry and Griphook were well concealed under the invisibility cloak. The scant patrons who were huddled around corner tables hunched low, as if attempting to squeeze themselves out of existence.

“Madam Lestrange, Mr. Nott,” Tom the barman wittered, bowing his head. Candlelight reflected brightly off his smooth, bald scalp. 
Not-Sr. sniffed, not even deigning to look at the man. Hermione on the other hand, lost hold of her senses and said, “Good morning.”
Tom’s head snapped up in surprise.
“Too polite!” hissed Harry’s voice in her ear, “You need to treat people like they’re scum!”
“Okay, okay!” she consented through her teeth.

In the early hours, Diagon Alley looked like an abandoned city; the shops were all barred and bolted, and nobody was around. All was quiet. Still, hints of the new regime were visible in the signboards: Harold’s House of Dark Secrets, The Deathly Apothecary, Book Shoppe - A Borkin and Burke’s Franchise...
Dragomir let out a low whistle.
Almost all available surfaces were plastered with ‘wanted’ posters with Harry’s face on them. Some even showed Hermione and Ron. And there... one of Kingsley...

As they strode deeper down the lane, they began to notice people clustered around random corners. Battered and tattered, they shrunk away into the shadows when they saw Hermione and Not-Sr. It made her want to claw at her face. Ever so often, she’d catch her reflection in dark shop windows, and she’d shudder every time. The shadow that bloomed beneath her feet was the one that had slithered all over her when the world had been reduced to CRUCIO.
She yelped in alarm when, all of a sudden, there was a wild-eyed man right in her face. “My children!” he wailed, waving about a bloody stump of an arm, “Where are my children! What has he done with them? You know! You know!”
He was crying, devastated, hysterical, and she could barely breathe.
“I – I really –”
He sprang at her with a great, big bellow, but then... he was crumpled on the floor ten feet away. Not-Sr. and Dragomir both had their wands brandished.
“Keep moving,” Not-Sr. muttered, “Come on.”
It took a lot of effort for her to tear her eyes away from the wretched man sobbing and clawing at the ground with his one good hand. Drawn by the commotion, faces began appearing at various windows, all united by their look of utter horror.
Well, so much for making an inconspicuous entry. And god, if she didn’t get it together she’d bugger up the entire enterprise. *I am Bellatrix, I am Bellatrix, I AM Bellatrix, I am –*

“Why, Madam Lestrange!”

*Exactly.*

They whirled around all together to watch a stout, grey-haired wizard making his way towards them.

*I am Bellatrix, and I am an atrocious inhuman being.* She drew back her shoulders and sneered, “And what do you want?”

The man’s face went cold and hard, and *Not-Sr.* unobtrusively tilted his head and whispered out of the corner of his mouth, “Travers. Death Eater.”

“I merely sought to greet you,” said Travers frostily, “but if my presence is not welcome...”

Hermionetrix hastily tried to salvage the situation, “No, no, not at all, Travers. How are you?”

“Well, thank you. And good morning to you, too, Nott.”

*Not-Sr.* nodded balefully, and Travers seemed to accept that as his manner. He turned back to Hermionetrix and said, “I confess I am surprised to see you out and about, Bellatrix.”

“Really? Why?” she asked haughtily.

“Well... I heard that the inhabitants of Malfoy Manor were confined to the house, after the... ah... escape,” he responded delicately.

“I am Bellatrix. “The Dark Lord forgives those who have served him most faithfully in the past. Perhaps your credit is not as good with him as mine is, Travers.”

Travers mouth thinned with anger, but the cloud of mistrust in his eyes lessened. Looking down at the still weeping man on the ground he enquired, “How did this one offend you?”

“It does not matter,” Hermionetrix replied derisively, “He will not do so again.”

Travers nodded, impressed. “Some of these wandless can be troublesome,” he said, “While they do nothing but beg I have no objection, but one of them actually asked me to plead her case in the Ministry last week – but whose wand are you using at the moment, Bellatrix? I heard that your own was –”

“I have my wand here,” Hermionetrix snapped, holding up Bellatrix’s wand, “I don’t know what rumours you have been listening to, Travers, but you seem sadly misinformed.”

“I... I see,” Travers stuttered in surprise. Then he sneeringly looked at Dragomir and asked, “Who is your friend? I do not recognize him.”

“This is Dragomir Despard. He speaks very little English, but he is in sympathy with the Dark Lord’s aims. He has travelled here from Transylvania to see our new regime.”

“Indeed? How do you do, Dragomir?”

Dragomir held out his hand, (“’Ow you?”) and Travers reluctantly shook it.

“So what brings you all to Diagon Alley this early?”

“I need to visit Gringotts,” said Hermionetrix, getting seriously agitated by Traver’s inquisition. Why wouldn’t he just go away?

“Alas, I also.” (Of bloody course!) “Gold, filthy gold! We cannot live without it, yet I confess I deplore the necessity of consorting with our long-fingered friends. Shall we?”

Well they hardly had a choice in the matter. Just what was needed: A suspicious and attentive Death Eater in their midst.

“So... Nott,” Travers ventured as they walked, “I hear your son stood with the Order during the incident.”

“You certainly hear a lot, Travers,” said *Not-Sr.* with contempt.

“Well...”

“I have no son.”

“Right, yes, of course,” muttered Travers hurriedly, “It’s just that you had made such glorious, high-ceilinged promises about what you’d do to your – er the boy – if you’d ever get your hands on him...”

*Not-Sr.* cracked his knuckles and glowered, “All the more pity that I wasn’t present at Malfoy
Manor that night. I intend to keep those promises, Travers. Or do you doubt...”
“Not at all!”
Hermionetrix kept her eyes fixed ahead, though she itched to glance over at her friend... just to get some sort of sign that he was still indeed in there somewhere. The way he spoke was so ferocious, so convincing, that it frightened her.

Soon enough, they were poised before the tall doors of Gringotts. At the entrance were two navy-cloaked wizards holding golden batons.
“Ah, Probity Probes,” sighed Travers theatrically, “So crude – but so effective!”

As he was being checked, Hermionetrix heard the softest whisper of “Confundo; Confundo,” and knew it was safe for her to pass.

Inside the enormous marble hall of the bank, the unlikely quartet (plus two,) stalked towards an elderly goblin perched on a high stool. Travers went first, and then... Hermionetrix stepped forward.

“Madam Lestrange!” the goblin gasped, “Dear me! How – how may I help you today?”
“I wish to enter my vault,” she replied arrogantly.

The goblin suffered a strange little spasm as he peered at her. In fact, everyone – goblin and human – had stopped what they were doing to stare at her.

“You have... identification?”
“Identification?” she screeched, “I – I have never been asked for identification before!”

“Think of who you are talking to, goblin!” Not-Sr. growled.

The goblin ignored him. “Your wand will do, madam.”
Her hands began to quake. They knew. It was obvious they knew that Bellatrix was not supposed to have her own wand.

“Ah, you have had a new wand made, Madam Lestrange!”
“What?” Travers sputtered, startled, “But you just said – and how could you have done? Which wandmaker did you use?”

“I – um – you see –”

“Oh yes, I see,” said Travers, rather... blankly... as he stared down at the wand, “Yes, very handsome. Is it working well? I always think wands require a little breaking in, don’t you?”

What the hell was going on? Somehow, she mustered the presence of mind to nod, and then the old goblin clapped his hands, summoning a younger looking one.

“I shall need the Clankers,” he told him, and once he’d been handed a jingling leather bag continued, “Good, good! Now, if you will follow me, Madam Lestrange, I shall take you to your vault.”

The moment they entered into a stone torch-lit passage, Harry threw the cloak off himself and Griphook.

“We’re in trouble,” he stated, “They suspect.”

Somehow, neither Travers nor the goblin seemed remotely perturbed by the sudden appearance of the Undesirable Number One.

“They’re Imperiused,” Harry explained.
“Wicked stuff, Potter,” Not-Sr. commended. Harry spared him an impatient look. “I don’t think I did it strongly enough, I don’t know...” “What do we do? Shall we get out now, while we can?” Dragomir asked frantically. “If we can,” Hermionetrix muttered, glancing back at the door that had snapped shut behind them. Loud voices were piercing through the heavy wood. Harry shook his head, “We’ve got this far, I say we go on.” “Good!” Griphook barked, “So, we need Bogrod here to control the cart; I no longer have the authority. But there will not be room for the wizard.” “Okay. Imperio!” Traver’s blank expression glazed over some more, and he wandered away into the darkness. “What are you making him do?” she whispered. “Hide.”

She’d been on a rollercoaster ride only twice in her life, on two separate trips to Adventure Island. She hadn’t particularly enjoyed either of those instances. Hurtling through dark, twisty-turny channels in a bloody bucket, with no seatbelts of any sort was far worse. Since she didn’t have a vault, she’d never seen this part of the bank before... Why was it that the magical world insisted on the most bizarre, terrifying, and impractical ways to do basic things? Screech! – They swung around a sharp corner and Hermionetrix grabbed Not-Sr.’s hand. Oh, she was going to vomit for sure. Suddenly, after another petrifying sharp turn, they were confronted with a gushing rapid pummelling the track ahead. “FUCK!” roared Not-Sr. and Harry. “No!” shouted Griphook. Hermionetrix and Dragomir screamed. But there was no stopping. They burst through the cascade, water soaked her through, and with unexpected abruptness she was Hermione once more.

There was barely a moment to gasp – the cart turned over and tossed the lot of them. And they were freefalling, whizzing down toward the unforgiving ground below... “Molliare!” Hermione shrieked. They all slowed and landed gently on the rocky floor. “C-Cushioning Charm,” she heaved, as Ron helped her up. He was back to himself, and so was Theo. “The Thief’s Downfall!” Griphook said gravely, “It washes away all enchantment, all magical concealment. They know there are imposters in Gringotts, they have set off defences against us!”

“Lumos!” they all murmured once inside the Lestrange’s vault. Well here it was then, Aladdin’s legendary cave; the light from their wands revealed mountains of gold and silver, gems and jewels. Looking over at her companions, Hermione saw that they all wore different expressions – Harry was determined, Ron was utterly enthralled, Theo unimpressed, and Griphook... shifty.
What was her face doing, she wondered.

She drifted away, carefully examining the endless piles. She saw Gryffindor’s fake sword, a solid gold armour, an emerald encrusted candelabra, strings of pearls, a skull made of lapis lazuli, a golden goblet dotted with diamonds and amethysts...

“Harry, could this be –? Aaaah!”

The goblet fell from her hands as she screamed. The blasted thing had burned her. She shoved her scorched fingers into her mouth, and when she looked down, the cup seemed to have multiplied... she couldn’t tell which the one she’d originally picked up was.

“They have added Germino and Flagrante Curses!” Griphook exclaimed.

“Okay, don’t touch anything!” Harry instructed pointlessly.

Or, not so pointlessly, as a second later, Ron tripped over a Faberge egg, and then there were about thirty more of them.

“Oh, well done, Weasley,” Theo snapped.

“Sod off,” Ron grumbled, hopping around clutching his burned foot.

“Stand still! Don’t move!” Hermione ordered.

Every tiny corner of the vault was then examined with utmost care. Of course, it was difficult to entirely avoid brushing against things...

“HA!” Ron barked, “Whose fault is it now?”

“Shut up,” Theo griped as he scowled down at the surplus of onyx chalices strewn around him.

“Oh, so it’s no big deal when you fuck up, eh, Super-Wizard?”

“Weasley, I will shove you into that priceless Japanese screen behind you, and then you’ll get scalded so thoroughly that you’ll turn into one giant blister, and your skin will actually match your hair, and –”

“You wouldn’t dare, you prick –”

“Oh, really? J–”

“That’s ENOUGH, both of you!”

Hermione was tiptoeing her way through six towers of gold bricks when Harry’s exclamation (“It’s there! It’s up there!”) caused her to come dangerously close to knocking one of them down.

She ran over and saw that yes, indeed, there was a little golden cup sitting high up on a shelf far beyond their reach.

Ron asked, “You’re sure that’s the one?”

“Definitely,” said Harry steadily, “It’s the one I saw in Hokey the House-Elf’s memory.”

“...Merlin, I am dying to know what you three have been up to this past year,” said Theo.

With an agonised scream, Hermione burst out of the Lestrange’s vault as burning hot metal pressed and sizzled into her skin. She crashed sideways into Theo, and immediately, he helped steady her.

Ron, breathing heavily, cried “We’re done for!”

Goblins had surrounded them – were bearing down on them – flashing maces and daggers with intent. Suddenly Griphook streaked past, waving Gryffindor’s sword while shouting, “Thieves! Thieves! Help! Thieves!”
“Stupefy!” Harry roared, and his fury at being betrayed doubly redoubled the intensity of his spell. Hermione, Theo, and Ron followed his lead: “STUPEFY!”

Goblins scattered helter-skelter, and above the furore, a tethered dragon roared. A wave of fire swept by above their heads.

“THIS WAY!”

“Harry – Harry – what are you doing?” Hermione yelled, watching in horror as he charged straight towards the fuming dragon.

“COME ON!”

Hermione grabbed Ron and Theo by the elbows and dragged them behind Harry as they continued to aim spells at the goblins.

“Harry, what... what...?”

They were standing by the dragon’s foot, and the goblins had begun shooting arrows at them and......

“Get up,” Harry commanded, “Climb up, come on –”

WHAT!

“Huh?!”

“Potter, are you insane?!”

But Harry was already clambering up the dragon’s back. He held out his hand to Hermione looking absolutely beside himself, and – Mother Superior jumped the gun – Hermione took it and let him pull her up.

Onto the Dragon. She was sitting on the back of a great, big, fire-breathing dragon.

A BLIND fire-breathing Dragon.

“Mental. This. Is. Mental!” Ron huffed as he climbed behind her.

“Seconded. Fucking Seconded,” Theo agreed as he scrambled up after him.

And then Harry pointed his wand at the dragon’s tether and set it free.

The dragon did what you would expect a dragon that had been held captive in an underground cave for years to do.

It soared.

Its sheer delight at finally being able to stretch its wings was palpable. It roared as it circled high above London, it purred as it dashed through clouds.

Hermione, however, was the opposite of jubilant. Discomfort with heights and all that aside... there was the little thing about the creature being blind. And if its inability to sense the presence of four people on its back was anything to go by, then its other senses weren’t all that spiffy either. Especially since Hermione was prone to screaming bloody murder every time the beast swerved, and Theo and Ron were lobbing a whole array of swear words high into the open sky.

Harry was cool as a cucumber, though. He’d had a far worse interaction with a dragon back in fourth year. But that was always the case with him... Harry had always seen worse. Excuse him while he yawns through your abject terror.

Oh LORD.

The dragon wanted air as fresh and thin as possible, it seemed, and this quest compelled it to go higher and higher and higher...
The ground below was nonspecific and greenbrown (and SO far away - she promised herself that she would not look down again); there was no telling where they’d reached. Hermione remembered reading that dragons could fly for up to 32 hours without needing to stop. She didn’t have the temerity to loosen her hold around Harry’s waist so she might check her watch... but from the sun’s position, she hazarded a guess that it was sometime around noon. So that was five hours since they’d escaped from Gringotts.

The dragon swerved to the right. “EEEHP!” she yelped.

“What do you reckon it’s looking for?” Ron yelled over her head some time later.
“No idea!” Harry shouted back.
“It’s going to take us to fucking Helsinki, I’m telling you!” Theo bellowed.

On and on and on it went. But, Thankfully, it had lost some of the initial fervor that had enthralled it in the first leg of its flight. The dragon was now cruising around at a dreamy pace, and if, somehow, she could bring herself to forget that she was hundreds of thousands of feet up in the air atop a blind dragon, Hermione might’ve thought that it was almost… pleasant.

Her mind wandered periodically. She imagined a scenario where she was telling her parents about this jaunt over dinner. (“Oh my!” gasped mum, and “But that’s absolutely mad!” raved dad.)

Theo said, “Moi is how you greet people in Finland, by the way.”
Ron replied, “For Godric’s sake, Nott… I’m stressed enough right now without you saying things and making it all worse.”

The sun was setting, so the sky darkened. Monsieur Dragon arced over a mountain range and let out a contented rumble. It was suddenly very, very cold, and the chilly air felt marvelous against the numerous burns on Hermione’s skin.

After another age of quiet flying, Ron piped up, “Is it my imagination or are we losing height?”
Putting much at risk, Hermione made herself look. He was right – the tops of trees were no longer tiny green dots, and she could see miniature roads and little houses, all soaked in sunset hues. There was a brook directly beneath them, *(for men may come and men may go but it goes on forever,)* and she saw a herd of sheep being led into their enclosure by a man... Gabriel Oak, perhaps. They passed a small forest, a church, a meadow, another farm...

Then the dragon was flying in circles over a lake. Circles that were getting tighter by the second as it descended: A literal downward spiral. Hermione started to *giggle* which was batty, but then Harry shocked the sanity back into her:
“I say we jump when it gets low enough! Straight into the water before it realizes we’re here!”
*Oh dear.*
“How,” Theo shouted, “Are you the boy who keeps living when all your ideas are so fucking mad!”
“They may be mad, but obviously they work! Okay then… NOW!”
Hermione slid off the dragon’s back and whizzed through the icy air for an eternity, and landed with a huge, horrifying SPLASH into icier waters.

She bobbed up and down, gasping, looking across large ripples to see Theo, Harry, and Ron breaking through the surface of the water. The dragon was already miles away; a shadowy speck against the cobalt sky.

Together, the four of them swam towards the nearest shore. Hermione nearly flew into a panic when one of her legs got tangled up in a clump of reeds, but Ron came to her rescue, pulling her free.

Hacking and spluttering, she crawled onto solid ground and collapsed. She could hear Ron’s wheezes nearby and Harry’s breathless incantations as he cast protective spells around them.

For a long time they just lay on the grass, panting. Unmoving. Unbelieving.

“Holy... Holy.... Holy...” Theo murmured.

And then it was back to business. Hermione sat up and began fumbling around in her bag, pulling out a change of clothes for all. She fished out a phial of dittany for their burns, and four large bottles of pumpkin juice.

In dry clothes and with healed skin, they blinked around at each other as they gulped juice like it was heavenly nectar straight from Mount Olympus.

“Well, on the upside,” Ron remarked, “we got the cup. On the downside –”

“–no sword,” Harry fumed.

“No sword. That double-crossing little scab.”

“Goblins, yeah?” Theo quipped, “If only someone had warned you that it wasn’t a good idea to –”

“Nott, I swear, I –”

“What’ll happen to the dragon?” Hermione asked, mostly to stop their bickering, but also because she was a bit concerned, “Will it be alright? I mean… its blind and not used to being out in the wild…”

Ron looked at her bemusedly. “You sound like Hagrid. It’s a dragon, Hermione, it can look after itself. It’s us we need to worry about.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well I don’t know how to break this to you,” he replied slowly, “but I think they might have noticed we broke into Gringotts.”

Theo let out a great big snort of laughter. Ron gawked at him, startled, but then on his other side, Harry fell onto his back and cracked up. After that it was inevitable; they all guffawed till their throats were raw.

Actually, until Harry’s gasps of hilarity turned into those of pain. Hermione, Ron, and Theo scrambled to his side in alarm, and watched as he twitched and shuddered, lost in yet another untimely foray into Voldemort’s mind.

“What the fuck is wrong with him?” Theo demanded, even as he continued to stare at Harry with horrified fascination.

“He’s, um, having a vision,” Hermione explained weakly.

“Potter’s a seer?!”

“No, really,” Ron intoned scornfully.

Alright. You need to tell me what’s up,” Theo stated emphatically, “I’ve gone along with things
so far, dragon et al, but now Potter here has gone for a stroll down Dark Lord Lane, and I want to
know why we went through hell to get hold of a bit of bric-a-brac,” he ended by tilting his head
towards Hufflepuff’s cup nestled innocuously in Ron’s hand.
“You’re right,” Hermione sighed.
“Hermione, NO!” Ron exclaimed.
“...Imposters....” Harry moaned.
“Ron, we owe him the truth now, I think!”
“Yes, Ron,” Theo seconded unhelpfully.
“Hermione, Harry doesn’t want to tell him!”
“This isn’t about Harry...”
“Of course it is!”
“It’s about You-Know-Who, Ron! It’s about everybody who’s fighting to bring him down! It’s
about you, and me, and —”
“He’ll just go off and tell Malfoy first thing!”
“No I won’t,” Theo snapped.
“Yeah, right...”

They glared lividly at each other. Hermione could sense something unpleasant churning about in
Ron’s head, poised to come shooting out of his mouth, so quickly she intervened –
“The cup’s a Horcrux.”
“What?!”
“Hermione......!”

Theo instinctively flinched away from the small golden relic. “Are you serious? A bloody
Horcrux!”
“Yes.”
“You-Know-Who made a Horcrux?!”
“Six, actually.”
“Yeesh.”
“...Yes.”
“So that’s what you’ve been doing all this while? Tracking down Horcruxes?”
“Basically.”

“Hold on a second,” Ron broke in angrily, “You know what a Horcrux is?”
“You know who my father is?” came Theo’s pat reply.
“You mean,” Hermione spluttered with dread, “That your father’s made one too?”
“Nah. He just told me all about them during my pre-Hogwarts lessons. One of the greatest magical
accomplishments, according to him.”
“Your father is a sick bastard,” Ron spat.
“Finally something we can agree on, Weasley.”

As they eyed each other guardedly, Harry resurfaced with a groan.
“He knows,” he rasped, “He knows and he’s going to check where the others are... and the last one
is at Hogwarts. I knew it. I knew it.”
Harry jumped into a standing position spryly, and it was hard to believe that just a moment ago he
was trembling feebly on the ground.
“What?” blurted Theo and Ron.
“But what did you see?” Hermione questioned, “How do you know?”
“I saw him find out about the cup, I – I was in his head,” Harry began pacing as the other three got
to their feet, “he’s... seriously angry, and scared too. Can’t understand how we knew, and now he’s
going to check if the others are safe, the ring first. He thinks the Hogwarts one is safest, because
Snape’s there, because it’ll be hard not to be seen getting in. I think he’ll check that one last, but he could still be there within hours –"

“Did you see where in Hogwarts it is?” Ron asked.

“No, he was concentrating on warning Snape, he didn’t think about exactly where it is – fuck – We need to get going.”

“But how are we going to get in?” Hermione wondered fretfully.

“Hog’s Head,” said Theo immediately, “There’s a way into the Room of Requirement in there. It’s what Draco’s been using all year...”

“Fine,” Harry assented grimly, “It’s a good thing it’s dark... Hermione, you can fit under the Cloak with me, but first disillusion these two, yeah?”

She nodded and set to work, hoping Bellatrix’s wand would let her cast the charm as well as her original wand had done. The results seemed satisfactory enough.

She walked slowly over to stand by Harry’s side.

“Okay, everybody ready?” He swung the cloak around the two of them, and – “One... two... three...”

It had been a whirl: Seconds after they’d apparated to Hogsmeade, Death Eaters were on them – though, thanks to the cloak and disillusionments, they were able to escape into an alleyway, quickly.

“Let’s just leave!” Hermione hissed.

“Yeah... Disappearate now!” Theo agreed.

“Great idea,” Ron added.

(“WE KNOW YOU ARE HERE, POTTER, AND THERE’S NO GETTING AWAY! WE’LL FIND YOU!”)

“They were ready for us,” whispered Harry. “They set up that spell to tell them we’d come. I reckon they’ve done something to keep us here, trap us –”

“We have to try, Harry!” Hermione beseeched.

But then came Dementors, and there was no way the Death Eaters wouldn’t notice the brilliant silver stag that chased them away.

The Death Eaters were in an uproar –

“You broke the curfew, you doddering old fuck!” shouted one.

“I still say I saw a stag Patronus!” railed another.

The barman of the Hog’s Head stared them down. “Stag? It’s a goat, idiot!”

Still under the cloak, Hermione peeped over the bar to watch the scene. Evidently, the goat Patronus had persuaded the assembly of Death Eaters, for she saw only their backs as they walked out. The barman chained and bolted the front door behind them, then watched them for a while through a window.

Abruptly, he spun around, and gruffly called out, “It’s safe. You can come out now,” and once they
“You bloody fools. What were you thinking, coming here?”
“Thank you,” Harry said to him, “We can’t thank you enough. You saved our lives!”
The barman merely grunted, before disappearing into an adjoining room.

“Cheerful bugger, isn’t he?” Theo whispered.
“...Like a slice of Snape,” Hermione rejoined.
“With Pince drizzle,” Theo continued.
“And a Filch on the top.”
“I’m starving,” Ron moaned, and they all stared at him, quite disturbed. “What?”

Luckily for Ron, the barman returned with a plate laden with bread and cheese, and a jug full of mead. They fell upon it like noble Brutus fell upon his sword, like Icarus fell to the sea; with finality, with passion, with outstanding grace.

“Fank oo, real goof,” said Ron with outstanding grace.

The barman nodded.

Harry swallowed a mouthful, cleared his throat and said, not as a question but a statement, “You’re Aberforth.”

“Aye.”

Hermione stopped eating to stare at the man who Rita Skeeter had written off as an irredeemable freak. Bearded like his brother, and bespectacled, too. His eyes were the same brilliant blue, and they were narrowed as he watched Harry.

“Right then,” he said, “We need to think of the best way to get you out of here. Can’t be done by night, you heard what happens if anyone moves outdoors during darkness...”

“No,” Harry cut in, “We aren’t leaving.”

“Don’t be stupid, boy!”

“We need to get into Hogwarts! If you can’t help us, we’ll wait till daybreak, leave you in peace, and try to find a way in ourselves...”

“But you can help,” Theo added, “There’s a way in from here, don’t deny it. Where is it?”

“Please,” Hermione implored.

Aberforth looked at all of their faces closely, one by one, and then sighed, seeming to cave. He turned to the portrait of a young girl on the wall behind him, and muttered, “You know what to do.”

She smiled, turned and walked away, receding into the tunnel painted behind her. And when she eventually returned, she was not alone. The one with her, undoubtedly male, possessed a much taller, much broader frame.

And when the portrait swung open like a door and he tumbled out, Hermione gave a little whoop of delight.

“Neville!”

Neville, looking more hard and weathered than she had ever seen him, grinned broadly. “I knew you’d come! I knew it!”

As they walked down the dark and narrow tunnel, Neville told them all about the many ways the Carrows had terrorized the teachers and students of Hogwarts. He was so... cavalier about it all; entirely unruffled. Though he was limping, and though one of his eyes was swollen shut, he appeared genuinely and utterly delighted to see them all again.
Casually, he mentioned incidents that made Hermione’s stomach turn: Terry Boot getting beaten up, the relentless use of the Crucius curse during lessons, Michael Corner getting chained up and tortured, Padma suffering the wrath of Alecto for weeks, Seamus being sentenced to daily lashings…
“My god, Neville,” she half-sobbed.
“We’re all alright, though,” he put an arm around her and smiled, “You’ll see. They’ll all be bloody chuffed to see you!”
“Who are you?” Ron asked him with awe, and he chuckled.
“Well… here we are,” he announced as they arrived at a door. As he pulled it open he shouted, “Look who it is! Didn’t I tell you?”

Harry walked through the opening first. He was greeted with a humungous roar, and so the remaining three rushed on after him…

The Room of Requirement was larger than she had ever seen, full of beds, sofas, lamps, bookcases, and colourful hangings depicting all four houses; but that wasn’t what rooted Hermione to the ground. It was the massive throng of people that gathered around, hugging her, patting her back, shaking her hand…
“HARRY!” “It’s Potter – POTTER!” “Ron!” “Hermione!” “Oh... Theo!”
“Okay, okay, calm down!” Neville ordered, and they all listened. He was, well and truly, their leader. What a marvel that boy was!

“Surpassed itself, hasn’t it?” Neville beamed.
“It’s all down to Neville,” Seamus said, “He really gets this room – knows exactly what to ask. Neville’s the man!” His face was so badly swollen, that his grin looked painful. Hermione hurriedly took some murtlap essence out from her bag and handed it to him. “So... what are you –”

Harry jerked and fell to his knees, hands rising up to find his scar.

“What?”

“We need to get going,” Harry muttered through his teeth, looking hard at Hermione and Ron.
“What are we going to do, then, Harry?” asked Seamus, “What’s the plan?”
“Plan? Well, there’s something we – Ron, Hermione, and I – need to do, and then we’ll get out of here.”
Everybody stopped chattering at once.
“What d’you mean, ‘get out of here’?”
“We haven’t come back to stay,” Harry replied shortly, “There’s something important we need to do –”
“What is it?”
“I – I can’t tell you.”

Hermione saw Theo’s lips thin, Neville’s eyebrows push together, and Seamus’s nostrils flare.

“Why can’t you tell us?” Neville demanded, “It’s something to do with fighting You-Know-Who, right?”
“Well, yes –”
“Then we’ll help you.”

Cries of hear hear erupted across the room. Hermione saw so many faces that made her heart leap – Parvati, Lavender, Ernie, Justin, Terry…
“You don’t understand,” Harry mumbled feebly, “We – we can’t tell you. We’ve got to do it –
alone."

"Oh get over yourself, Potter!" Theo burst out, "I’m so tired of this solo woe-is-me-trip you have going. Didn’t you hear what Longbottom said? We’re all fighting the same war. Let them bloody help you!"

"Good man!" Seamus cheered, and a few people even applauded.

Harry glared. "Dumbledore left the three of us a job and we weren’t supposed to tell! I mean, he wanted us to do it, just the three of us."

"We’re his army," Neville said fervently, "Dumbledore’s Army. We’ve been keeping it going while you three have been off on your own –"

"It hasn’t exactly been a picnic, mate," Ron interjected.

"I’m sure it hasn’t but I don’t see why you can’t trust us! Everyone in this room’s been fighting and they’ve been driven in here because the Carrows were hunting them down. Everyone in here’s proven they’re loyal to Dumbledore – loyal to you."

The uncomfortable silence that followed was, thankfully, short-lived. The door leading to the secret tunnel popped open and Luna, Dean, and Malfoy strolled in. There were twin roars of delight from Theo and Seamus as they both ran toward the new arrivals. Theo kissed Luna in a way that led to many wolf whistles, and Seamus hugged Dean like they were meeting after twenty years.

But the most bizarre thing to happen was Neville going over to clap Malfoy on the back.

"Malfoy! Good to see you again, mate."

"Longbottom," Malfoy replied stiffly, "You look like shite."

"Well, you haven’t been around to heal me, have you?"

("Have we entered an alternate reality?" Ron whispered, dumbstruck.)

"What the hell are they doing here?" Harry demanded.

"I called them," Neville responded, holding up a DA Galleon, "I promised I would when you’d show up to help us reclaim Hogwarts."

"That’s what we’re doing, isn’t it Harry?" Luna trilled from between Theo’s arms, "We’re going to fight them out of Hogwarts?"

Harry’s mouth opened and closed soundlessly a few times. "Listen," he stuttered, "I’m sorry, but that’s not what we came back for. There’s something we’ve got to do, and then –"

"You’re going to leave us in this clusterfuck?" Michael Corner spat.

"No!" said Ron, "What we’re doing will benefit everyone in the end, it’s all about trying to get rid of You-Know-Who –"

"Then let us help!" said Neville angrily. "We want to be a part of it!"

They were saved by the door again: This time it marked the arrival of Fred, George, Lee Jordan, and...

"Ginny!"

She smiled, brightly, widely, (her bright red hair just brushing the tops of her shoulders,) and threw herself into Harry’s embrace.

"Little brother!" Fred and George cried in unison and tackled Ron.

"Aberforth’s getting a bit annoyed," said Lee Jordan, "He wants a kip, and his bar’s turned into a railway station."

As Hermione hugged Ginny, George loosened his chokehold on Ron and conversationally enquired, "So what’s the plan, Harry?"

"There isn’t one," Harry groaned.

"Just going to make it up as we go along, are we? My favourite kind," Fred rejoiced.
“That’s the Potter way,” said Theo dryly.
“You’ve got to stop this!” Harry begged Neville despairingly, “What did you call them all back for? This is insane –”
“Why can’t they help?” said Ron suddenly.
“What?”

Ron pulled him and Hermione aside. “They can help,” he whispered, “We don’t know where it is; we’ve got to find it fast. We don’t have to tell them it’s a Horcrux.”
“Ron’s right,” Hermione agreed firmly, “We need them. You... You... don’t have to do everything alone, Harry.”

He had a funny look on his face as he mulled that over, upset but also completely bewildered.
“All right,” he said in the end, and he turned towards the anxious crowd. “Okay.”

*

Ravenclaw’s lost diadem was a gamble by any definition, but it was the only lead they had. Harry locked his hands behind his back and whispered to Hermione and Ron, “I’m going to go and look at this statue of Ravenclaw... at least find out what the diadem looks like. Wait for me here and keep, you know – the other one – safe.”
“Yes.”
“Sure.”

Harry looked askance at Cho, who jumped to her feet, but Ginny brusquely insisted, “No. Luna will take Harry, won’t you, Luna?”
Luna smiled brightly, “Oooh, yes, I’d like to.” (And Cho sat back down looking decidedly cross.)
“I’m coming too,” said Theo in a tone that brooked no arguments.

*

Once Harry, Luna, and Theo had gone, Hermione wandered around the large room, taking in everything. It was like being inside an enormous bomb shelter. The recent turn of events had given rise to an air of flagrant excitement, and all around, people were chatting, convening, buzzing...

Terry Boot smiled at her as she passed the corner where he was huddled with Michael, Cho, Lisa, and Mandy.
Ernie and Justin waved as she walked by.
She grinned when she saw Parvati and Lavender asking Angelina to plait their hair into serviceable, battle-friendly styles.
Her eyebrows shot up when she saw Padma and Tracy sitting awfully close together, talking in whispers, with their hands tightly clasped.

Then she got to where Fred, George, and Ginny were sitting with Malfoy.
“Draco,” sang Fred.
“Draaaaaaco,” crooned George.
They put their heads together, fluttered their eyelashes and sighed, “Oh, Draco!”
“What’s all this?” Hermione demanded of Ginny who shot her an amused look.
“Fred and George are imitating mum. She’s very grateful that Malfoy risked his life to warn us about the attack on the Burrow.”
Malfoy looked very sorry indeed that he had done so.
“Would you like some cake, Draco?” said Fred.
“Is that horrid wooden chair too hard on your precious little arse, Draco?” said George.
Ginny snickered, “I won’t be surprised if mum declares him an honorary Weasley.”
Malfoy turned vaguely green. “Just fuck off will you?”
“But, George... do you think Draco dear will be able to pull off red hair?”
“With that face and those eyes? How can you even ask, Fred?”
“Oh sorry, sorry. Won’t daddy Malfoy be thrilled...”

Hermione moved on. Neville and Dean were sitting with Seamus as some fifth year Ravenclaw girl slathered murtlap essence all over his face.
“...need a wand,” Dean muttered.
Seamus gasped, “You don’t have a wand?!”
“Wait... I have a couple of spare ones,” said Neville reassuringly, “Nicked them from the Carrow’s confiscated lot...”

Finally, at one corner of the room, sitting by the wall directly under the Gryffindor banner, Hermione found Ron.
“Isn’t this the craziest thing you’ve ever seen?” he mumbled as she sat down next to him.
“Really, Ron,” she smiled, “After... well, everything... this is what throws you?”
“Er... yeah?”
Hermione laughed. “I know what you mean though. This is weird. It’s incredible.”
They stared about them in amazement for a while.
Then, Ron looked at her questioningly. “What do you reckon... this diadem thing... do you think it’s what we’re looking for?”
“I don’t know,” Hermione mumbled, and just like that all her optimism came crashing down, “Honestly, it better be. We have nothing else to go on.”
“Right.” Ron ran a hand through his hair anxiously.
“But,” she continued, “Even if it is a Horcrux... we have no way of getting rid of it, do we?”
“Fuck, you’re right,” Ron groaned, “Too bad we don’t have a couple the basilisk’s toothpicks... at... hand...” He trailed off, and a look of wonder bloomed across his face.
“Ron? What?”
“That’s it!” he exclaimed. His eyes were so wide... “The basilisk! Hermione...! The basilisk!”
“What are you –”
“It’s still here, innit? In the Chamber of Secrets... we can just go pick up a couple of its fangs and _”
“Oh my god!” she gasped.
“Yeah?”
“YES! Ron... YES. That’s... That’s BRILLIANT!”
“So shall we go then?”
“Absolutely! Shit, Ron, you’re a genius!”
“Let's not get ahead of ourselves,” he grinned as she gaped. Looking over his shoulder he called, “Oi, Neville... wouldn’t have some brooms lying about here, would you?”
There they were, Hermione and Ron, staring at the snake-engraved sink tap that was the key to the Chamber of Secrets; tense, anxious, frightened, exhilarated.... And Moaning Myrtle descended on them.
“Oh look! It’s Ginger and the kitty-cat!”
“Not now, Myrtle!” Hermione snapped, while Ron made another series of hissing sounds at the tap.
“You’re always so rude,” she wailed, “Where’s Harry?”
Ron’s fifth attempt at Parseltongue fell flat.
“The last time I saw him, he hurt poor Draco so badly. They were fighting over me...”
Ron hissed. Hermione told Myrtle to shut up.
“Angry little pussy, aren’t you? You think you’re better than lonely, miserable Myrtle... but I don’t see any boys fighting over you...”

The squat and sullen spectre fell silent as a low rumbling sound pervaded the air. The sink began to rotate and disappear into the ground.
“You did it, Ron!” Hermione gasped.
“Bloody hell. I did, didn’t I?” he said with that quintessentially Ron look of gobsmackedness, “Um, alright then,” he continued as he peered down the narrow tunnel that had revealed itself, “Geronimo!”

The Chamber was long and filled with snake-engravings. Every last surface was covered. A bit much, Hermione thought. Yes, Salazar, you like snakes. Got it.
At the far end was an enormous statue of the man himself, all bearded and stern, like an ancient sculpture of Poseidon. A diffused and faintly green mist filled the space, and twisting, turning, coiling all over the stone floor was the skeleton of a colossal serpent.
“Look at the size of that thing,” Ron breathed.
“The Great Wall of China,” Hermione blurted with mindless awe. Harry had taken this monster on all by himself. At twelve. Jesus.

They walked around the chamber, searching for the creature’s head...
“Here!” Ron called from between two (snake-covered) pillars. Hermione rushed over and baulked at the sight of the massive skull with spiky, yellowed, scythe-like teeth. She stepped forward, and a couple of severing charms later, there was a small pile of Basilisk fangs before her. She swallowed, delved into her bag, and took out Hufflepuff’s golden cup.
“Here,” she whispered quiveringly, holding it out to Ron. His hand half-lifted... but then dithered and dropped back to his side. “No,” he stated with a shake of his head, “You do it.”

“Me?” she squeaked, startled, “Why?”

“You haven’t had the pleasure yet,” Ron shrugged, “It’s only fair that you get a go.”

Right. Like they were in a playground, and he was offering her a turn on the swings.

“Oh.”

Kneeling on the damp, slimy ground, with the cup placed in front of her and a fang in hand, Hermione found herself unable to move.

“Go on,” Ron murmured encouragingly, crouching down next to her, “Just do it.”

_Just do it._ She was hit with a paralyzing, primal fear that seemed to be emanating right out of the cup. _Just do it. Just_ –

She raised the fang high above her head and, eyes fixed on the Horcrux, took a deep breath and struck. There was a deafening, awful screech – and it wasn’t that of metal being pierced. It was human, but only in the loosest sense of the word. From within the small gash her strike had made, a wisp of black smoke seeped out, and within seconds it got larger and sturdier till it towered over her, a solid, vaguely anthropomorphic form.

_The Brightest Witch of her age,_ the... thing... the behemoth... the golem... spoke in a chorus which was a culmination of so many voices she recognised, _“Hermione Granger. What a tragic waste.”_

She stared up at the mountainous figure feeling all the various voices tug at different heartstrings.

_“Brightest Witch. . . so much talent . . . such potential . . . that determination to prove yourself . . . all squandered to be the doomed sidekick of a reckless martyr.”_

“HERMIONE!” Ron shouted, “STAB IT AGAIN!”

_“Such a brilliant mind . . . such promising abilities . . . I can show you how to harness them . . . I can teach you everything.”_

Everything?

_“You will be unstoppable . . . all those arcane secrets about magic that you wonder about will be yours to hone . . .”_

Ron put his hands on both her shoulders and shook her. Hard.

She gasped. Lifting the fang up again, she brought it down on the cup with twice the force; a feral grunt – almost a roar – tore out of her throat. The monstrous apparition exploded into billions of feathery particles, and a painful scream echoed around the chamber.

The contrasting silence of the seconds that followed was breathtaking, and in a rare instance of synchrony, Hermione and Ron let it linger.

“Well,” she panted after a while, “Just two more to go.”

“Yeah.”

“Did it...” she faltered, “Did it try to... distract... you as well? When you, um...”

Ron laughed nervously, and his entire face turned red. “Oh, you have no idea. It was worse. Much worse.”

“...What –”

“We should go,” he said hurriedly, “Hopefully Harry’s had some luck with the diadem.”

“Yes. All right.”

Her legs were shaking as she stood up, and Ron and she picked up a good dozen of the Basilisk’s fangs between them and shoved them into her bag. But as they were exiting the chamber and
walking into the tunnel that would lead them out, a high, steely voice cut into the gloom. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, from all around and within her head.

“I know you are preparing to fight. Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood. Give me Harry Potter. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you shall be rewarded. You have until midnight."

Hermione and Ron shared one horror-stricken and distressed look, before he swiftly mounted the broom he’d been carrying, and she hopped on behind him, and they took off.

They ran from corridor to corridor, passing clusters of students ready to fight, suits of armour springing off their stands... from the windows they could see threads of white-blue enchantments swirl around the grounds. The entire foundation of the castle seemed to be trembling with magic and exhilaration.

“Hermione, Ron!” Dean called from beside a courtyard archway where he stood with Justin Finch-Fletchley, Parvati, and Alicia Spinnet.
“Have you seen Harry?” Ron asked.
“At the Great Hall about half an hour back... what –?”

They shot off without waiting for him to finish.

They scuttled down one passageway... two... and at the third, someone skidded around the corner and stumbled right into their path. Harry’s frenzied green eyes widened and he bellowed, “Where the hell have you been?”

On the seventh floor, Hermione, Harry, and Ron encountered Ginny and Tonks staring out of a shattered window, watching Grawp stomp around on the grounds, growling threateningly into the night.

“Let’s hope he steps on some of them!” Ron said boisterously.
“As long as it’s not any of our lot,” Ginny whispered and aimed a jinx into a throng of Death Eaters below.
“Good girl!” hollered Aberforth, suddenly appearing through a cloud of dust. He had a small army of students behind him. “They look like they might be breaching the north battlements; they’ve brought giants of their own.”
As he continued to charge down the corridor, Tonks yelled after him, “Have you seen Remus?”
“He was duelling Dolohov – haven’t seen him since!”
“Tonks, I’m sure he’s okay –” Ginny began, but Tonks wasted no time in running off after Aberforth.
Running a hand through his hair, Harry mumbled, “They’ll be all right,” not sounding confident in the least. “Ginny,” he went on, “We’ll be back in a moment. Keep out of the way, keep safe...”

Just as they got to the wall beyond which the Room of Requirement lay, Ron exclaimed, “Hang on a moment! We’ve forgotten someone!”

“Who?” Hermione asked.

“The house-elves, they’ll all be down in the kitchen, won’t they?”

“You mean we ought to get them fighting?” asked Harry blankly.

Ron gravely shook his head, “I mean we should tell them to get out. We don’t want any more Dobby’s, do we? We can’t order them to die for us –”

“SERIOUSLY?!” Hermione burst out, gawking at him, “Now? NOW? You choose now to have your lovely, endearing moment of enlightenment?”

“Er – What.”

“I mean... now? There isn’t time for me to feel proud, or amazed, or vindicated, or –”

“It’s now or never, innit?” Ron grinned widely, glowingly, “Imagine if I had died an unenlightened oppressor –”

“Excuse me,” Harry cut in dryly, “But could you save the banter for after the war?”

“Yeah – right – sorry –” Ron muttered.

Harry had to pace in front of the wall five-and-a-half times before a door appeared. They entered, it shut behind them, and it was like they had entered a different world.

All the crashing and booming of the battle outside disappeared. They stood in absolute quiet in the middle of a massive, post-apocalyptic landfill... A madman’s curiosity shop... Salvador Dali’s brain. Towers of random objects sprawled across the cavernous room, some touching the high ceiling.

“This way,” Harry said softly, as though too much volume could cause damage, “I think it’s down here...”

For a while, they wandered aimlessly among the heaps, centuries’ worth of rubbish piled up and abandoned... Harry really didn’t seem to have a clue about where he was leading them.

“Accio Diadem!” Hermione murmured, but nothing happened.

“Let’s split up,” Harry suggested, “Look for a stone bust of an old man wearing a wig and a tiara. It’s standing on a cupboard and it’s definitely somewhere around here....”

So they each veered off in different directions. Hermione peered closely through all the junk – the trumpery and the frippery, the bits and bobs, and this and that... Sometimes, she’d get so close to being sidetracked. She saw a beautiful bronze astrolabe with Persian inscriptions... jars full of glowing liquids... so many books... a tall, inornate cabinet made of dark wood...

She stopped dead as she stared at that last item. Was this, perhaps, the infamous vanishing cabinet that Malfoy had spent nearly a year mending? Was this innocuous looking object the very thing that had marked the beginning of the nightmare they were stuck in?

Move on, Hermione.

She took a turn to the left and circled around a tower of old wooden chairs. She saw bottles, vases, satchels, figurines... but no bust, no diadem.

By and by, as she neared what looked like a large stuffed river troll, Hermione heard voices. One was Harry and the other –

“...gonna be rewarded,” Vincent Crabbe purred gleefully, “We ’ung back, Potter. We decided not to go. Decided to bring you to ’im.”

“Good plan,” Harry commended sarcastically, “So how did you get in here?”
She could tell he was trying to keep Crabbe distracted. Gingerly, she peeked from behind the troll’s thick arm, and saw that it wasn’t just Crabbe; evidently Twiddledum and Twiddledee could never be separated.

“We was hiding in the corridor outside,” Goyle said in his gravelly voice while looking supremely pleased with himself, “We can do Diss-lusion Charms now! And then you turned up right in front of us and said you was looking for a die-dum! The fuck’s a die-dum?”

“Harry? Are you talking to someone?”

Hermione swore under her breath. And Crabbe, showing surprising agility, pointed his wand at a looming hill of furniture and trunks, and yelled, “Descendo!”

One by one, things began to go crashing down around the region where Ron’s voice had come from. Harry aimed a quick finite at the teetering pile, and restored its stability.

“What’s going on?” Ron called once more, still hidden behind the junk, “What’s going on?”

“Harry?” Crabbe scowled and mimicked, “What’s going on—or, Potter! Crucio!”

“WHAT?”

She leapt out from behind the troll and sent a Stunning Spell straight towards Crabbe. From the corner of her eye, she saw Harry crash into the ground after a fearsome leap, and something small and glittering flew high up in the air and fell in the middle of the mess of recently fallen furniture.

“It’s the Mudblood!” Crabbe roared, “Avada Kedavra!”

She dived to the side, winded, and barely had time to react when she heard Goyle growl, “Crucio!”

But the spell never hit her. Instead, Goyle’s wand flew out of his hand and disappeared within the clutter beside him. Then, from the shadows between two towers, Malfoy emerged. He walked slowly towards his former lackeys, (and as he passed Hermione he whispered ever so softly – “That’s thrice now,”) somehow managing to coerce his face into that grating old smirk of his.

“Draco?!” Goyle spluttered.

“Goyle,” he nodded, “Crabbe. Leave.”

“What the fuck d’you mean leave?” Crabbe thundered.

“I mean go away. Run along. Exit. See yourselves out.”

Crabbe seethed. “NO.”

“Listen, you idiot... you’re in over your thick head here. Get out.”

“I don’t take your orders no more, Draco. You an’ your dad are finished.”

“Yeah,” Goyle spat, “I know what you’s doing. You want ‘im to yourself. Want to take ‘im to the Dark Lord and make up for all your cock ups.”

“Oh, splendid deduction, Goyle,” Malfoy drawled, “Really excellent stuff. You’re such a genius.”

“Fuck y–”

All of a sudden, Ron emerged from between the rubble, shouting “Petrificus Totalus!”

The spell just grazed past Crabbe, who spun around lividly to retaliate.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Ron jumped behind a cello case to dodge the curse. Crabbe and the wandless Goyle both charged after him.

“Shit,” Malfoy growled, and followed...

Harry grabbed Hermione’s arm and pointed at the heap before them, “It’s somewhere here! The diadem! Look for it while I go and help R–”

A thunderous rumbling from behind had them spinning around... Ron, Malfoy, and Crabbe were sprinting towards them, followed by a desecrating row of blazing flames.

“Like it hot, motherfucker?” Crabbe boomed.

The fire was spreading inordinately fast... “Aguamenti!” both Hermione and Harry howled. All that emerged from their wands was vapour.
“RUN!” Malfoy screamed through a cough. Hermione and Harry loped along after him.

What followed was a haze. All Hermione knew was run run run run and FIRE. And it was no ordinary fire. From the way it was consuming and annihilating everything it touched, she recognised it to be Fiendfyre... and the only way to survive was to get as fucking far away from it as possible.

She scampered around like a headless chicken, shrieking as flames licked the air around her. Drenched in sweat, dizzy, terrified... every shallow breath brought with it the sickening chary smell of smoke and ash. Her hair tumbled out of its bun, and streaked out behind her as she ran. Shit, if the fire were to catch it! She threw an arm behind her head and pulled the lot over her shoulder; all the while running, running, running...

She hit a dead end. Before her was a wall, and around her was a ring of Fiendfyre. To her horror, she saw that only Ron was with her – they’d lost Harry, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle...

She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t think; this was it, the end, and the end was a hissing, roaring, blazing orange.

“What can we do?” she screamed, “What can we do?”

Ron ran around in a circle, looking for a way out, but she knew it was hopeless... the inferno was closing in... The end...

“RON! HERMIONE!”

The call came from above, and she nearly melted at the sight of Harry and Malfoy hovering over them on brooms.

“HARRY! HARRY – HELP!”

They dived, splitting when a flare rose up to guzzle them. Harry flew straight to Ron, seizing his arm and –

“GRAB ON, GRANGER,” Malfoy belted. She took his hand, he hauled her up, and then directed his broom straight up. Hermione bit back a wail of alarm, pressing herself tightly against Malfoy’s back. Her arms locked around his waist, and as they rose higher and higher, she buried her face between his shoulder blades.

It was only when her axis had righted itself that she risked looking down. The burning sea stretched endlessly. Only small islands remained – the tips of the tallest piles. Everything else – historical treasure and debris alike – had been wiped out like it had never been.

“HARRY, LET’S GET OUT, LET’S GET OUT!” Ron shouted.

“MALFOY!” Harry called, “CAN YOU SEE THE DOOR?”

“NO!”

They flew around wildly, skimming close to the walls. The flames had begun taking shapes of savage beasts with yawning mouths, desperate to swallow them whole. Lions, dragons, crocodiles, snakes...

Fucking snakes.

She hated snakes. She was so sick of snakes. Fuck snakes.

“OVER THERE!” Harry roared, pointing. So it was, like the photo negative of the light at the end of a tunnel, a dark opening visible through a blazing archway.

But Malfoy wheeled around and shot off in the opposite direction.

“What? What are you doing?” Hermione squealed, “What are you doing?”

“GOYLE,” he yelled.

She craned her neck to look over Malfoy’s shoulder, and saw Goyle balancing precariously on top of a crumbling pile of... something.
“GET ON!” Malfoy ordered the moment they were close enough, “HURRY UP!”

Goyle jumped on behind her, and the broom tipped backwards dangerously. Hermione screamed and once again pushed her face into Malfoy’s back. Oh god they were going to slide right off and fall into the Fiendfyre and — Malfoy lurched forward, taking her with him; the broom straightened.

“THE DOOR, GETTOIT, THE DOOR!” Goyle chanted frantically. Malfoy sped up, zooming through the thick smoke, through the fiery creatures, through the random objects being tossed around... until Harry and Ron were visible once more. Then it was Harry’s turn to abruptly spin his broom around and dive.

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING?” Malfoy cried.


“FUCK’S Sake... WHAT IS HE DOING?”

Harry... and Ron... were circling a fire-dragon, even as the beast tried to close its jaws around them. Then, swiftly, Harry dived again, and when he re-emerged, something charred but vaguely sparkly hung around his wrist. The diadem. Damn it, why hadn’t she ever told him that Fiendfyre could destroy Horcruxes?

“LETS GO,” he nodded, and shot toward the exit again. (“BLOODY HELL!” Ron exclaimed.)

Both Harry and Malfoy rolled into whatever the broom equivalent of sixth gear was. The hot air beating against her face scalded her eyes, so she squeezed them shut. Involuntarily, she fisted the front of Malfoy’s shirt.

Goyle was screaming in her ear... her lungs felt like they were constricting... sweat dripped down the length of her spine...

“Get off me, Granger.”

Hermione’s eyes flew open, and she pulled in a gulp of fresh clean air. The smoke, the heat, the crackling, thundering noises of fire were gone: They were back in the seventh floor corridor. She jumped away from Malfoy, stumbling backwards off the broom and right into Ron’s chest, and he dragged her away to the opposite side of the hallway. She slid down to the floor, wheezing, pressing her hands against her buzzing heart. Harry and Ron dropped down on either side of her, similarly staggered and out of breath. Goyle was lying on the floor like a beached whale, whimpering and staring blankly up at the ceiling.

“C-Crabbe,” Malfoy choked, slumping against the wall, “Fuck. Crabbe...”

“He’s dead,” Ron muttered unnecessarily, and Malfoy’s brow furrowed with genuine regret. Harry looked away. Hermione couldn’t.

The professors’ enchantments had given way – Death Eaters were everywhere. The fifth floor was completely chaotic with seven groups of people locked in violent duels. Malfoy immediately dashed off to lend a hand to Neville, who had two cloaked and hooded figures shooting hexes at him.

Hermione looked around for someone to help, but suddenly, Fred and... Percy?!... jumped in seemingly out of thin air, both trying to overpower a Death Eater each. Hermione pitched forward, wand raised, incantation on her lips... and along with her spell, three more jets of light hit the...
person duelling Percy. He fell to the ground and his hood slid off, revealing the clammy face and streaked hair of Pius Thicknesse.

“Hello, Minister!” Percy sneered down at him, “Did I mention I’m resigning?”

Fred incapacitated his opponent with a jaunty flourish, and turned to beam at his older brother.

“You’re joking, Perce! You actually are joking, Perce... I don’t think I’ve heard you joke since you were –”

**BOOM.**

Sheer energy tore ferociously across the air. Hermione was lifted off her feet and flung backwards. Her hair whipped forward, blinding her. She could hear the wind whistling in her ears as she flew.

“Protego Maxima,” she shrieked, raising her hands to cover the back of her head. She landed hard against a pillar and slid down its length; the harsh jagged stone shredded her knuckles. The blow had knocked the wind out of her, and she gasped, her head spun, tiny stars bloomed across her vision. She stayed absolutely still while her body pulled out of its state of shock.

One breath. Two Breaths.... Four.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. The entire side of the castle had been blown away. Before her, the floor cut off abruptly, and beyond it was the night sky. She couldn’t see Harry, Ron, Fred, or Percy anywhere. However, a short distance away, Neville was helping Hestia Jones to her feet... Malfoy was pushing a pile of rubble off his legs...

“Are you all okay?” she called. Her voice was so frail; she didn’t think they’d heard her. But Neville waved a hand at her, before offering it to Malfoy.

With feeble motions she lifted off the ground and got to her feet. Her entire back exploded with pain. She winced, and dipped her fingers under her clothes to feel – *fuck* even the tiniest of pressure hurt. Her fingers came away wet with blood.

A noise from behind her: Harry was stumbling over the wreckage, making his way to her.

“No – no – no! No! Fred! No!”

Harry grasped her hand and together they tottered and staggered towards the source of that terrible cry...

At the other end of the hallway, Ron and Percy were on their knees next to Fred’s prone form...

Fred who was spread-eagled, still, and glassy-eyed.

“No,” Hermione whispered in disbelief.

Harry and she began moving faster; a skid here, a trip there, till they were standing by Fred... by Fred’s *body*. Hermione could only stare, her hands shaking, as Percy wailed into his chest and Ron’s stricken eyes were fixed on his brother’s face.

“GET DOWN!”

Harry took hold of her and pulled her down. Neville and Malfoy sprinted by while parrying curses with three Death Eaters.

“Percy, come on, we’ve got to move!” Harry urged, but Percy only shook his head. Hermione turned, blinking away tears and gazed at the gaping hole ahead of them.

“Percy!” Ron begged, “Percy, you can’t do anything for him –” (Something large, thick, and hairy peeped in from the opening... “– We’re going to –”)

She screamed. The large, hairy thing was an Acromantula. Harry and Ron simultaneously sent a jinx its way, and the strength of their combined spells knocked the creature down.
“It brought friends!” Harry bellowed. At least a dozen giant spiders – poured in. “Let’s move, NOW!”
He finally managed to pry Percy off Fred, and together, they towed his... body... to a relatively hidden alcove.

Spells came out of nowhere; one whizzed dangerously close to Hermione’s head... one struck Ron on the knee...
She grabbed hold of his arm and began pulling him away....

“ROOKWOOD!” Percy’s roar was as fierce as Ares’ war cry, and he streaked across the floor behind his target.

Ron immediately launched after him, but Hermione desperately held him back. It was difficult – he was so much bigger and stronger than she was – “Lemme go, LEMME go,” – but somehow she held down his flailing arms and pushed him behind a tapestry.
“Ron! Ron... listen... please calm down – Harry, in here!”
“I have to go! I have to – need to –” he growled almost incoherently. He was trembling.
“Listen to me,” she sobbed, “LISTEN RON!”
“I wanna help – I wanna kill Death Eaters –”
“Ron, we’re the only ones who can end it! Please – Ron – we need the snake; we’ve got to kill the snake!”
Gradually, he stopped struggling, till finally, all that was left in him was grief, and he stooped till his head dropped onto her shoulder.
“We will fight!” she promised him, stroking his hair gently, “We’ll have to. But let’s not lose sight now of what we’re supposed to be d-doing! We’re the only ones who can end it!”
Ron lifted his head, looked closely and sorrowfully at her... then Harry... and nodded.
She wiped the tears off her cheeks and looked at Harry to say the words she never in a thousand years thought she’d say: “You need to find out where Voldemort is, because he’ll have the snake with him, won’t he? Do it, Harry – look inside him.”

It would forever remain one of the most impressive things she’d ever seen: A battalion of bounding desks stampeding down a hallway, being led by a tousle-haired Professor McGonagall.
“CHARGE!” she hollered.

“Harry, you get the Cloak on,” Hermione hissed, “Never mind us –”
Of course he tossed it over all three of them.

The fourth floor was packed with fighters. Students, teachers, Death Eaters were all over the place... it was like Renoir’s Bal du Moulin de la Galette... except nobody was dancing and making merry.
Dean versus Dolohov, Parvati versus Travers; Neville’s bloody grandmother versus Amicus Carrow, (“That’s for tormenting my grandson, you scoundrel!”)

In that state of unrelenting flux, she didn’t know where to aim her wand.

Whooping and cackling, Peeves hovered overhead, bombing Death Eaters with Snargaluff pods. “LET’S GO!” Harry shouted.

On the staircase, they encountered Kingsley duelling a masked Death Eater… a little below, Fлитwick and Yaxley were exchanging hexes. At the foot of the stairs, two bodies came crashing down from a hole in the ceiling; Hermione made out the savage, gristy, animalistic form of Fenrir Greyback as he made to sink his teeth into... “NO!” she shrieked, blasting the monster off Lavender, who remained on the ground barely moving. She wanted to check on her... she so did... but one of the boys steered her away...

Trelawney was dropping crystal balls from a balcony... Sprout was tossing about Venomous Tentaculas...

The three of them were moving so fast – everything was a blur of motion, lights, and whizz fizzle crash boom bang.

She saw a hefty fifth year Hufflepuff boy emit a growl and slide-tackle his opponent.

Then there were more Acromantulas scuttling about, snapping their fangs menacingly. Hogwarts’s soldiers and Death Eaters alike, stopped in their tracks to try and contain them... “Don’t hurt ‘em, don’t hurt ‘em!” Hagrid cried appearing around a bend and running towards his supposed friends.

Harry tore off the cloak and chased after him – “HAGRID, NO!”

“...HAGRID, COME BACK...!”

“...HAGRID...!”

The Acromantula’s retreated hastily from the onslaught of spells, and their favourite half-giant got carried away with them.

*

A giant roamed the Entrance Hall nearly unopposed. He was enormous, massive, making even Grawp – who suddenly burst through the large doorway – look runty. The giants sprung at each other, and got entangled in a brutal wrestling match.

They crashed against the marble staircase, eviscerating a chunk of it, both growling and gnashing their teeth...

They barreled into the house point hourglasses, sending a cascade of glass and colourful gems across the floor.

Harry grabbed Hermione’s hand – “RUN!” – and they raced onto the grounds. They saw the swarm of giant spiders disappear into the Forbidden Forest. But they’d covered no more than six paces, when the atmosphere turned arctic, and the din of war mellowed. Dread, despair, and hopelessness bubbled deep in her heart, and all Hermione could do was keep herself standing.
Dementors – thousands, millions, trillions of Dementors – formed an arc in front of them. The deadening mist that they carried along clung to her skin; their scratchy breathing told of all the horrors that were soon to come...

She gave herself a solid shake. “Come on! Patronuses! Come on! *Expecto Patronum!*

Her otter bounced out of her wand, twirled, then evaporated. *Shit!* Happy thoughts, happy thoughts... Christmas with mum and dad... sitting by the lake with Theo... dancing with Ginny... laughing in the common room with Harry and Ron...

“*Expecto Patronum!*” ...a mere wisp of silver.

Ron’s terrier flickered and faded. His brother had just died... of course he couldn’t... but Harry! Harry had always been able... “HARRY, COME ON!” she yelled.

He was frozen. He hadn’t even lifted his arm.

Provence... mum and dad... “*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*” she tried again, but it was Fred’s blank eyes and Hagrid that her head was full of; a puff of mist was all the came out of her wand.

But from *behind* them, a silver hare, a boar, a fox, and a manta ray flew over their heads, soaring straight towards the Dementors. Hermione looked around her in shock; Luna, Ernie, Seamus, and Theo were unexpectedly by their side, holding up their respective wands.

“That’s right,” Luna egged them on, “That’s right... come on, think of something happy...”

“Something happy?” Harry whispered throatily.

“We’re all still here. We’re still fighting. Come on, now.....”

Hermione looked at Luna... at all of them... at her friends’ marvellous faces... and an otter, robust and full-bodied shot out of her wand. Harry’s stag and Ron’s terrier joined it. The Dementor’s didn’t stay for much longer after that.

The unbearable coldness let off, and Hermione turned to Theo. “Where did you – how did you –”

“Luna taught me,” he replied, smiling wanly.

“Can’t thank you enough,” Ron muttered, nodding at their saviours one by one, “You just saved –”

He was interrupted by a sound like ten simultaneous thunderclaps. Another giant, even larger than the one destroying the entrance hall, burst out from the forest.

“RUN!”

“The Cloak!” Hermione said in an undertone, “Put the Cloak on!”

Harry complied, and snuffed out his wandlight.

She crawled behind Ron, who crawled behind Harry, down a painfully narrow tunnel. The opening at the end was concealed by a large, rotting crate, and the three of them crouched to look out through the miniscule gap between the crate and the wall. The Shrieking Shack was shambolic as always: Grim, dingy, and dusty. Nagini was suspended in a sphere in the centre of the room; Hermione blinked, and in that split second when her eyes were closed, she saw that damned snake darting towards her in Bathilda’s bedroom.

A table stretched across the length of their peephole, at one end of which, a ghostly pale, skeletal hand tapped its fingers rhythmically against the wood.
At the brink of death, Severus Snape lost all his cold, sneering stateliness. He was bloodless and slumped against a wall, with his limbs all bent at awkward angles like a discarded puppet. Hermione didn’t want to see this – she did not want to be present for the moment in which his last breath would leave him, and his heart would stop, and his face would slacken. But what could she do but observe helplessly as Harry moved towards their fading former potions master? Was he feeling pity... Would he tell Snape that he deserved such an end? She bit her lip to contain a whimper... Ron took hold of her hand, but she shook him off. She didn’t want comfort, she wanted to leave.

Harry crouched by Snape’s side, and they both stared at each other – one impassive, the other devastated. Snape started to cry – *dear lord* – and burbling through the tears, he choked, “Take... it... Take... it...” His tears turned silver – the silver of ejected memories – and Hermione promptly conjured a flask and shoved it into Harry’s hand.

Snape’s memories filled the flask to the brim. With his final burst of energy, the sorry, despicable man grabbed Harry by the collar.

“Look... at... me...”

Hermione turned around, unable to watch any longer.

A while later, the sound of Snape’s rasping, rattling breathing stopped completely.

*The Death of the Hired Man.*

Everything was suddenly very still... and very quiet.

*\*\*

The strange, disturbing calm thereafter didn’t last long. As before, Voldemort’s awful voice resounded inside and out:

“You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery. Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste. Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately. You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured.

“I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then the battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour.”
Chapter End Notes

Yes, #Frexit really sucks.

I've written another palette cleanser.... a silly, absurd, not at all slow-burny songfic called 'Ra-Ra-Rasputin': https://archiveofourown.org/works/14505363
Over the weeks, there will be more of those.
Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue here has been borrowed from DH.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Professor Flitwick's leg was hanging on by a thread of skin. The poor man was lying on a mattress on the floor, breathing hard as a mediwizard tried to stick it back on. That was the first thing Hermione saw as she dithered by the large arched doorway during Voldemort's temporary ceasefire.

Beyond him was another mattress where Michael Corner was getting his swollen eye tended to. Next, on a stool, Parvati was sobbing insconsolably into her sister's shoulder. Hermione met Padma's eye with a question in her own... but all she got in lieu of a response was a heavy sigh.

The scene at the Great Hall was a compounded visual of the desolation of battle. It was a composite image of the consequence – Impression, War.

There were no tables, no chairs, no decorous candle stands; no air of splendour. Mattresses laid out in tidy lines all around the room accommodated the injured. The medical staff, in maroon robes, rushed around administering potions and aid.

But it was the sounds that truly drove the reality home. Sobs, wails, gasps, cries of pain...

It was enough to make Hermione want to cover her ears and run. She'd been standing like a statue for... well, who could say how long. Her heart was in her throat, and she couldn't cope with the amount of emotion surging through her. And she was... alone? Where had Harry and Ron gone? Really – how long had she been standing there?

"Miss?"

She shuddered and turned around. A kindly looking young mediwitch held up a jar of thick purple paste.

"Your back is bleeding, miss," she said, "May I?"

"No – no," Hermione stuttered, "I'm fine."

"Your shirt is soaked through."

"It's fine – I'm fine," she insisted shakily, "Please, there are people far worse off –"

"And they are being tended to," the mediwitch said gently, "Let me heal you, miss... it won't take long."

Hermione sighed, and nodded, finally forcing herself to enter the Hall. The mediwitch made her sit on a stool, and conjured a simple screen to cover them. "Shirt off, please."

Hermione obeyed, twisting her matted, knotted, singed hair into a tight bun. Even cool air stung against her exposed back, and she hissed and closed her eyes the moment it was touched.

"It'll be better in a mo," her healer assured her, "Dear me, I can't believe you were willing to ignore this, miss... And if you would let me tend to those burns on your arm as well..."

And it did get better. She could feel the harsh, throbbing pain recede, and the feeling of having something wet and oozy on her skin disappeared.

"There. All done."

"Thank you," Hermione whispered, and slipped her shirt back on.
She stepped out from behind the screen and nearly walked straight into Oliver Wood carrying a... a... body on his shoulder. He passed by, and she steeled herself to glance at the face hanging halfway down his back. She stopped breathing – it was Colin. Scrawny, sweet, overenthusiastic Colin Creevey. Dead.

Oliver carried Colin over to the middle of the hall. That was where the deceased lay in a line. Hermione swallowed, and her throat was so parched, it was painful. She knew, even as the nausea and unbearable terror paralyzed her cognition, that that slow, hesitating walk to the row of dead people was something she'd remember forever. She measured every step, she counted every breath...

Next to Colin lay a young, bearded man whom she recognised to be the shop assistant at Honeydukes. There was a boy from Ravenclaw and his skull seemed to have caved in. There were men and women in Auror robes, faces she saw around Grimmauld place and the Burrow during Order meetings... and oh god... there was Diggle. Dead. Another Ravenclaw, three Hufflepuffs, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor... Lying with a dried up gash across her throat was the girl Hermione had thought was probably called Martha. Hufflepuff, Auror... Slytherin... Ravenclaw, and –

Hermione fell to her knees with a choking gasp. Lavender. No! She'd saved her! She'd blasted Greyback off her. No no no no no. Her eyes were half open. There was blood all over her face, and matting her hair; Lavender would never have stood for that. Not her hair. Trembling, Hermione cast a cleaning charm. Free of blood, and with her eyes closed, she looked like she was sleeping. "I'm so, so sorry," Hermione whispered.

Then she stood up and walked on. Hufflepuff, a man with hair exactly like dad's, Gryffindor, Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw. Why the hell didn't she know all their names? There were so many that were just faces to her. Dead faces.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

She walked by six other unknown bodies. And then there were two familiar bodies. Very, very familiar bodies. Hermione's hands flew up to her mouth. Her vision swam. She wanted to scream, but she'd been hollowed out and filled with cement because her feet were stuck to the ground and her ears had closed up. All she could hear was a dull rushing sound. All she could see through her surging tunnel vision were Lupin and Tonks. Lupin and Tonks lying side by side... ashen, still, quiet, and dead. Dead. Lupin. Tonks.

Tonks' hair was mousy brown... the way she wore it when at her lowest. The lines and shadows on Lupin's face seemed so much more prominent than usual. Hermione couldn't bring herself to move. Maybe if she stood long enough they'd take pity on her and wake up. Oh, come on Tonks. And Lupin had always been so reliable. Wake up, she urged, please, please, PLEASE wake up. Please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please, please –

A wail that was the very soul of pathos sounded in her head.
The Weasleys were gathered around Fred's body a few metres away. Mrs Weasley, the source of that piercing wail, was lying across her fallen son's chest. Mr. Weasley sat close beside her, holding his fist against his mouth as he cried. Bill and Fleur were crying, Charlie was hiding behind his hands, Percy had his arm around Ron, Ginny stood a little apart mopping her blotchy face with a handkerchief.

And kneeling by Fred's head was George... Hermione couldn't look at him for more than a fraction of a second. But even in that tiny fragment of time, she registered the mask of shock, discomposure, and agony that his face had become. It reflected the kind of pain that was *savage*, that was unrivalled in its intensity.

Their grief was what finally unglued Hermione's feet.

She promptly strode towards Ginny, who looked up at her nearly as soon as she'd taken the first step. Her face creased, like all at once, she'd lost the ability to keep herself together. Hermione ran. She hugged her distraught friend tightly, and she pinched her own lips between her teeth to hold back her whimpers as Ginny sobbed, "Fred... Fred... *Fred*..." into her shoulder.

Trapped in a purgatory, she almost found herself craving the brutal chaos of battle, the turbulent heat of a raging fire, the all-consuming adrenaline rush experienced during a violent duel...

She was sitting now, on a bench she'd conjured once holding Ginny up had gotten too difficult. Ginny's head was in her lap, and Hermione stroked the short, damp strands away from her face. She wasn't crying anymore.

Mrs. Weasley, too, had stopped weeping. Instead, she seemed to have appropriated George's look of devastation, and that of course, was infinitely worse. Hermione cast her eyes around the hall, searching for the smallest spark of something *good* to cauterise the giant, gaping open wound that was her soul. By the door, Neville and Seamus were carrying more bodies inside. She felt the force of a thousand knives twisting in her gut as she saw that one of them had dirty blond hair... But then she noticed the Hufflepuff robes and hated herself for the immense relief that surged through her.

She looked at the crumbling walls, at the shattered floor. She watched the healers scuttling about like wind-up toys. She glanced at Slughorn comforting the dozen or so students of his house who'd opted to stay and fight. She glimpsed Professors McGonagall and Sprout whispering closely as the former got a cut across her cheek mended.

But no matter how hard she tried, her eyes sought Fred. She didn't know how it was possible for him to look the way he looked – he'd always been packed with life enough for a hundred people – and now...

Her eyes sought Lupin and Tonks – she gasped, softly, for they were no longer alone. Luna was sitting by Tonks' side, with one of her hands between both of hers. Next to her was Theo, with his eyes mournfully downcast. Malfoy knelt in the space between Lupin and Tonks' heads, looking from one to the other to the other to the other...

His hair that used to always look so neat, was falling messily into his eyes and hiding them from the world. Or perhaps hiding the world from him?

Hermione's makeshift bench creaked. Ron eased himself down on Ginny's other side, and blinked at Hermione, once, with faded, red-rimmed eyes. He squeezed his sister's shoulder, and she
immediately lifted off Hermione's lap and curled into his side. He put an arm around her and laid his head on hers.

Feeling like an intruder, Hermione quietly slipped away. She wished Harry was around, but by his marked absence, she'd deduced that he was in Dumbledore's old office, swimming around in Snape's memories.

So she sidled up to Theo and Luna, and as unobtrusively as possible, sat down next to them. They didn't speak at all; rather, they communicated through expressive looks and subtle nods. It didn't feel right to say *anything* that wasn't profoundly, divinely meaningful. And nobody had anything meaningful to say. Malfoy didn't look up even once.


Wasn't the hour up yet? Hermione's watch had broken.


"Oh, thank you, thank you! Ah, I'm just orl over t' place..."

On her way to see Flitwick, Hermione stopped to help a portly mediwitch who'd spilled all her supplies while rushing from one patient to the next.

She kept her vision trained straight ahead as she passed the dead for the second time. At the far end of the hall, Kingsley had gathered the remaining Aurors. Parvati was still crying all over Padma, and now she knew why. Her best friend had died, and Hermione had not a single word to say to her. Like a coward, she bowed her head and walked on.

But alas, the Charms' professor was no longer lying on his mattress.

"There are still lots of people buried under the rubble, he went to look for them," Michael Corner said from the next mattress. His eye looked much better. "They told him to rest, and he said nothing doing," he added proudly.

"How are you?" Hermione asked.

"Not bad. Pomfrey says the blindness is most likely temporary..."

She swallowed, "Oh... um..."

"Hermione!"

She spun around with alacrity to see Neville waving her over as he helped a young boy with an injured leg. She bid Michael a hasty farewell and joined Neville just as he handed his charge over to a mediwizard. He looked so much more than merely exhausted.

"Why don't you sit down, Neville?" she offered softly, "Let me take over for a while."

"Nah, s'Alright," he said, rubbing his eyes tiredly; clearly the weakness of his flesh was nothing when compared to the willingness of his spirit. "I'm okay. Why aren't you with Harry?"

"He... there was something he had to do..."

"Yeah. That's what he told me, and --"

A small man carrying a tray loaded with goblets of water stopped to offer them a drink. Hermione felt a slow uneasiness build up inside her.

"Oh, Merlin, yes," Neville sighed, and chugged his lot in one go. "Ooof. That's better."
"Right. Neville. What did Harry tell you exactly?"
"Just that he has to do something. It's part of the plan. And he told me to kill the snake. You-Know-Who's snake, that is, in case you or Ron were bus--"
"Where was he going?" Hermione demanded, her hands closing into fists.
"He didn't say..."
"Which way then, Neville!" she exclaimed impatiently, "The headmaster's office, or...?"
"Er, no. He went outside. Into the grounds – Oi, where are you off to?!"

Hermione tore across the Hall, sped past the dead, and skidded to a stop before Ron, who was still cradling Ginny.
"Ron – shit – Harry – he's –" she panted.
"What?" Ron asked hoarsely.
"Harry – Harry's GONE!"
"What do you mean?" Ginny spluttered, "Where's he gone?"
"Aah!" Hermione was furious with herself for taking so long to get the fucking point across. "He's GONE. To the forest! To turn himself in!"
"WHAT?"
"What?! WHAT?!"

Ron and Ginny were on their feet in a flash. Ron took both their hands and began pulling them ahead, but they'd barely made any progress when Voldemort's all-pervading voice swelled around them.

"Harry Potter is dead. He was killed as he ran away, trying to save himself while you lay down your lives for him. We bring you his body as proof that your hero is gone.
"The battle is won. You have lost half of your fighters. My Death Eaters outnumber you, and the Boy Who Lived is finished. There will be no more war. Anybody who continues to resist, man, woman, or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family. Come out of the castle now, kneel before me, and you shall be spared. Your parents and children, your brothers and sisters will live and be forgiven, and you will join me in the new world we shall build together."

The last syllable of that announcement echoed for an inconceivable stretch of time. '...ther ...ther ...ther ...ther...'
Nobody moved, and silence was total and all-encompassing. Stillness and quiet so intense, that Hermione imagined she could actually see the minute disturbances in the air that the last traces of Voldemort's voice was causing. They were just words – no, arbitrary sounds that had the semblance of words. It had been an empty speech. A ruse.
Because Harry could not be dead.

Ron's hand was still in hers and clammy with sweat. She pulled free of his increasingly tightening grip; her mouth opened and closed around half-formed thoughts that would never materialise vocally, because just then, a horrifying, nerve-jangling scream sounded from outside. Like Hokusai's Great Wave, the entire population of the Great Hall rose and surged forward en-masse, frothing with anxiety, churning with terror.

At the forefront, Hermione, Ron and Ginny were the first to walk out of the castle. The first thing Hermione saw was McGonagall, crumpled by the main doors. She was entirely bloodless... shaking...

They walked down the front steps...
Hermione barely noted the Death Eaters, Voldemort, his vile fucking snake, Bellatrix... Because there was Hagrid – *Oh, he was alive!* – and – in his arms – limp and motionless –

"No!" she shrieked, stumbling, catching herself on her knees. "NO!" she choked, as bile bubbled up her throat.
"Harry!"
"NO!"
She heard Ron and Ginny mirror her devastating anguish... then the entire crowd behind them blew up. It was all muted though, as Hermione's ears clogged up again. The ferocious roaring she could hear was her own blood gushing about.
Harry's head was resting against Hagrid's enormous forearm. His eyes were closed. Forever.
"*Oh,*" she groaned, wanting to curl up right there on the ground – to hell with Voldemort and his fucking war. To hell with everything.

"SILENCE!" Voldemort boomed, and there was a shot of lightening, followed by a thunderclap, that forced the multitude to comply. "It is over! Set him down, Hagrid, at my feet, where he belongs!"
Hagrid obeyed, though with a look of pure torture on his face, and he placed Harry gently on the grass, straight on his back.
"You see? Voldemort hissed victoriously, "Harry Potter is dead! Do you understand now, deluded ones?"

(Surely Hermione was deluded, and her tired eyes were playing mean tricks, for she was ready to swear that Harry's left eye had just... twitched.)

"He was nothing, ever, but a boy..."

(Oh, Harry, Harry, *Harry.*)

"...who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for him!"
"He beat you!" Ron yelled, taking a bold step forward. The throng cheered raucously, till another thunderclap reinforced silence.
"He was killed while trying to sneak out of the castle grounds," Voldemort cried, "Killed while trying to save himself –"

That's when a hundred simultaneous motions and sounds erupted, getting streamlined into one blazing torrent of action –
A thick burst of arrows came flying out of the Forbidden Forest and rained down on the Death Eaters, and as they scattered, Grawp emerged from around the side of the castle, crying for Hagrid.
In retaliation, Voldemort's army of giants roared... But then! A squawk from above! It was Dumbledore's phoenix, a burst of brilliant red against the dark sky, and he dropped a misshapen looking lump right into the middle of the crowd –

Hermione lost track of things when centaurs charged out of the forest, brandishing bows and swords. Death Eaters swarmed forward to meet them. Thestrals descended from high above, their hooves lashing out at the Giants who were trying to tear Grawp apart. They were all forced to skitter back as one of the largest giants keeled over when Buckbeak went for his face with his impressive talons. A mushroom cloud of dust erupted...
...There was sure to be a giant stampede imminently...
And in the midst of this mad chaos, when Death Eaters and Hogwart's defenders were all being
forced to retreat back into the castle, Neville let out a fierce cry like an enraged Berserker. He had the sword of Gryffindor in his hand as he leapt forward and sliced Nagini's head right off.

It occurred to Hermione that she might die.

Of course, it had been a distinct possibility all year, but somehow, being locked in a duel with Bellatrix Lestrange, while using the deranged witch's own wand doubled the probability of that outcome. Hermione was as scared as she'd ever been.

"Impudent little mudblood," Bellatrix growled, "I should have finished you off when I had a chance. Did you miss me? Crucio!"

Hermione dived to the side frantically, and just then, a tiny little House-Elf scuttled right over to Bellatrix and stabbed her leg with a fork. She howled in agony and aimed a kick at the House-Elf. "HOW DARE YOU?" she bellowed.

Hermione couldn't revel in the wonder of Bellatrix being battered by a House-Elf for the second time for long. "Avada Kedavra," and the poor, valiant Elf fell; its large globular eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling.

Hermione lost it.

"Diffendo, Eviscero, SECTUMSEMPRA!"

Bellatrix only cackled, delighted by her unhinged fury. "Oo-er! The mudblood's got a bit of fire! I'm almost impressed – Crucio!"

"I'll show you fire... INCENDIO!"

With a wave of her wand, Bellatrix's wiped out the giant ball of flames.

"Flagello!" Hermione roared.

Bellatrix spun out of the way, but the ends of her robes got shredded. She glared at Hermione with furious disbelief, "I am officially sick of you. Avada Ked –"

Bellatrix stumbled, and fell flat on her arse – a jelly-legs curse by the looks of it – revealing a panting and wild-eyed Theo standing behind her. "Nott Jr.!?" she screeched, "Oh you – you – well your father will just have to deal with not being the one who kills you!"

She lifted her wand, primed and determined. Her eyes narrowed... her mouth opened... And Hermione acted.

Without a thought, without a single misgiving or doubt, she levitated an enormous chunk of fallen rock and mortar, (possibly the size of a jeep,) and dropped it on Bellatrix. Unceremoniously, undramatically; Bellatrix didn't even realise... And now she never would.

What – what had she done?

Theo stepped around the boulder, gazing at her in awe. She swayed uncertainly towards him.

"NO!" A vehement roar of utmost ferocity had Hermione spinning around... What she saw left her both light headed and ossified: Lord Voldemort with his teeth bared, pointing his want directly at her. Well now... now she really was going to die.
"STOP!"
It was a powerful, commanding exclamation, in a voice she knew too well... but that simply was not possible! Everybody – Voldemort included – looked this way and that witlessly...

At first it was just a subtle warping of light.
Then an audible flourish.
Then, what was once empty air was suddenly occupied.

Looking very much alive, Harry Potter walked calmly up to Voldemort, unarmed, unruffled, and firmly announced to all the shocked bystanders: "I don't want anyone else to help. It's got to be like this. It's got to be me."

The sky had begun to faintly lighten, as though in sync with what seemed to be the last showdown of the battle. In the centre of the Great Hall, Harry and Voldemort stood facing each other. The distance between them – some ten metres or so – fizzled with tempered electricity... electricity that radiated outwards and ran into a giant ring of speechless spectators.

Hermione was sandwiched between Theo and Ron, and perhaps it was only their fortifying presence that was keeping her from suffering a spontaneous brain haemorrhage. Straight across the hall, beyond the fated rivals, she saw Ginny clinging desperately onto Charlie's arm, Neville, (who was still holding the sword,) and Malfoy.

Voldemort raised his wand, and with his awful red eyes fixed on Harry hissed, "Who are you going to use as a shield today, Potter?"

Harry met his stare unflinchingly. "Nobody. There are no more Horcruxes. It's just you and me. Neither can live while the other survives, and one of us is about to leave for good."

"One of us?" Voldemort taunted with a laugh, "You think it will be you, do you, the boy who has survived by accident, and because Dumbledore was pulling the strings? You don't even have a wand! I am going to kill you, Harry Potter, and then I will kill every last one of your friends."

"You won't be killing anyone else tonight," Harry countered boldly, "You won't be able to kill any of them ever again. Don't you get it? I was ready to die to stop you from hurting these people –"

"But you did not!"

"– I meant to, and that's what did it. I've done what my mother did. They're protected from you. You don't learn from your mistakes, Riddle, do you?"

"You dare –"

"Yes, I dare," said Harry, "I know things you don't know, Tom Riddle. I know lots of important things that you don't. Want to hear some, before you make another big mistake?"

There was hunger behind Voldemort's cold, waxy facade. He kept his wand raised, but it was clear he wouldn't strike till Harry had revealed his secrets.

"Is it love again?" he hissed, "Dumbledore's favourite solution. But nobody seems to love you enough to run forward this time and take my curse. So what will stop you dying now when I strike?"

"Just one thing."

Voldemort laughed a horrible, unhinged, metallic laugh. "Surely you don't believe that you have magic that I do not, or else a weapon more powerful than mine?"

"I believe both," said Harry, and quite suddenly, Voldemort's laughter died down.
"You think you know more magic than I do?" he spat, "Than I, than Lord Voldemort? I brought about the death of Albus Dumbledore!"
"You thought you did. But you were wrong."

Hermione gasped, and she wasn't the only one. Shocked murmurs spread around the room. "Dumbledore is dead!" Voldemort bellowed.
Complete silence was reinstated.
"Yes," Harry agreed, "Dumbledore is dead. But you didn't have him killed. He chose his own manner of dying, chose it months before he died. Severus Snape wasn't yours. Snape was Dumbledore's. Dumbledore's from the moment you started hunting down my mother. And you never realized it, because of the thing you can't understand. You never saw Snape cast a Patronus, did you, Riddle? Snape's Patronus was a doe... the same as my mother's, because he loved her for nearly all of his life, from the time when they were children."
("Merlin," Ron breathed.)
"None of that matters!" thundered Voldemort, "Dumbledore is still dead, and I killed Severus Snape three hours ago. The Elder Wand – the Wand of Destiny – is truly mine! Dumbledore's last plan went wrong, Harry Potter! And now I will end you."
Harry nodded calmly, his empty hands resting easily at his sides. "Before you try to kill me, I'd advise you think what you've done... Think, and try for some remorse, Riddle..."
"What is this?"

Really – what was that? Hermione had never heard Harry speak like that. He had a plan, didn't he? He had to have a plan. Had he a wand stashed under his jumper?

"It's your one last chance," Harry went on, "it's all you've got left... I've seen what you'll be otherwise... Be a man... try... Try for some remorse..."
"You DARE –?"
"Yes, I dare. Because Dumbledore's last plan hasn't backfired on me at all. It's backfired on you, Riddle..."
(The electric charge between them intensified. The tension grew more taught, more severe, more nerve-wrecking... water forming a dome above the brim of a goblet, just seconds away from spilling over...)
"...That wand still isn't working properly for you because you murdered the wrong person. Severus Snape was never the true master of the Elder Wand. He never defeated Dumbledore."
"He killed –"
"Aren't you listening? Snape never beat Dumbledore! Dumbledore's death was planned between them! Dumbledore intended to die, undefeated, the wand's last true master! If all had gone as planned, the wand's power would have died with him, because it had never been won from him!"
"But then, Potter, Dumbledore as good as gave me the wand!" Voldemort said with explicit glee, "I stole the wand from its last master's tomb! Its power is mine!"
"You still don't get it, Riddle, do you? Possessing the wand isn't enough! The wand chooses the wizard... The Elder Wand recognized a new master before Dumbledore died, someone who never even laid a hand on it. The new master removed the wand from Dumbledore against his will, never realizing exactly what he had done, or that the world's most dangerous wand had given him its allegiance. The true master of the Elder Wand was Draco Malfoy."

Another series of gasps broke out around her. Theo jerked involuntarily. Hermione's eyes flickered past Harry and Voldemort to look at Malfoy – he was astonished. Eyes round, lips parted –

"But what does it matter? Even if you are right, Potter, it makes no difference to you and me. You don't even have a wand anymore – I saw to that in the forest. After I have killed you, I can attend to Draco Malfoy..."
(Theo twitched again. Across the room, Malfoy came back to himself; he glowered at Voldemort.)
"You're too late, you've missed your chance," said Harry, "I overpowered Draco weeks ago. I took his wand from him. So it all comes down to this, doesn't it? Does the wand in your hand know its last master was Disarmed? Because if it does... I am the true master of the Elder Wand."

Voldemort hissed. His stance changed to a combative one. And Harry – like he had all those months ago in Perkin's tent – raised his empty hand and shouted, "Accio Elder Wand!"
It slipped right out of Voldemort's cadaverous fingers, spun across the space in between, and landed neatly in Harry's grasp.
Voldemort stumbled back in horror, in blind terror, "What – no – NO –"

Harry didn't waste any more time. He pointed the most powerful wand at the most evil wizard and crisply intoned, "Avada Kedavra!"
There was nothing graceful about the way Tom Riddle fell. One moment he was standing, petrified with fear, and the next he was an inglorious heap on the ground, his vacant, expressionless face drenched in the orange glow of dawn.
In the shocked silence that followed, the faint swish of air that sounded when Harry lowered his hand was clearly audible – as was the soft expulsion of air that escaped from his lungs.

Then the Great Hall exploded. Cheers rang all around and burst out into the illusory sky above.
"YES!" – "YEAH!" – "HARRY...!" – "HE DID IT!" – Jubilant cries echoed endlessly; people abandoned the circle formation and dashed ahead to pounce on Harry.
Hermione found herself being lifted off the ground...
Ron spun her around in circles – "It's over! We did it!" – And then he was charging towards Harry, too...
Theo pressed her to his side... she felt him kiss the top of her head... but soon he was off too, dashing through the crowd in search of Luna.
Another set of arms hugged Hermione from behind. She only figured out who it was when he let go and ran ahead, whooping with delight: Seamus.
"Oh Merlin!" – "Yes!" – "YES!"

The unbridled frenzy of joy bordered on madness. She was being pushed around, knocked aside by bodies rushing ahead, and pulled into random embraces.
Grawp's celebratory roars were, of course, the loudest. House-Elves were banging their pots and pans with forks and ladles. Aurors were rushing to and fro, apprehending Death Eaters before they could escape...

It was all over. It really was over.

Hermione knew she ought to go to Harry. She thought that she might be one of the few people he'd actually want to be with at the moment... but she simply couldn't bring herself to fight through the mob.
Instead, she walked backwards; back, back, back, until she'd broken free of the mass entirely. Then she turned around and ran.
On the fifth floor there was an exquisite tapestry depicting a forest full of frolicking nymphs and unicorns, in a style strongly redolent of Botticelli. The battle had left it in tatters. The Nymphs were hiding behind trees, and the unicorns wandered about the blank landscape forlornly.

Right next to the tapestry there was a giant hole in the wall. Hermione walked towards it, stepping over piles of rubble and debris. She could see the new day breaking outside, all around the wrecked castle walls, over the placid lake...

It turned everything a brilliant, saturated orange; it was reprehensibly beautiful. Oh, the merciless cosmic consistency of the world at large... it could go bugger itself.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Where was her cheer, you ask? Where was her relief and optimism? – It had gone the way of Fred Weasley. Her mind, which always insisted on jumping ten steps ahead, thought about tiny Teddy Lupin, now an orphan.

It just wasn't fair. They had been fighting the good fight, doing the right thing... why did they have to pay the ultimate price? It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair. Voldemort was dead, and that wasn't enough. Bellatrix was dead – because of her – and even that wasn't enough. Nothing would ever be enough. "We won," they'd shouted downstairs... but had they really? Was this victory? Burying the cold, stiff corpses of good, brave, well-loved people... was that really a victory?

As she gazed at the blazing Noldean sky and the bloody perspective it was trying to shove down her throat, she felt an uncontainable rage. It speared through her like a shockwave, making her eyes tear up and her teeth gnash together.

Jesus Christ, she wanted to maul something. Her skin was prickling. Her nerves were sizzling. She wanted to – wanted to – wanted to –

There were footsteps from behind, and as much as she hungered to incinerate the intruders... she took a breath, clenched her fists, and peered over her shoulder.

It was Theo. And Luna. And Malfoy.

And right then, she found her outlet.

She turned her back to the shimmering red-yellow, spinning around to glare at Malfoy. He stopped dead in his tracks, looking back at her in a way that was almost... stunned.

"You," she fumed, "What are you doing here?"

The change in his face was instantaneous. "What?" he scowled.

"What. Are. You. Doing. Here." She took three furious steps ahead, "Why the hell are you here?"

"Have you lost your mind?" Malfoy growled.

"Hermione..." Theo murmured.

"Shouldn't you be down in the Great Hall, basking in the glory of your triumph? Shouldn't you be demanding that people thank you for all your contributions? Kiss your fucking boots? Or have you come to collect mine? It's what... thrice... you've saved my life now, right? Oh, THANK YOU, Malfoy," she kicked a stone by her feet, and it skittered across the floor and hit the top of Malfoy's shoe, "Thank you, and thank you."

Malfoy's hair and eyes had soaked up the orange light terrifically. He looked daggers at her, and began in a menacing snarl – "Listen, you fucking –"
"No, you listen," she bayed, "Who do you think you are? Asking people to thank you like you aren't a total piece of shit... Sitting by Tonks and Lupin like you fucking knew them. You didn't. You wouldn't even accept them as human, let alone a part of your family. You arsehole. You smug... you... you charlatan."
"Fucking BITCH," Malfoy roared, and made to charge towards her. Theo jumped in front of him just in time.
"Let's go, Draco. Please, leave it. Let's —"
"Who do you think YOU are?" Malfoy yelled, struggling against Theo, "Let me go, Theo... someone needs to shove that cunting shrew off her high horse —"
"Go to hell, Malfoy," Hermione spat, "You're the one on a high horse. Mighty proud of yourself, aren't you? Think you've made up for — for — everything. God, if you spend even the rest of your life apologising to the world, it wouldn't be enough."
Theo put all his strength into pushing Malfoy away, even as the latter fought to shake him off. Not for a second did his flashing eyes move away from Hermione.
"I have nothing to apologise for!"
Hermione laughed. It was bitter, incredulous, and ugly. "You tormented people. You made their lives hell. Harry, Ron... Neville —"
"Are you fucking ser– GROW UP —"
"— And you can't exactly ask for Dumbledore's forgiveness now, can —"
Theo had managed to drag Malfoy halfway down the corridor. "HE should be apologising to ME!"
Hermione laughed again – her harsh, ugly laugh – "Of course, he should. Nothing's ever on you, is it? Everybody owes you something. Such an entitled bloo—"
"Shut the fuck up!"

But that was the last thing that could be said. Theo and Malfoy disappeared around the corner at the end of the corridor.
"AARGH!" Hermione shrieked, and her cry echoed, drowning out the dwindling scuffling noise of Malfoy's forced retreat.

Then there was utter silence, except for the mellowed twittering of birds. Luna was watching her cautiously as though scared to come close.

"Oh god," Hermione gasped. Her arms wrapped around her ribs as she tried to hold herself together. "Oh god," and she crumpled.
"Oh god, oh god, oh god."
First, I would like to tender an apology to ElleMartin for the fate of poor Lavender. I know how you feel about her. I am not quite as sorry for depriving Molly Weasley of her moment of glory, nor for not letting Harry's hands stay squeaky clean.

Well - This is it then. I have put away the Deathly Hallows, and we're well done with canon. (I'm sure we all feel the same way about the epilogue.)

There's just one thing I'd like to address, since there has been some talk about slow-burns of late: I really hadn't planned on it being THIS SLOW. The original story was going to be a post-war fic, where I'd have explained the minor deviations via flashbacks and introspective paragraphs.

But then... I didn't want to write about just one relationship. I wanted to write about struggle, and growth, and friendship... and then Theo popped up, and I couldn't not give him his time in the spotlight. I love you all for loving him.

And I love you all for staying with this story. What comes next is hurt and anguish... for a bit. Then rehabilitation and healing. More growth and friendship. And yes... love. So, stick with me, kid. We'll go... somewhere or the other.
Less than a year ago, the Hermione Granger who'd stood in front of Ginny's dresser had been all dressed up for a wedding. In her beautiful lilac dress, she'd been at the prime of her prettiness. Who was that girl, and who was this girl now... the one currently being reflected, emaciated, pale, and haunted looking? Who was she with her pointy little shoulders and her skinny legs sticking out of sleep shorts with purple rings under her eyes and burnt, tangled hair?

Hermione took a pair of big bronze scissors and began cutting away the charred locks.  

Snip. Snip. Snip.

The frayed curls fell haphazardly to the floor, so unlike the shiny, fiery strands that had surrounded Ginny's feet less than a year ago.  

Less than a year ago.  

How had the world overturned in less than a year?

Snip. Snip. Snip.  

The Burrow was quiet – so painfully quiet – so abnormally quiet – and perhaps quiet forevermore. It had been fourteen hours since the fall of Voldemort, and George had locked himself up in what
used to be the room he'd shared with Fred. Where, less than a year ago, she'd snuck in to steal some Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes products. And then she'd come out to find Fred waiting for her with a knowing little smile on his face. Less than a year ago, and now he was dead.

*Snip. Snip. Snip.*

Early in the day, after she'd... lashed out at Draco Malfoy, Hermione had taken half an hour to collect herself. Then Luna had put a gentle arm around her and taken her back down to the Great Hall, where finally, Hermione got her audience with Harry. They'd hugged for an endless moment, and she'd broken down against his chest, against his – against all odds – still beating heart...

*Snip. Snip. Snip.*

Hermione, Harry, and Ron sat on the damp grass by Dumbledore's grave, after Harry had slipped the elder wand back inside it. Kreacher appeared with a loud *pop* and a plate full of sandwiches, which they'd listlessly chomped on, while Harry told them how he'd come to be the boy who lived *again*. It all sounded impossible. The whole thing. King's Cross Limbo. Talking to a dead man. *Choosing* not to go "on"...

*Snip. Snip. Snip.*

But the thing that Hermione was most stuck on was what "on" meant. She wondered if she'd have been able to come back, like Harry so easily had. How had he done that? The answer to life's greatest mystery, *what dreams may come once we have shuffled off this mortal coil*, had been just a train ride away.

*Snip. Snip. Snip.*

She hadn't realised it then, with all the chaos and madness, but in the chamber of secrets, when the Horcrux had tried to distract her using the lure of knowledge and secrets, she'd been tempted. Dangerously tempted. So was the 'Brightest Witch of Her Age' really a compliment at all, or a shameful, ironic summation of her greatest weakness? Was she really such a doomed Faustian caricature?

*Snip. Snip. Snip.*

She'd have boarded that train. The living world was absolute shite anyway.

Hermione put the scissors down, and stared at herself without blinking till her vision blurred. Her formerly waist-length mass of hair now fell to just about the middle of her back. With a sigh and a flick of Bellatrix's wand, she vanished the pile of hair around her. Since Bellatrix had die— since Hermione had *killed* Bellatrix, the wand had been working perfectly well for her. A trophy. How lovely.

She'd so have boarded that train.

The sound of the door opening had her refocusing her eyes, and reflected over her shoulder she saw Ginny walking into the room.

"Hi," said Hermione softly.

"Hi," Ginny replied, softer still. She had two vials in her hand full of some purple coloured potion. "Er... dreamless sleep?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah. I thought we could use it. Gave some to Harry and Ron, too."

They both wandered over to their respective beds, with a vial in hand. Hermione slipped under the covers, knocked back the potion in one gulp, and Ginny doused the lights. She lay in the semi-darkness with just a sliver of moonlight slipping through the gauze curtains...
that stretched across the window at the far end of the room, and waited desperately for oblivion to claim her. She closed her eyes, and saw the image of a boulder falling on Bellatrix in slow motion. Her eyes flew open again. God damn it, that was going to haunt her for fucking ever wasn't it? She was never going to be free of Bellatrix. Her wand, her death, her insidious, deranged cackle - they would follow her wherever she'd

When she woke up, sunlight was flooding into the room at an angle that suggested early afternoon. For a moment, Hermione watched golden dust mites dance in the shafts of light... so oblivion had come after all. She didn't feel refreshed or revived. Just awake. And that was enough of an accomplishment. Now, to get out of bed...

She threw the covers off, and swung her legs in an exaggerated arc before setting them on the floor. Her bare feet look so small and pale against Ginny's burgundy carpet. She stood up and stretched; her shoulders popped, and she tipped her head back, filling her lungs with air.

Awake. Alive. The war was over. And she was so scared.

There was a cup of steaming tea placed on her bedside table, and she blessed Ginny's endless thoughtfulness. She breathed in the aromatic brew – English breakfast, just as she liked it – and then took a sip. Strong, sweet, just as she liked it, the war was over and she was so very scared.

With slow, shuffling steps she went to stand by the window, letting the summer sun hit her face, arms and bare legs. Sunshine on her skin, weaving into her hair, mingling with the steam from the tea and wafting up her nose...

Sunshine, tea just as she liked it, a new day, and the war was over.

The orchard outside was blossoming. The trees were heavy with fruit, and wild flowers were sprinkled all over the lush grass like colourful confetti. The sky was so blue, with only three-four sparkling, fluffy white clouds to mar its smooth, gorgeous perfection. A beautiful summer's day; the war was over.

There was a sudden disturbance by the edge of her vision, and then Ginny was walking up to the grove. Actually, she was jogging: Her stride was quick and urgent. Harry followed moments later, but kept a good distance from her.

Ginny paced madly in front of the trees; across the lush grass, under the blooming sky, warmed by the golden sun... she paced ferociously. With abandon. With desperation. Harry stood at one side and watched her.

The war was only over once you'd survived its aftermath.

Day one was quiet. Breakfast was quiet. Tea was quiet, but for Mrs. Weasley sniffing over her
Day two was quiet. The lunch they forgot to eat was quiet. Ginny grabbed her broom and disappeared for hours. Ron and Harry played chess quietly. George didn't make an appearance.

Fred's hand on the clock on the mantelpiece pointed to *Lost*.

Day three was explosive.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron followed Mr. Weasley through the floo into the Ministry of Magic atrium. The traffic, the flurry of moving bodies popping in and out of the gilded fireplaces came to a standstill. Everybody stopped to stare at them.

Of course, Hermione's mind was full of flashes from the last time they'd been there – her in Mafalda's body, running terrified as Yaxley and his team of Death Eater's chased after them. She could still feel the weight of the horcrux-pendent in her hand...

"Blimey," Ron breathed.

She looked at what had caught his eye, and gasped. Gone was the ghastly statue of a witch and wizard on a throne of muggles, and gone was the tacky Fountain of Magical Brethren. Instead, standing in the middle of the atrium was a large obelisk made of lustrous white gold. They walked closer to see it was inscribed from top to bottom, with the names of all those who'd lost their lives since Voldemort's reign of terror began. Both times. Hermione, Harry, and Ron circuited around the structure while the crowd, still frozen, watched them.

"It was one of the first things Kingsley saw to, as Minister," Mr. Weasley murmured.


"Harry!" a voice boomed from behind them, and they all spun around. It was Kingsley, striding towards them. He was a new man, in his Ministerial garb; sophisticated and imposing. His robes were crisp and deep green, and his gold hoop earring glinted intensely even in the low lighting. He shook their hands, one by one, with a warm smile. "It's good to see you all."

He gestured down the hall to the golden gates at the end, and led them through security. The poor guards seemed at an utter loss to see the Minister of Magic and Harry Potter at the same time.

"Where's it happening then, Kingsley?" Mr Weasley asked as they stood waiting for a lift.

"Conference room three. Level two. They – everybody's already there, waiting." Harry squirmed, and Kingsley caught it. "Don't worry," he tried to reassure him, "We've a strict schedule – ten minutes for you to speak, five minutes of Q-and-A, and then you're out of there."

Hermione said, "And what about –"

"Rita Skeeter has been categorically banned from the Ministry for the day," Kingsley smirked.

Then they were in a lift shooting downwards and Hermione's stomach, liver, kidneys, et al jumped into her throat. But even after the lift stopped, ("Level Two – Department of Magical Law Enforcement," ) there was no time to let her organs settle back in place. Kingsley marched them
down a corridor to a dark wood door flanked by two Aurors. He pulled it open and she reeled under overwhelming sensory overload.

A hundred flashlights attached to a hundred cameras went off, and she was blinded. A deafening applause broke out... whistles... hoots... cheers...

It was a good thing Mr. Weasley kept his hand on her back as she staggered her way to the long table that stretched across one end of the room.

Stage fright: Another awful old friend of Hermione Granger's. It didn't matter that Harry was the one who was standing at the podium and telling a sea of rapt faces all about Horcruxes and horror; she wanted to bolt. Her face was burning, both from mortification and due to the room's bright lights. The constant clicking of cameras, the scratching of numerous quills running over parchment, the sporadic gasps from the crowd at pivotal moments: It was all so dizzying.

Hermione clasped her hands together and tried to focus on what Harry was saying.

"...erius Snape was loyal to Albus Dumbledore till the very end of his life. He sacrificed much for our cause, and I will always be grateful to him. If I am standing here today, it is as much thanks to him as it is to Dumbledore.

"He made certain that I had the means to destroy the last of Riddle's Horcruxes, and he did his best to ensure that ultimately, the Elder Wand would end up in my possession."

An astonished buzz floated across the room, and Harry waited patiently for it to die down. Six cameras went off.

"So here's the thing: You have made me out to be some sort of lone hero... the saviour," Harry's mouth twisted, "But that's... well... a load of bollocks. We have won the war, not me. People died for it. Families have been ripped apart, lives destroyed... and to hail one person as the saviour is disrespecting all those people. All I did was deliver the final blow, and that was only made possible by my mother's love, my father's sacrifice, by Dumbledore's careful planning. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Snape's loyalty, and the support of Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. The real heroes are the brave fighters of the Order of The Phoenix, so many of whom have lost their lives: Nymphadora Tonks, Alastor Moody, Dedalus Diggle... Fred Weasley. The real heroes are the teachers and students of Hogwarts; Dumbledore's Army who stood up to the atrocities taking place in their school. The resistance – the people behind Potter Watch and The Quibbler – they are the real heroes.

"These two sitting here – Ron and Hermione – they're... they're... they're the best friends anyone could ever ask for."

And straight away, the sights and sounds of that overfilled room disappeared. Hermione stared at Harry's profile with a breath stuck in her throat.

"They stuck by me through everything –" (Ron lowered his eyes with chagrin.) "– Since I was eleven years old and had my first little rendezvous with the arch nemesis I never asked for. I would've been lost without them – without Ron's quick-thinking and spiritedness, and Hermione's unmatched brilliance and tremendous magical skills. They're the real heroes."

"So now you know everything I know. I have told you everything, and this is the last time I'm going to speak about this. Tom Riddle took my parents away from me. He stole my childhood, robbed me of my freedom, killed people I loved... but it's over now. I won't let him claim another second of my life after this. I would thank you to respect that."

And he stepped away from the podium and walked straight to the door, his mouth set in a straight,
determined line, and his eyes hidden behind the glare that reflected off his glasses. "Harry Potter!" The crowd cried, "Wait! Mr. Potter! A question, please, Mr. Potter!"

Hermione exchanged a startled glance with Ron, with Kingsley, with Mr. Weasley, and the four of them jumped up to follow Harry out the door. "Show the reporters out, please, Matthew," Kingsley told one of the Aurors outside.

They caught up with Harry in front of the lifts. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "No, no, Harry," Mr. Weasley said promptly, "You did wonderfully." Hermione, Kingsley, and Ron nodded in earnest agreement. They didn't speak as they rode back up to the atrium, and only exchanged brief goodbyes once standing before a fireplace.

But then Hermione cleared her throat, "Minister," she began. "Come now, Hermione," he chided gently, "That's Kingsley to you."

"Right," she replied, averting her eyes. She'd thought about saying this so many times in the past three days... as objectively, as dispassionately as she could manage. But now her chin wobbled, and mouth dried up... oh but she had to say it. "Kingsley... I need a portkey."

"A portkey...?"

"Yes. To Melbourne. Australia. I'd... uh... My parents moved there, before the war. I'd like to bring them back."

"Oh. But of course," he affirmed, and she finally found the courage to look him in the eye, "When would you like it?"

"Um... ten days from now?"

"Consider it done, Hermione."

*

She couldn't sleep that night so she wandered out in the garden by herself, breathing in the heady smell of jasmine. She looked heavenwards and sighed.

*When he shall die,*

Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

*
"How's Luna?" Hermione asked.
"Fine," Theo said with a sigh, running a hand through his shaggy hair, "She has to tend to Xeno all
day. He isn't doing too well."

She winced. "I thought the healer's had fixed him?"
"The best they could. His right side is still almost completely paralyzed."

He'd come to visit her that evening, four days after the fall of Voldemort, and Hermione was so
grateful to have a reason to be away from the oppressive gloom that shrouded everyone at the
Burrow. She'd never felt like such an unwelcome stranger in that house before.

They were sitting by that same damned scummy pond where Moody had deposited George and...
Fred... less than a year ago.

Theo was – as always – wearing the scarf she'd made for him. She couldn't remember the last time
she'd seen him without it.

"How's everyone in there?" he asked, pointing to the burrow with his thumb.
"Not good," Hermione whispered, "George never leaves his room. Ginny is angry most of the
time. Mrs. Weasley keeps crying. Ron doesn't talk... Percy and Charlie don't talk... Mr. Weasley is
always away at the Ministry – I think he hates being at home. Bill and Fleur come by sometimes...
but they barely talk as well." She squeezed her eyes shut before she could cry.
"And Potter?"
"He's actually doing better than anyone else. He is... free."

They lapsed into a bout of silence, watching tiny frogs splash in and out of the water. The radial
ripples they caused, green and silver waves of motion, were hypnotic, especially when shot with
the bright purple of the reflected sky of dusk.

Eventually, Theo leant back on his hands and said, "I'm selling Nott manor."
"Seriously?" Hermione spluttered, glancing at him with wide eyes.
He tipped his head back, and his hair, tinted blue, fell away from his face. "Yeah. It's never been
my home. I don't want it. There are some Dittany cultivators who're interested in buying the land,
and I'm getting a nice tidy sum for it. They're going to tear the manor down and I couldn't be
happier."
"But... but where will you live?"
"Malfoy manor for now –"
"You aren't staying with Luna?"
"No," he ground out thinly, "Narcissa and Lucius are in custody... Draco shouldn't have to deal
with all that alone."

Guilt tickled Hermione's throat – this was the closest Theo would get to berating her for tearing
into Malfoy; and it was enough. More than enough. She stared vacantly, awkwardly at the pond.
"But anyway..." Theo went on, "the chap who's helping me negotiate the sale has found me a nice,
spacious flat near Diagon."
"Wow," Hermione breathed.
With a nonchalant shrug, he turned to look at her. "But what about you? When are you going to get
your parents back."
"Soon," she said shakily, "After the funerals. I've spoken to Kingsley... asked him to fix me a
portkey..."
Theo nodded, then reached out to put an arm around her. She laid her head on his shoulder and took in a deep breath. "Um... Theo?"
"Yeah?"
"Would you... I mean... do you think you might maybe consider... that is... if you want..."
"Spit it out, darling."
"Right... do you think you could... come with me?"
Hermione braced herself for his refusal. It was a little selfish of her to ask, what with his real estate issues, and Malfoy and Luna needing all the help they could get, and –
"Are you seriously asking me that?"
"Sorry," she mumbled.
"...What the hell?" He jostled her off his shoulder, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Did you think I'd refuse? You shouldn't even have to ask, Hermione. Tell me the time and place, and I'll be there. Of course I'll be there. Silly fucking goose."
She laughed a watery laugh.
"C'mere," he said, and pulled her back into his side.

The sun set on another day.

"Theo. Thank y–"
"Shut up."

Late in the morning of day five, Hermione slipped into plain black dress robes that she'd borrowed from Ginny, and had had to shrink more than the usual amount. She pulled her hair back into a prim bun, stepped into plain black shoes, and walked out of Ginny's room. She heard sobs as she passed the bathroom.

Harry and Charlie were the only ones in the garden when she arrived. Charlie was smoking, blowing perfect rings into the air. Harry tried to smile at her, but all his face did was twitch awkwardly. The three of them waited in silence. Bill and Fleur apparated in a few minutes later. Then Ron stomped across the lawn... then Percy... Mr. Weasley. Ginny walked over with her splotchy face held high. Harry took her hand. But all the while, they only exchanged terse nods, and nothing more. All in black, all hyper-aware of what they were about to do...
It was only after an undertaker had portkeyed into the garden with a simple wooden casket that, finally, Mrs. Weasley showed up, a white lace handkerchief obscuring her face, and behind her, walking stiffly with his eyes locked on the progression of his feet, was George.
He looked old, which was something neither of the twins had ever looked before, but everything else about him was perfectly in place. His hair was combed back, revealing the hole on one side of his head. His robes were neat and free of creases. His expression was stoic.

The party walked slowly through grassy, sun-dappled fields full of dandelions, daisies, bluebells, and poppies; through flourishing trees out of which wafted the intoxicating aroma of ripe fruit. A gentle, constant breeze flirted with the hems of their sombre robes.
The undertaker was leading the way: Charon ferrying the gathering to their personal hell. Fred's casket was being carried by his siblings: Ron, Percy, and Bill on one side, and George, Ginny, and Charlie on the other. It was too plain, too austere to be Fred's final resting place. It wasn't right –
wasn't right at all.
The Weasley parents followed behind, clutching each other for support. Hermione and Harry
brought up the rear. Nobody spoke, the birds sang, the bees hummed, and the leaves rustled.
More people joined them along the way. Aunt Muriel, (her feathery hat replaced by a black netted
veil,) Theo, Luna, and (Hermione blinked uncomfortably,) Malfoy. Then there came a few
Weasley cousins, Kingsley, and Angelina. Lee Jordan, looking utterly faded, hastened to the front
of the line to walk silently by George's side.
There were more people gathered around the spot where Fred was to be entombed, amongst the
graves of a hundred other Weasleys. Oliver, Alicia, Katie... many people from his year whose
names Hermione didn't know. She nodded at Neville, Seamus, and Dean. McGonagall was there,
with red-rimmed eyes, as were Hagrid, Hooch, Pomfrey, Sprout, and Flitwick. She was immensely
surprised to see Argus Filch, of all people, standing to one corner, looking solemn.

Unlike Dumbledore's funeral – the only other magical funeral she'd attended – there was no
minister-like figure presiding over the event. The Weasley siblings lay their brother down on the
ground, and Mr. Weasley stepped forward. He stared at the unadorned casket for a long while,
before finally whispering, "Goodbye, my boy," and waving his wand. The tomb he constructed
was sleek and made of deep amethyst. On the headstone, in bright orange, was written:

*Here lies Fred Weasley, beloved son and brother.*
*Wherever he goes there will be joy and laughter.*

Purple and orange.
Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes colours. Now that was fitting.

Mr. Weasley stepped back, and immediately his wife fell into him, crying dreadfully. One by one,
the attendees walked up to conjure flowers before the tombstone. Flitwick outdid everyone by
conjuring lilies made of what appeared to be stardust. Angelina bent and pressed a gentle kiss
against the stone. Lee was trembling to badly his tulips were wonky.
When it was Hermione's turn, she created a dense bushel of yellow and orange nasturtiums to grow
around the entire tomb, encircling it in a vibrant ring. Someone squeezed her hand as she lowered
her – Bellatrix's – wand, and she turned to see Ginny, offering her a weak, watery smile.

Hermione stepped away then, and watched the show go on from a distance. She watched as Alicia
all but collapsed and had to be carried away. Theo and Luna, together, produced a delicate archway
of bellflowers. Malfoy's tegetes and Sprout's sunflowers rather complemented Hermione's
nasturtiums.

Most people left after they'd made their offering – the crowd thinned. Hagrid gave her a sorrowful
wave as he trudged by.

Ultimately, just the Weasleys, Lee, Angelina, Harry, Theo, Luna, and Malfoy remained, the last
three of whom walked up to Hermione. Well, Theo and Luna did, and Malfoy lingered stiffly some
distance away.
"We'll be leaving now," Theo told her, "Luna needs to get back to her dad..."
"How is he now," Hermione asked, puckering her brow at Luna.
"Better," Luna whispered, "Healers come to check up on him every day. And of course, pickled
Gulping Plimpy fins are helping immeasurably."
"That's good news," Hermione muttered.
Theo smiled down at Luna with a great deal of affection before looking back at Hermione. "So...
"I'll see you later?"
"Yes. Okay."

They walked away, and as Malfoy made to follow, Hermione said goodbye to prudence, and called out, "Malfoy! Wait!"

He froze. Theo froze. Luna froze. All three of them turned back to gape at her.

Right.

Hermione cleared her throat. "Could I – May I – have a word. Please. Malfoy."

He was looking at her so blankly that she wanted the ground to swallow her up. It was Theo who spoke in his stead: "Er... Hermione... Are you –"

"It's fine," Malfoy interrupted suddenly, "Theo, it's fine. You go on. I'll meet you there."

With an uncertain, worried glance between the two, Theo nodded... but made no move to actually go on. Luna had to take his hand and drag him away; and even then, he kept looking over his shoulder...

"Well, Granger. What is it?"

She jumped and looked up at Malfoy, now standing much closer. He was so tall, and having him stare down at her with those cold grey eyes of his stole away the last of her nerve.

"Um," she stammered.

"Well?" he demanded. His hair was still uncharacteristically unkempt, hanging in locks over his brow.

"Okay," she started awkwardly, "Look. I just... I wanted to apolo–"

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"I said no, Granger. Don't fucking apologise."

"Why on earth not?" Had she been nervous? All she felt now was affronted and annoyed.

"I don't want to hear it."

"That's not – why are you –"

"Now if that's all..." he said gruffly, and made to turn away.

"That is not all!" she hissed. She grabbed the sleeve of his robe and pulled him back to face her. He glared with incredulous antagonism, "What the hell –"

"Why won't you let me say it?" He simply continued to glare. "Do you think you'll have to apologise too? Oh, don't worry, I don't expect any repentance from you for your behaviour in the past –"

"Shut up. Neither of us is going to apologise, alright? Nobody is going to forgive anybody. I just hope, for Theo's sake, you can keep things civil from here on forth."

"Me?!" Hermione fumed, "Me? Because, historically, Malfoy, you're the one who's been a prat!"

"And you're the one who seems to love living in the past," he snapped.

They glowered at each other for five seconds. Five seconds that Hermione counted in her head – five seconds that allowed her to document the near-imperceptible way in which his left eyebrow twitched, the way his nostrils subtly flared. Five seconds after which his gaze left hers and travelled to the side of her neck where... where she knew her tiny mole resided. Almost subconsciously, she lifted her hand to touch the spot, and his eyes snapped back to hers. She sucked in a breath through her teeth. "I can be civil," she whispered.

"Good," he whispered back curtly, "And thankfully, I doubt we'll have to interact all that much anyway."

Then suddenly, he spun around and left... forcing her to watch him walk away. The sunlight on his hair was dazzling as he made his way past gravestones –
Gravestones.
They were in a graveyard. She blinked up at the cornflower blue sky and shuddered. For a while, she had actually forgotten.

She rushed back over to Fred's tomb – now as blossoming and bright as he had been – and took her place beside Harry, Ginny, and Ron.

*

No sooner did they arrive back at the burrow, than George charged back indoors. They heard the slam of his door closing all the way out in the garden.

Later that night, Hermione sat alone by the window in Ginny's room, once again watching the stars as sleep evaded her. Her eyes ached for repose, her head throbbed, but she remained one hundred percent alert. All the lights were doused; the temperature in the room was perfect. She felt like shit. There was a knock on the door and she jumped, without there being any reason to do so. It could only be a Weasley. Or Harry.

"Come in," she called out and stood up and faced the door. Ron shuffled in. "Hey," he mumbled, "Mind if I kip here tonight? Gin wants to be with Harry, and... you know..." he trailed off, making a face.
"Um, sure," Hermione replied hesitantly. She watched him in the delicate light of the moon, his pale face, his ragged hair, and he watched her back, intensely... too intensely...
With the abruptness of a thunderclap, his head dropped and he started to cry. Hermione raced forward to throw her arms around him.

For a long, long stretch of time, she held him and gently patted his back, all the while standing on the tips of her toes and fighting to hold in her own tears. He sobbed into her hair, crying for his brother, his family... but that did eventually peter out. And then the character of their embrace changed.
Ron's hands drifted upwards, pulling her t-shirt up as they went. His head turned so that his lips brushed against her temple...

Hermione was a good three feet away from him in a flash.

He swayed as though in a daze, and blinked blearily at her. "Hermio – wha–?"
She swallowed, and looked away. "I'm sorry, Ron. I'm sorry. I can't."
"What are you talking about?" he demanded, "You can't? It's us, Hermione – you and me –"
From the corner of her eye, she saw him take a step towards her, his hand lifted... and so she backed away some more.
"I'm sorry," she wailed, "I... I can't..."
"Hermione. Look at me." She shook her head. "Look at me."
She did, and wasn't he just the most wretched thing she'd ever seen? His brother was dead, he was a frayed, devastated mess, his eyes were full of anguish and he said, "Please."
"Ron, I ca--"
"I'm in love with you," he declared, "I've been in love with you for years. But you know that. And you... you're in love with me, aren't you? This... us... it's meant to happen. Innit, Hermione?"

His brow creased with sincerity, his sad, cobalt-in-the-moonlight eyes pleaded with her. She bit her lip and just... shook her head. Again. And he recoiled at the rejection. Again.
"You – you – are in love with me, aren't you."
She couldn't speak.
"Hermione. Say it. Say you love me."
"I can't," she said in the smallest voice she'd ever used.
"What."

His expression sucked all the air out of the room, out of her lungs, and left the world in a crushing vacuum. Hurt, fury, and disenchantment claimed his face, all at once. And he stood there long enough for its image to be imprinted onto her brain before storming out of the room.
Not surprisingly, Hermione didn't sleep that night either.

Ron left, and she stood frozen in the moonlit room for eons. Would misery and heartache ever end? Would she ever feel anything but complete devastation?
Devastation: That's what every aspect of Ron had conveyed. What if she had let him kiss her and touch her? She could have given him a moment of relief, much like she had taken from Pete the year before. Oh, but it could never have been as clinical as that with Ron.

She felt too horrified to cry... and it wasn't her right to cry. She had hurt him... hurt him so badly.

Like an iron-limbed automaton, she returned to her spot by the window and curled up with her knees pressed against her chest. There she sat till the moon faded into a gradually lightening sky.

At dawn, a man and his dog scampered across a distant field. Sometime later, a little bird landed on the window ledge and shook the dew off its brown wings.

Mrs. Weasley came out to feed the chickens. An aeroplane streaked across the sky.

Then the door to Ginny's room flew open, and Harry barged in.
"What the hell happened, Hermione?" he demanded.

Hermione didn't move from her corner, and she merely sighed, looking away from her agitated friend and back out the window. "Don't. Please."
"Don't what?!" Harry railed, "Ron woke Gin and me up in a towering rage a while back, muttering something about you being a... treacherous bint, and threw us out of his room. Now he's locked himself in there and won't come out. So tell me! What happened?"
"Harry... please."
"Hermione... he was fucking crying."

She squeezed her eyes shut and wrestled with her squirming insides. "He told me he's in love with me," she whispered.

Harry was quiet for so long that she was forced to look over to check if he was still there. And he was – wild-haired and wearing a puzzled expression. "O...kay?" he said uncomfortably, "That's... good, right? It's what you've wanted to hear for a long time. How did it get all bollixed up, then?"
"Harry..." she muttered, and looked away again.
"You didn't..." he sputtered incredulously, "You... You didn't turn him down, did you?" Her lack of response said it all. She felt his anger and disbelief bleed into the air and envelop her. "You did?! Hermione, what the fu– Why?!"
"I don't feel that way about him."
"Since when?" he raged, "I've watched you two for years, dancing around each other, fighting, being jealous and petty, making MY life bloody difficult... and when he finally decides to man up, you suddenly don't feel that way about him? That makes no sense!"
"It wasn't sudden," she replied thickly, (don't you dare cry.)
"Since when, then?"
"A while." And that was all she was willing to say.
"Fuck's sake," Harry growled, "How could you do that to him? He was in a fucking state... there
was no reason to stomp all over is heart –"
"Do you think I wanted to do that?" Hermione hissed, jumping to her feet and rounding on him,
"Do you really believe I wanted to hurt him? What would you have had me do?"
"You could have given him a chance! You could have made him feel a little less shitty!"
"How long? How long should I have kept up a charade before it would've been okay to break his
heart?"
Harry huffed, pulling an agitated hand through his hair. "It wouldn't have to be a bloody charade.
He's mad for you. You should've seen what the horcrux showed him before he destroyed it. It was
basically all about you. And you wanted him too, once... maybe if you'd given him a chance, you'd
have..." He trailed off.
"I'd have what?" Hermione spat with barely contained despair; her legs were shaking with the
effort it took to keep standing, "I'd have come around? Maybe decided, hey alright, why not? When
have you known me to be that fickle, Harry? When have you known me to make unconsidered
decisions? Do you think I just went on a random whim when I realised I don't love Ron that way?"
"No..." he sighed tiredly, "Of course not..."
"Then what, Harry? What, what, what? We're so wrong for each other – and you know that. You
know that. It could've been so much uglier... and giving in would have been unfair... to him... to
me... I know he hates me now... and he'll probably not stop hating me... I hate me, Harry... I... I..."

She was hyperventilating, and Harry was staring at her in wide-eyed horror. She spun away from
him once more, striding back to the window to press her forehead against the sun-warmed glass.
Her vision was foggy – so she had succumbed to tears after all.
She heard his feet shuffling, and assumed he was leaving... until she felt two hands settle on her
shoulders. Harry rested his chin on the top of her head and murmured, "Sorry. I just really wanted
something good to happen, you know?"
Hermione blinked until the moisture collected in her eyes had cleared. When she looked out of the
window again, she saw Ginny on a broom, circling the orchard at breakneck speed.

_Reality demands_
_that we also mention this:
_Life goes on._

Hermione had maintained her policy of not reading the _Prophet_ ever since Harry's press conference
at the Ministry. The only reason she had some idea of the news was because Mr. Weasley would
return from work every evening, laden with information. He'd temporarily been assigned the role
of scouring through all the documents of the past year, picking out individuals who'd been faithful
to Voldemort's regime.
Thanks to him, Hermione knew about the hundreds who'd been imperiused, the hundreds who'd
been persecuted and were now being given reparations. She knew that all dementors had been
rounded up and locked away in the lowest rung of cells in Azkaban; the prison was now guarded
by Aurors. She knew about the flurry of fast-track trials – as many as ten a day – being conducted
by the Wizengamot. Death Eaters, corrupt officials, snatchers, et al were being jailed for life.
Hermione heard about Yaxley, Umbridge, the Carrows, Dolohov, Nott Sr., Greyback... all being
locked up for good.
On the evening of the sixth day after the war, Mr. Weasley emerged from the fireplace and threw a newspaper on the kitchen table. Then he walked purposefully towards the kitchen cabinet and began pulling out glasses.

The rest of the occupants of the room – all the Weasleys (sans George,) Lee Jordan, (who was the only person George allowed into his room,) Harry, and Hermione – gathered around the table. The headline read: Augustus Rookwood, Ex-Unspeakable and known Death Eater, sentenced to life imprisonment.

Mrs. Weasley let out a keening wail and fell into the nearest chair. Fleur promptly put an arm around her. Everybody else was frozen... with relief? With bitterness? With a feeling of futility? Staggered by the shocking hollowness of retribution?

Mr. Weasley handed them a tumbler full of firewhiskey each.

Day seven saw them all congregated at Andromeda Tonks' back garden, dressed once again in sober black dress robes. Once again, the pulsating bloom of summer mocked the occasion; the garden was full of poppies and peonies.

Under the shade of a lush chestnut tree were three caskets.

Andromeda was a statue before them. She held a bundle of blankets, housing the tiny, sleeping form of Teddy Lupin pressed against her bosom. Her face was the epitome of grace and composure; she had Bellatrix's features, it was true, but instead of flashing ruthless insanity, they exuded constraint and self-control. It was heartbreaking to behold.

As a complete contrast, to her right was Professor Sprout: Dishevelled, broken, and sobbing miserably into a soiled handkerchief.

"I'm a proud Hufflepuff, I am," said Tonks with a brilliant grin, "It's the best damn house. You know, in my fifth year, I sat the whole lot – first year to seventh year – down in the common room and taught them 'Yellow Submarine.' Merlin, how it stuck! It became our anthem... Drove Sprout up the wall, it did!"

To Andromeda's left was Malfoy, and his demeanour was similar to his aunt's. His jaw and fists were clenched, his eyes were lowered. Theo stood next to him, correspondingly sombre, and his arm was drawn around Luna, who was crying softly. Even Xenophilius had made it this time. In a bright blue wheel chair with a healer in tow, he was alarmingly skeletal. His once puffy hair had wilted.

The Weasleys all stood together in a cluster, watching Andromeda with profound understanding on their faces. All, except George, that is. Mrs. Weasley had stood outside his door for hours, begging him to come out, to no avail. A lot of the usual suspects where there – Kingsley along with a small army of Aurors, (all friends of Tonks, most probably,) Hagrid, McGonagall, Flitwick, Hestia, and... Honestly, etcetera.

"Wotcher," the pink haired woman said with a small wave, "I'm Tonks. Don't listen to what anybody else says in regard to my name, yeah? Nice to meet you."

Nearest to Lupin's casket slouched Harry, mourning the loss of yet another father-figure.
“You’re the cleverest witch of your age I’ve ever met, Hermione.”
“I’m not. If I’d been a bit cleverer, I’d have told everyone what you are!”

Here’s what Remus Lupin was: One of the bravest people she’d ever known. Brave for not letting his condition beat him down, brave for carrying on even after everyone he cared for died, brave for surviving the death of the man he loved, brave for being endlessly kind rather than bitter, brave for putting away all his self-doubt and misgivings so that he may be a good father to his son.

The son who will never know him. God, it was all so miserable.

Only moments after Kingsley had entombed the caskets in soft grey marble, Teddy Lupin woke up. His loud, gurgling wails broke through the heavy poignancy around them. Immediately, Andromeda turned around and walked back into her house, head bent as she cooed and shushed at the bundle in her arms. Malfoy and Mrs. Weasley went after her.

Hermione attended three funerals on day eight.

First, there was Diggle's, held in a small graveyard somewhere in Somerset. His wife was as tall as he had been short; very stork-like. They laid him to rest just a few minutes after sunrise, and his tomb of pure white turned gold as the early rays of morning struck it.

Just four hours afterwards, Hermione stood between Harry and Dean in a muggle cemetery, attending the last rites of Colin Creevey. She barely saw anything beyond Dennis, so small and lost, clinging to his mother's side. Almost the entire Gryffindor house had turned up, as well as many people from other houses, in Colin's year. Before his coffin was lowered into the ground, Neville and Seamus covered it with a blazing red Gryffindor banner.

Later, just before five o'clock, she was sitting outside a small mausoleum attached to a reasonable-sized estate. It was rather fitting, she thought, that the evening sky was lavender. There was a speech being made, about a beautiful girl with a beautiful soul, but all Hermione could think of was the girl who’d called her boring, stuck-up, swotty, ugly...

Stop it.

Lavender's mother, (an older, more voluptuous version of her daughter,) and father, (a tall, swarthy man with thinning hair,) were beside themselves. Parvati and Padma were three seats away, and it was like they'd been transported, undisturbed from when she’d seen them in the Great Hall a week ago.

There was another speech being made, about a brave, strong-willed girl with a heart of gold... and it was true. Ultimately, that's who Lavender Brown proved to be.

Her... ugh... body... wrapped up in pale pink silk was carried inside the mausoleum by her weeping father. The congregation stood as that happened. Hermione couldn't help but notice Ron – his shoulders slumped and his eyes full of tears – and she went up to him and took his hand.

He let her hold onto it... for all of five minutes... until the ceremony came to an end, and he yanked his hand away and stormed off.
At night she curled up under a thin linen sheet and *Moon River* played in her head in a beautiful, incessant loop. In the next bed lay a disgruntled Ginny who blamed her for not being able to spend the night with Harry anymore.

*Two drif ters off to see the world  
There's such a crazy world to see*

*The crazy world was a flatland, and the ground was a carpet of clayey, ochre sand, sparingly shooting out short stalks of brittle, yellow grass. Barren trees with twisting branches sprung up here and there. The air shimmered and rippled with heat.  
...Chasing after our rainbow's end...*

*The horizon line was defined by a purple, mountainous stripe. In the middle-ground sat the dilapidated ruins of the Tower of Babel, out of which a row of... crows? Dementors?... flew out and soared in a sweeping arch above her head.  
The sky was pale blue. Cloudless. Glistening.  
Hermione turned as she followed their flight...  
...My dream maker  
Heartbreaker  
Wherever you're going I'm going the same...  
She ran through the desert forever, staring at the dark flying shapes, half-blinded by the dazzling sky.  
...What I see, who I become  
We're all chasing after our end  
Chasing after our ends...  
She stumbled, and she screamed as she fell. The hot sand scalded her. With a gasp she sat up to see what she had tripped over... and it was a skull, made of lapis lazuli.  
Then one of the black shapes in the sky swooped towards her... closer... closer... and it was Bellatrix, and she pounced on her, loomed over her... her deranged face filled Hermione's vision...  
"HOW DID YOU GET INTO MY VAULT," Bellatrix shrieked.  
"No – please –" Hermione gasped.  
Suddenly, all the black flying things closed in... turned orange... blazing... they were ruthless flames of a raging fiendfire...  
"NO!"

She was in Ginny's room, sitting up in her bed. Panting. Sweating. Shivering. She looked about her in a terrorised daze.  
In the dark room, Ginny's eyes were black as they looked at her, before turning their blank gaze to the ceiling.
On the morning of day nine, Hermione sat at the Weasley kitchen table shelling peas. She lost herself in the mindless mundanity of the task, paying no mind to Ginny as she clumped out into the garden with her broom, nor to Harry, who followed with one of his own. 
Plop-plop-plop, the peas spilled out of their pods into the bowl before her.

But she couldn’t ignore it when loud shouts broke out from somewhere above. She didn’t even get a chance to stand before thump, thud, bang, a bundle of bodies plodded down the stairs.

"NO! NO!" Mrs Weasley was half-sobbing, half-yelling, "I CAN’T TAKE IT ANYMORE! He has to talk to me! HE HAS TO!"
"Mum..." Charlie implored. His arms were locked around her, trying to keep her from charging back up the stairs.
"NO!" Mrs. Weasley shrieked, "He has to come out! He has to talk to me! GEORGE! GEORGE! I AM YOUR MOTHER AND YOU WILL LISTEN TO ME!"
"Mum, please, calm down..."
Ron and Percy had come down to the kitchen too, gazing plaintively at their mother.
"He was my son! Fred was my boy and I lost him! I lost one boy and I shan’t lose another! GEORGE! YOU HEAR ME – GEORGE! COME DOWN HERE AT ONCE!"
"Mum," Percy said forcefully. He went to stand in front of her and put both his hands on her shoulders. "Mum. Enough. Please, mum."
"He's... George... I... Oh, Freddy..."
With that, Mrs. Weasley broke down, teetering forward into Percy's arms. He led her into the sitting room, saying, "Shhh, it'll be okay..."
"No... No... It won't..."

When they had gone, Charlie breathed out heavily. He dug into his pocket to pull out a pack of cigarettes and shuffled out into the garden. The door closed behind him with a loud slam, and it left Hermione alone in the kitchen with Ron.

"Enjoyed the show?" he sneered.
Hermione stared at him with wide eyes and a quivering chin.
"Must be fun for you, eh, watching the destruction from the outside? Because perfect Hermione Granger hasn't lost a thing. Even the fucking war couldn't touch you. Perfect, perfect. You're alive, your fucking Slytherin chums are alive, you'll go off and get your parents back... everything's sodding dandy in the life of Hermione Granger."
"Ron –" she whispered piteously.
"We lost everything... everything. And you lost nothing. Not that you care, right? I saw you, at Fred's funeral... chatting up fucking Malfoy."
"Ron," she choked, "Ron, I wasn't --"
"Yes. You. Were. Just... get out of here. Bloody hell, why are you here? Why the bleeding shite are you here? Just get the –"

"Shut up, Ron. Shut up now."
Both Hermione and Ron jumped and looked towards the door. Unbeknown to them, Harry and Ginny had returned, and stood framed by the doorway wearing equally horrified expressions.
"What," Ron spat poisonously, "I'm just speaking the truth. She," he pointed viciously at Hermione, "Is living off our generosity, having a merry fucking time slagging around with Slytherin cunts –"
"Do NOT talk about her like that," Ginny roared, pulling her wand out. But Harry with his seeker-reflexes, caught her wrist before she could inflict any damage. "Get off me, Harry!"
"Er... Let's all... please calm down, yeah?" Harry whispered with desperation.
"THE FUCK I WILL –" Ginny thundered.
"Oh, right," Ron fumed, "One slag will defend another, yeah?"
"WHAT DID YOU SAY?" Ginny screamed, the same time as Harry growled, "Watch it, Ron..."

"Are you all quite insane?"
And it was Percy this time, speaking from the door that led to the living room. He looked from Ron's purple face to Hermione's bloodless one... from Harry restraining Ginny, to Ginny trying to launch herself at Ron.
"Our mother," he gritted out through clenched teeth, "Is in the next room, terribly upset. Stop this ridiculous, childish nonsense at once. Ron, get out."
"Excuse me, what–"
"Get out. Walk your bloody temper off. Come back when you can speak civilly again."
"You're not the boss –" "I swear to Godric, Ron, I will hex you if you don't leave right now." And surprisingly, albeit with a furious glare, Ron followed the command of the brother he claimed to not respect at all. "Ginny," Percy continued after Ron had flounced away, "Go to your room," and with an angry hiss, she acquiesced too.

Percy levelled a profoundly unimpressed look on Harry and Hermione before leaving. The awful ringing silence he left behind was thicker than slime. Just to break through it, Hermione scraped back her chair loudly as she got to her feet. 
Not wanted, not wanted, not wanted. Had Ron voiced the sentiments of the entire Weasley clan? She'd never felt like such a sick parasite before... Not wanted.

"Hermione..." Harry whispered uncertainly.
She shook her head at him and turned away. With an inconspicuous sniff, she went over to the pantry and brought out a box of lemon balm tea leaves.
"I'm going to make some tea for Mrs. Weasley. Would you like a cup?"
"Er... sure..." Harry muttered.
Hermione put the kettle on.

*

When Ron got back, the sun had set and everybody was gathered in the sitting room, co-existing in silence. Wordlessly, he ensconced himself in an armchair by a window, which he stared moodily out of.
Ginny glowered at him. She and Hermione were sitting on the floor by Mrs. Weasley's feet, helping her untangle a mountain of wool. They were doing it without magic, painstakingly, as again, the absorption that such a tedious task provided was truly welcome.

They heard the floo go off in the kitchen, and Mr. Weasley's voice was heard calling out: "Molly? Percy?"
"In here, Arthur," Mrs. Weasley called back.

He wasn't alone. He walked primly into the room, and close after him entered Kingsley, as regal as ever in faun coloured robes and carrying a dragonhide briefcase.
"Oooh," Mrs. Weasley squeaked, "Kingsley! Er – Minister, Er –"
Kingsley rolled his eyes, "We've been over this, Molly. I'm still the same person... the person who
rather loves your gooseberry pie..."
"Of course, of course," she muttered, "Do sit down..."

"So what brings you here?" Mrs. Weasley asked as she handed him a hefty slice of pie.
"A couple of things," he smiled, "And thank you so much for this. You've salvaged a really rotten
day." He helped himself to a forkful and closed his eyes blissfully. "Well, let's get down to it, I
suppose. First, Percy."
The man in question started and blinked at Kingsley through his horn-rimmed glasses. "Me,
Minister?"
"Yes. I'm sure Arthur's been telling you how hectic things are getting in the Ministry. It's pure
madness on most days. We're woefully understaffed... so many have been sacked, imprisoned, or
are currently receiving treatment at Mungo's. We're in desperate need for efficient, organised,
steadfast workers..."
"Are you –" Percy stammered, "Are you saying –"
"Come back to work, Percy. I would like to offer you your old job again: I could really use a good
senior assistant."
"I don't know what to say," Percy replied thickly, "I... I've made mistakes, Minister... bad
choices..."
"Who hasn't?" said Kingsley with a shrug, "I know you're a hard worker. So what will it be? Can I
expect you in my office bright and early tomorrow morning?"
Percy swallowed, and needlessly straightened his glasses. "Yes. Absolutely."
"Wonderful," Kingsley exclaimed. He finished up the last of his pie, and then he set the empty
plate on the centre table. "I would like to talk to Harry, Hermione, and Ron privately now, please."

The others rose and exited the room promptly, (Ginny kept looking suspiciously over her
shoulder,) and the remaining three all seated themselves on the sofa in front of Kingsley.

First, he looked at Harry: "As the chief representative of the British Ministry of Magic, I would
like to inform you that the government wishes to award you an Order of Merlin, First Class –"
"No," said Harry, promptly.
Kingsley smirked, "Perhaps you will prefer my suggestion? A collective award, for all those who
fought –"
"Yes," said Harry without delay.
"All right," Kingsley was most amused, "There is a small ceremony planned for the fifteenth... if
you all could please make an appearance..." He then popped open his briefcase and turned to
Hermione and said, "These are for you." He held out a pillbox hat and a wooden spatula. "The hat
will take you to the Ministry of Magic head office in Melbourne on the sixteenth of May at nine
PM sharp. This one... the spatula... will bring you back here. The date and time is up to you; a
simple expurgo will activate the portkey."
Hermione set the objects on her lap with reverence. "Thank you."
Kingsley waved away her thanks and proceeded to hand them a crisp white envelope each. The
letter inside read:

SUMMONS TO WITNESS AT THE TRIALS OF LUCIUS MALFOY AND NARCISSA MALFOY

To,
Hermione Jean Granger,
You are required to attend to give evidence in court at the hearing of this proceeding on Wednesday, the 13th of May, 1998, at The Ministry of Magic, London, at 11 am sharp, and are to remain until your attendance is no longer required.

Issued by (Interim) Chief Warlock
Tiberius Ogden

"What d'you need us for?" Ron grunted, "Lock them up."
Both Hermione and Harry opened their mouths to speak, but were cut off by Kingsley.
"It isn't that easy, Ron," he said, suddenly seeming tired.
"Because of their twatty son's deal with Lupin, yeah?"
"Well, yes. Which is why I need you to be at the ministry at nine – there's going to be a closed... trial... of sorts for Draco. I've tried my best to shut it down, but the Wizengamot insists, and I don't have the power to overrule them. It'll just be Ogden, two other members, and I... and a few witnesses... it's all ridiculous, of course... as far as I'm concerned, Draco Malfoy does not deserve punishment of any sort."
Ron scoffed, "And all the shit he pulled in sixth year?"
"Under duress, you mean?" Kingsley asked with a frown, "His actions after are what I'm concerned with. I have spoken to Andromeda Tonks, Neville, Seamus, Bill, Theodore, and Luna... they've all agreed to speak in his favour. Now if the three of you would agree –"
"Yes," Hermione said with an immediacy that surprised her. Harry nodded, and Ron... looked away.
"Ron?" Kingsley prompted.
"Fine," he muttered, not meeting the Minister's eye, "He... helped protect my family... so I suppose. Just this once. Then we're even, and I can hate the bastard with a clear conscience."
Harry laughed; Kingsley's lips twitched.
"As for the trials of Lucius and Narcissa –"
"She lied to Voldemort... it's what kept me alive..." Harry mumbled.
"Yes," Kingsley averred, "Are you willing to testify on her behalf?"
"Yeah."
"Well then. With that, and the conditions of Draco's deal, I have no doubt that she'll escape Azkaban. And Lucius –"
"You can't be serious," Ron blurted.
"Oh, he's going to jail. For a good long time," said Kingsley with promise, "Just, unfortunately, not for life." He held up his hand as Ron made to protest again. "Not ideal... I know. But again, it's what Remus promised Draco, and I am going to honour his promise for him."

Obviously, none of them could object to that. They remained lost in their own musings for some time, until Kingsley clapped and rubbed is palms together and said, "There's one more thing – oh, don't look so worried – these are happier tidings! I had gone to Hogwarts yesterday to see how the repair work is coming along, and I'm please to tell you... it's nearly complete; nearly restored to its former glory. We'd called in a team from France to help with the architectural restructuring, and –"
"Why is it," Hermione interrupted, fighting to keep a tremor out of her voice, "That it was so easy to get foreign aid now, and not during the actual war?"
Kingsley sighed and turned his eyes heavenwards. "We have very strict non-interventional policies in place, Hermione. It's difficult enough to maintain the Statute of Secrecy during a time of conflict, domestically, without it becoming an international –"
"But surely the rest of the magical world knew that Voldemort would not be satisfied with taking over merely Britain!" Hermione exclaimed incredulously, "He was out for world domination – everybody's lives were at stake!"
"There are laws, Hermione, that are –"
"Preposterous!"
"...Maybe so..." suddenly he smiled, "This is, actually, a good preamble for what I was about to say – Hogwarts is almost ready to be reopened, and you will be getting your letters soon – Minerva wants to give the students in your batch a chance to redo their final year. However, I have an alternative proposition for you: Come work for the Ministry. As I said to Percy, we're short-staffed, and you three are some of the finest young people I know. Pick your department – Harry, I know you've always wanted to be an Auror... and you, Ron. Hermione the International Magical Office of Law will be honoured to have you."

She gaped at him with something akin to panic swirling in her gut. The war was over, and he was offering a fresh start, a new life, a complete change of pace. "But... what about our N.E.W.T.s?" she spluttered. Her heart was thudding so disturbingly.
Kingsley threw back his head and guffawed. "Completely unnecessary, Hermione. I think you've rather proved yourselves already... you don't need grades, or a piece of parchment to validate your abilities!...So? Internships and training will commence on the first of August."
"I'm in," Harry said with a short, sure nod.
Ron, who'd gone back to scowling out of the window, shrugged. "Sure. Whatever."

A fresh start, a new life, a complete change of pace...
No.
She wasn't ready. She wasn't... complete. Hermione Granger did not skip steps.
"I'm sorry, Kingsley," she said, "I will have to decline. I want to go back to Hogwarts, I want to complete my education. I think –"
She broke off to stare at Harry – he was chuckling. "Kingsley, she wouldn't be Hermione if she didn't jump at the chance to go back to school. I'm sure she's been looking forward to sitting for her N.E.W.T.s since our first day at Hogwarts."
"Not the first," Hermione mumbled, giving Harry the first genuine smile she'd indulged in in a long, long time.
"No?" he asked her fondly.
"Before. Since I'd read about them in Hogwarts: A History."
He grinned, and it was full of so much affection that she wanted to hug him.

Kingsley, too, was grinning as he stood up. "Fair enough, Hermione. But remember, there will always be an opening for you at the Ministry." He smoothened down his robes and picked up his briefcase. "I must be going now... thank you for your time. I'll see you tomorrow."
He left, and the reminder of what the next day was to bring fell like a bucket of ice cold water on Hermione's cheery mood.

Day ten: The Ministry of Magic atrium.

Hermione's sensible shoes clicked in tandem with Harry, Ron, and Percy's footsteps as they marched towards the lifts. Out of habit, Hermione looked at her wrist to check for the time – she
still wore her broken watch, stuck at twelve-forty AM. Her watch was still stuck on the night of the final battle.

As the lift descended, Hermione was once again thrown back to her morning as Mafalda, standing stricken behind Umbridge. The feeling got stronger and stronger as they walked down the Department of Mysteries corridor, down the flight of stairs leading to the courtrooms...

"Here," said Percy after leading them to a large, dark door, "Courtroom six."

They were, evidently, the last to arrive. The highest bench was already occupied by Kingsley (who smiled encouragingly at them,) Ogden, (who also smiled), and two witches in plum coloured robes – one curious, one sneering. Percy went to sit by Kingsley, parchment and quill in hand, leaving Hermione, Harry, and Ron to take a seat on the benches that lined the sides of the room.

There sat Andromeda, expressionless, and Neville, in expensive silk dress robes. Seamus, with his face completely healed gave them a little wave. Luna smiled. Bill nodded.

Hermione sat down beside Theo, but he wouldn't look at her. He was sitting absolutely still, staring at the straight-backed wooden chair in the middle of the room as he chewed at his tongue; a sure sign of internal chaos. He twitched oddly when the door opened, and Malfoy walked in, flanked by two Aurors.

Hermione watched him closely, trying to gauge something out of the cold aloofness of his demeanour... Just as he lowered himself into the chair, he said something to his escorts, and they laughed, one even lightly thumped his back good naturedly.

Ogden cleared his throat. "Closed hearing to determine the culpability of Draco Lucius Malfoy in his role as a Death Eater under the service of Tom Marvolo Riddle, otherwise known as He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

"Interrogators: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic, Tiberius Ogden, Chief Warlock, Edwina Lumbard, senior member, Wizengamot."

Ogden droned on, naming everybody in the room. Hermione rolled her shoulders, overcome with a need to fidget. She had a lump in her throat.

"...Court Scribe: Percy Weasley..."

Luna had clasped Theo's hand. Seamus was drawing invisible spirals on the floor with his shoe. Hermione bit her lips between her teeth.

She looked at Malfoy again; his arms rested along the slim arms of his chair, and his fingers were drumming against the edges intermittently, as though tapping against phantom piano keys. And when had he decided to stop combing back his hair, she wondered inanely. Was his spine so taught with fear, or pride? Hang it all, she was nervous for Draco Malfoy.

"...Neville Longbottom, and Seamus Finnigan.

"The charges against the accused are as follows: That he did freely and willingly join the ranks of the followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, those that called themselves the Death Eaters," (Malfoy's hands curled into fists,) "That he did invite He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to take sanctuary in his home," (Malfoy's calm facade dropped; he glowered at Ogden,) "That he did, under the orders of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, spend the majority of his sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry securing a way to introduce Death Eaters into the castle. That he did, through his actions, cause near-fatal accidents to befall his fellow students, Ronald Weasley and Katie Bell," (Malfoy's lip curled,) "That he did, ultimately, succeed in completing his mission on the thirtieth of June, nineteen-ninety-seven, which resulted in a battle that injured many. That he did, disarm a weakened and sickly Albus Dumbledore, and threaten to take his life. That he did
subsequently, live as a fugitive from justice. That he did, continue to serve He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named loyally and –"
"Not true," Malfoy cut in loudly.
"You will be given a chance to speak later, Mr. Malfoy!" the sneering witch – Edwina – shouted. "Er..." Ogden stammered uncomfortably, "Right then. Do you, Draco Lucius Malfoy, deny the previously stated charges?"
"I deny their premise," Malfoy replied, slow and sharp, "I was neither free nor willing when I was being marked. Had I refused, my parents and I would have been killed. " Suddenly, the pace of his speech trebled, "The Dark Lord, mind you, doesn't ask. I wasn't offered the mark, and I didn't invite him into my home –" he paused to laugh bitterly, "–This is such bullshit. Did you hear yourself prattle? What do you think, we had the Dark Lord over for tea, and he was completely delightful, offered to give me a sweet little tattoo, and we enjoyed his company so much that we simply had to have him stay on?"
"Your insolence is highly inappropriate, Mr. Malfoy!" Edwina snapped. (Hermione heard Theo let out a quiet groan.)
Ogden, however, looked thoroughly chastise as he fretfully shuffled his papers around. The other witch – Zoya something – seemed stricken.
Malfoy wasn't done: "And just so you know, I never served the Dark Lord out of loyalty. Never. And if you've seen Remus' memories, which I'm sure you have, you'll know that I tried to get out of it multiple times... But apparently Dumbledore had big plans that couldn't be derailed, right?"
"Look, Draco," Kingsley began tiredly.
"What is this, Minister?" Malfoy spat, "I was promised I wouldn't have to deal with any of this. I answered all of Remus' questions, under the influence of Veritaserum! We had a deal! We had a deal, and you broke it! You've put my mother into custody, you're treating me like a criminal... I've helped, spied, and fought for your side..."
"Hear, hear!" Neville and Seamus chorused. "You tell 'em, Ferret boy," Seamus added.
Sneery Edwina was beside herself, "Order! Order in the court!"
Like true Gryffindors, Neville and Seamus took their time settling down, and Malfoy, the inscrutable prat, was smirking at them. Hermione thought Theo might chew his tongue right off.
Eventually, after calm had been restored, Kingsley stood up and turned to the other three at his bench. "I'm afraid," he said authoritatively, "This farce of a trial has gone on for too long. You have seen Remus Lupin's memories, and I, along with numerous members of the Order have told you about the role Mr. Malfoy has played in the war. Now if you insist on hearing the testimonies of these witnesses, so be it, but I can assure you that if you don't vote in this young man's favour, I will make it my personal mission to keep appealing on his behalf until the verdict is overturned." "This is intimidation!" Edwina shrieked.
"This is honouring an agreement!"
"Please, please calm yourselves," poor old Ogden implored, "Let's put it to a vote, shall we? All in favour of dismissal...?" He raised his hand, and so did Zoya Something. "All right. Case dismissed." He jumped to his feet. "We have another trial to get to in an hour, and I would truly appreciate some refreshments before that. Minister?"

A slightly dazed Kingsley, a ludicrously jaunty Ogden along with Sweet and Sneery left the courtroom. That's when Seamus punched his fist into the air, Luna and Bill applauded, and Theo leapt off the bench. Malfoy had hardly gotten to his feet when Theo reached him and whacked him on the shoulder.
"What the fu–"
"You Merlin be damned moron. Couldn't you control yourself for ten fucking minutes?"
"What are you talking about? Everything turned out just fine?" Malfoy scowled. "But what if it hadn't?"

He didn't get a chance to answer. A bailiff of some sort in light purple robes came to inform him that his parents were in a holding room and wished to see him. He rushed off, and Theo rushed off. Ron whispered something to Harry and hurried away as well. Andromeda muttered a hoarse, "I must get back to my grandson," and left.

Hermione, Harry, and Luna lingered in the empty courtroom for a while after Neville, Seamus, and Bill had bid them farewell. "Well, that was something," Harry quipped. Hermione nodded dumbly. "Theo was so worried," Luna said, "But I'd told him they couldn't possibly put Draco in Azkaban. They'd have saved themselves so much trouble if they'd bother to look at his aura." As they sauntered out into the stone corridor, Hermione asked Harry, "Where did Ron go?" "To see Reg Cattermole," he replied, peering at her from the corner of his eye, "He wants to apologise for getting his family into trouble."

While waiting for the next trial to begin, Hermione pondered over the impossible complexity of human nature until she felt acutely, unbearably... uncomfortable.

* 

The trials of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had lasted for an hour. They'd sat through the proceedings with stony expressions, speaking in monosyllables as much as possible. Narcissa Malfoy, though exponentially less polished than usual, managed to display some elegance. Thanks to Harry's testimony and her son's deal, she had been acquitted. Her husband was sentenced to a twenty year jail term. Hermione hadn't really looked at him much, not even while relating the events that had taken place at Malfoy Manor; the impression she was left with was long, limp, tangled white hair, hollow eyes, and sunken cheekbones. The moment it was over, Theo and Malfoy had taken Narcissa away, doing their best to shield her from reporters and photographers. She'd been deathly white.

Sat on the floor by the window once more, Hermione told Ginny all that had happened. The sun was setting and Ginny's head was ablaze. "Harry told me you've all been offered jobs at the ministry," she said, leaning back against her arms. "Yes..."

"And he told me you've decided you'd rather go back to Hogwarts." Hermione looked out at the world, squinting against its radiance. "Harry said I wouldn't be me if I didn't go back."

"Hah. No. You wouldn't. And... Hermione... I'm really glad that you are. I'm really glad that you'll be there."

They smiled at each other. "And," Ginny continued, "I'm really glad that you're here right now. I know I've been a bit of a bitch —"
"Ginny, no..."
"Definitely a bit of a bitch, but knowing you're there... it's meant a lot. So just... don't listen to what Ron says..."
Hermione sighed, and she pressed a palm against her eyes. "He's so angry, Ginny."
"Well, of course he is. It's how we Weasleys process hurt, you see. There was no way this could've gone well, Hermione. He'll heal."
"But do you think he'll ever forgive me?" she asked in a small voice.
"I don't know."

Eleven days after the war, she wandered deep into the orchard with her copy of *Hogwarts: A History*, trying to relive the wonder she'd felt as an eleven year old. She couldn't get beyond the chapter about the Great Hall; printed words described a lavish room with a spectacular seeing, and her mind showed her images of people bleeding and crying, of a line of dead bodies. Her mind showed her chaos and flashing lights, madness and desperation... and a large chunk of mortar falling upon an unsuspecting –

Hermione shut the book and pulled out Bellatrix's wand, balancing it on her open palm. She'd barely done any magic in the past eleven days. Two days later, she'd have to use *this wand* to bring back her parents – this wand – this wand – *this* wand. Her idea of penance was a silly one.

The man on stage was a complete sodding dunce.
"...and though many lives were lost, the legacy of this war is the victory of good over evil, of light over dark, of love over hate..."
A total prick. Hermione wanted to pull off her shoe and hurl it at him.

On the twelfth day, she was in a jam-packed auditorium in some corner of the Ministry, listening to a brain-dead hack wax poetic about the nightmare they'd lived through.

"...will be honoured for their sacrifice – their valour will live on through us. They fought a righteous battle for a glorious new world..."

There was no righteousness in war; no glory in battle. This man – this sap – knew nothing. He'd probably hidden away during the entire thing... He wouldn't have been talking like that if he'd seen what it had really been like.
If he'd seen his friends fall to a pointless death. If he'd seen how a mother looked upon losing her child. If he'd felt the terror of facing death, a giant snake, a roaring blaze...
If he'd been hurt, cursed, tortured...

*My friend, you would not tell with such high zest*
*To children ardent for some desperate glory,*
*The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

She looked to her left, to a row of frosty faces. Harry, Ron, Dean, and Seamus' eyes were glazed like they were back in Binns' classroom. Ginny looked like she was a second away from casting a Bat-Bogey hex. She looked to her right, to another row of frosty faces. Neville's eyes were narrowed; Luna was examining the speaker like she thought he wasn't quite sane. And Theo and Malfoy... with identical expressions of disgust like they each had a whole lemon in their mouths...

Hermione began to giggle and it rang out like the tinkling of a dinner bell. On either side, the once frosty faces turned to stare at her with disbelief... before almost collectively thinking oh what the hell, and joining right in with her.
Her tiny little giggle had triggered a cloudburst of laughter, and Mr. Chest-Thumper stood up on his pedestal fuming in affronted silence.

* 

"You nutter, I love you," Theo sniggered, plucking at her sleeve.

The "ceremony" had dissolved very quickly once the audience realised that they could laugh their way to the end. After days of fights and funerals it had felt so surreal to be lost in a sea of laughter...

"I'm a genius, aren't I?" Hermione grinned.

They were walking to the lifts in a double file of sorts: Harry and Ron preceded Hermione and Theo, who preceded Malfoy and Neville...
Two rows of photographers flanked their path.

"Well, I've always said so."

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Potter – this way – please! Mr. Malfoy! Ms. Lovegood! Neville Longbottom...!"

"By the way..."
"Hm?"

"Give us a smile, Ms. Granger, C'maaan! Mr. Potter, Mr Potter! Nott and Malfoy – Slytherin turncoats – over here, halloa!"

"Are you sure you want to come with me tomorrow? I mean..."
"Do you want me to throw you to the hounds?"

"Mr. Longbottom – pretend you're holding a sword! A picture of Potter, Weasley, and Granger... go on!"

Then they were in a lift, shooting up towards the atrium.
Their short journey to the Ministry fireplaces was much more peaceful. Luna skipped over to Theo's other side, "You saved the day, Hermione."
"She really did," Theo seconded, putting an arm around each girls' shoulders.
"You're leaving tomorrow aren't you?"
"Yes, Luna."
"I hope it goes well. If only daddy had been able to complete the diadem he'd been making, I'd have let you borrow it."
"That's very kind of you..."

Even in the atrium, however, people kept pausing to gawk at them. When one pretty young thing stopped dead to blink at Theo, his walk turned into a strut. He unceremoniously pulled Hermione and Luna closer, offered the woman a rakish smile, crooning, "Well hello, there."
In unison, Hermione and Luna threw Theo's arms off. Hermione daintily stepped closer to Luna and looped her arm around the other girl's.
"Hey!" Theo cried in an injured tone.
They ignored him, and picked up their pace.
"Oi!"
Luna tittered.

Her beaded bag was packed, with all the photographs she'd taken from her parents' attic spread across the top. There was so much rubbish in there though... It still had more than half of Harry and Ron's clothes... a mini apothecary... The bloody portrait of Phineas Nigellus...
She'd empty it out. Later.

From Ginny's room she climbed up one floor. Standing in the landing, she breathed in heavily, and then knocked on the door to the left.
"George?" she called, "It's me Hermione."
Not a voice, not a sound of acknowledgement.
"I'm leaving tonight. Er... right now. I don't know for how long... and I – I – suppose I just wanted to say goodbye."
Silence.
"Um... take care of yourself."
She let herself linger for ten seconds.

The Weasleys and Harry were all in the kitchen, waiting to see her off. She got an exceptionally warm hug from Mrs. Weasley. "Best of luck," they murmured, "Keep in touch, let us know if you need anything." Ginny squeezed her hand.
"Come," said Harry with a tilt of his head, "I'll walk you out."
Ron was standing by the threshold, and as his eyes met hers, he offered her a gruff, "Take care now."
"You too, Ron," Hermione whispered, because it didn't sound like he was being sarcastic.

Harry shoved his hands into his pockets as they moved towards the closest hillock; Theo's silhouette could be seen standing on the very top. It was the very same one upon which she'd sat less than a year ago, after she'd altered mum and dad's memories.
She'd come full circle in a way – a jagged circle with a blade like edge. She almost couldn't believe she had been the one living through all she had lived through.
Circle: A continuous curved line, the points of which are always the same distance away from a fixed central point.

Ha – she couldn't claim to have known such consistency. A circle is a whole... and wasn't it just so fucking poetic that on coming to the end of this circle of hers, she was feeling anything but?

Chapter End Notes

This story is a year old now. Omg.
I know. And I'm sorry. Life happened, and this chapter was being extremely difficult. But here it is, and it's dedicated to all my wonderful Facebook friends and co-sprinters.

A whole lot more was supposed to happen here but it got out of hand. So unfortunately, the second part of this chapter will be a while longer. I hope this isn't too disappointing after such a long wait.

“Welcome to the British Ministry Of Magic consulate, Victoria,” said the robotic voice of a female announcer the moment Hermione and Theo appeared inside a small stone chamber. While Hermione was still reeling from the tumultuous after-effects of portkey-travel, a tall man with the most abundant head of sandy hair greeted them with a pleasant, “Good morning!”

His name, he revealed, was Timothy Preston, and would they please feel free to let him know what he could do for them...?

“Minister Shacklebolt told me to ensure that everything you need is taken care of.”

“Right, thank you,” Hermione mumbled, blinking at the early morning sky visible through the high windows in the room; it had been night just seconds ago. “Could you tell us a cheap hotel or hostel we could stay at? Muggle preferably – I’d like to have access to a telepho –”

“What she means,” Theo cut in, grabbing Hermione’s elbow, “Is that we’d like to know an expensive, luxurious hotel to stay at. The best the city has to offer.”

“Theo –”

“Hush.”

“Er, of course,” Preston replied, “I’ll look right into it.”

Hermione stood in the living room of the Residence Suite of The Langham, thunderstruck, overwhelmed, and more than a little appalled. The opulence was otherworldly: Lavish carpets on hardwood floors, heavy drapes over enormous windows looking over the sprawling city outside, impossibly expensive looking furniture and fittings, vases full of orchids... and not to mention the fact that it had two giant bedrooms, two glorious bathrooms, a dining room, a kitchen...

“I can’t let you pay for this,” Hermione squeaked.

“Pshaw,” Theo scoffed, throwing himself onto a fluffy looking sofa, “I just sold a mansion, got custody of my ancestral vault... Hermione, I’m loaded. I’m so rich, it’s disgusting. This is nothing, especially if you consider the Galleon to Australian Dollar exchange rate.”

“Hmph.” Hermione squirmed. She clasped her hands together. She shuffled her feet.

“Oh, sit down, would you?” Theo groaned, and when she scuffled over to a brocade armchair and perched on its edge, he rolled his eyes. “I’m going to explore the kitchen. You hungry?” Hermione shook her head.
She stared out the window, at the Yarra River shimmering a placid blue, and sighed. *Fragmen recreo*, she thought over the buzzing white noise in her head. *Fragmen recreo, Fragmen recreo, Fragmen recreo.*

Theo had fallen asleep not long after he’d discovered the wonders of refrigeration, sliced meat, and Coke, (he’d kept his palm against the warm, humming side of the fridge, while staring at its cold interior like a worn traveller who’d just discovered Shangri-La,) and Hermione had slipped into one of the bedrooms and apparated away from the city centre to the beachside suburb of Mentone... specifically, to the alley next to a tidy, whitewashed building...

**CHIPPER CHOPPERS: THE WILKINS’ DENTAL PRACTICE.**

A sob was swaddled in a laugh and placed on the sigh that rushed out through her teeth – that had to have been dad’s idea. She could imagine mum’s exasperation as she agreed to the name, hating it, but helpless against dad’s gleeful enthusiasm. *Chipper Choppers?! Are you insane, Robert?*

No... Not Robert. Wendell.

Hermione disillusioned herself and waited outside the tinted glass doors, pressed against the side of the wall. When a youngish man opened the door to go in, Hermione seized the chance to slip inside with him. Her hand brushed against the man’s jacket and she started – they both froze – but then he shook his head and moved on.

Hermione found herself in a neat little waiting room, with a floor of polished white marble and cool, mint green walls. A frosted glass door that undoubtedly led to her parents’ offices graced one of those walls. There were potted palms at every corner, and rows of dark green chairs. There was a shelf stocked with all kinds of books, the customary magazine rack, a coffee table that held small bottles of water and a bowl of sugar-free mints. The reception was in one corner: a sturdy desk behind which sat a girl, (she looked no older than Hermione,) with bleached blond hair tied up in a high ponytail.

“Good morning, Mr. Yang!” she greeted the man whom Hermione had entered with, “Lady Doc will be with ya in a moment. Have a seat!”

Hermione nestled herself beside the largest plant in the room. She watched the girl at the reception stare listlessly at her computer. She looked at the large Japanese landscape painting hung on the opposite wall. She was both rigid and jittery. She was both trembling and frozen. She was –

...The telephone at the reception rang.

“Yes?” The girl answered, “Yeah. Alright. Sure, Doc.” She hung up and tilted her head at Mr. Yang, “Room number two, sir.”

Over the next few hours – three, according to the clock above the reception – a steady stream of patients walked in and out of the clinic. Her parents had done well for themselves... which really wasn’t a surprise. The sheer number of loyal patrons they had gathered over the years back home had been unrivalled by any other clinic in the near vicinity.

By twelve-thirty PM, the waiting area had emptied. It was time to break for lunch, Hermione supposed. The receptionist leapt off her chair, picked up her bag and shot out. Five minutes of silence followed, and Hermione used the time to bite all the skin off her lower lip.
Then she heard a door open; a knot formed in her chest. She heard it shut with a soft snap... heard the gentle clicking of heels on marble...
She felt her before she saw her. Mum. Something in the air maybe... or maybe the exact tenor of the footfalls... something instinctive, intuitive.... Oh, heavens.

Mum had chopped her hair off and was sporting a charming, Mia Farrow-esque cut. Her freckles had come out, dotting her nose and upper arms. She was humming to herself as she paused in front of the reception to drop a file on the desk and put on the light coat that had previously been draped over her arm. It was such a familiar move, the way she tilted her head as she pushed her arms through the sleeves, and then shrugged her shoulders to set it in place.

Hermione was so enraptured by the scene that she nearly toppled into the plant beside her when dad walked into her line of vision. He hadn’t cut his hair... he never would. Was she imagining it, or were the unruly curls truly a little more salt than pepper than before? His skin had a light tan, the crow’s feet and laugh lines on his face were deeper; he’d obviously been spending a lot of time outdoors. He sauntered over to mum and chucked a file onto the reception desk as well, saying, “Has she ever lingered a moment longer than necessary?”

(On hearing his voice, Hermione felt a wave of terrible, splintering affection that doubled when her mum said–)


Dad grinned widely... beautifully... and placed a hand on the small of mum’s back as they walked out of the building.

Theo was mashing his fist across the buttons of the remote control as he sat before the telly with big, round eyes.

“Hermione!” he cried, “This thing’s bloody mad!”

First the headlines. In Brisbane today, a –

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?” Hermione asked, walking over to sit beside him on the sofa.

“Nooo.”

Sautee the finely chopped shallots till golden-brown in colour... yes... like this... then add a tablespoon of –

“You’re going to break the remote, Theo.”

“...”

“Theo!”

“What?”

Don't want to close my eyes
I don't want to fall asleep
’Cause I'd miss you baby

Hermione snatched the remote from his hand.

“Oi! Hey! What??”

“You were going to break it.”

“No I wasn’t!”
I'd still miss you baby
And I don’t want to miss a –

With a click of a button, Hermione wiped the screen clear off an emotional Steven Tyler, and Theo shot a petulant glare at her.
“Where’ve you been anyway?” he grumbled.
She looked away from him and peered at the remote in her hand. “I went to my parents’ clinic.”

He was quiet for a while. She ran her thumb nail along the grooves between the channel number buttons.

“Oh.”
“Hm.”
“Did you see them?”
“Yes.”
“And... Um...”
“They’re fine. Happy.”

He fell silent again. Hermione’s thumb nail travelled over to the volume control buttons. It left a temporary dent on the rubbery material.

“You’re wondering if restoring their memories is a good idea after all,” Theo stated matter-of-factly. It would never not surprise her that he could read her so well.
“I – I’m,” Hermione stuttered, “They’re happy, Theo. The moment I bring them back... they’ll be crushed. And – and angry and devastated –”
“And they’ll deal with it. If one thing’s clear from what you’ve told me about them it’s that they’re very strong.”
“Not where I’m concerned,” Hermione muttered, “I’m their weakness and I... I did this to them. They won’t... they won’t recover! They’ll –”
“They will –”
“They’ll never forgive me! They’ll HATE me.”

Theo sucked in a long breath and pried the remote gently from her hands. “Now who’s going to break it?” he murmured kindly. Then he put an arm around her and said, “They could never hate you. You know that. You know them. They’re your parents.”
“Not anymore. They’re successful, happy people... what right do I have to fuck with that? How can I... how can I... do that to them?! It made sense the first time, yes. It kept them alive. But now? Now? I can’t! I just... I cannot.”
“Hermione,” he rested his chin on the top of her head, “You deserve to have your parents back, after everything you’ve –”
“So I selfishly just go and ruin their lives?”
“They deserve to have you back.”
“They can’t miss what they’ll never know they had. Oh god.”

She buried her face into his shoulder, brimming with the need for a cathartic cry, but controlling herself for she knew that it would be nothing more than a fleeting fix.
“I’m so tired of feeling guilty,” she burbled, “I’m so tired of feeling wretched. I’m so tired of being tired.”
“I know,” he said as he twined one of her curls around his finger, “I know. You don’t have to decide right now, Hermione. Take your time... think it over.”
“Okay,” she agreed in a weary whisper.
So she thought it over. For three days she vacillated, lost in her tormenting dilemma, making and unmaking decisions as she draped herself on various bits of furniture in their fancy suite. It was torture – and she did not use that word lightly.

The pain she felt then was no less searing than that she had felt at the end of Bellatrix’s wand. The wand that she was, on the forth morning, spinning artlessly between her fingers has she lay across the foot of her bed, staring at the high ceiling of her room. It was the position she had been in all night.

“Did you sleep at all?”
Hermione turned her head to look at Theo leaning against the frame of the door. He had a can of coke in his hand.
“A little.” She hadn’t.
He raised his brows sceptically but didn’t comment, choosing instead to watch her fiddle with the wand in her hand.
“You know Ollivander has reopened his shop, right? There’s no need for you to be using her wand.”
“It isn’t hers anymore.”
“But... I mean...”
“I killed her.”
“Yeah.”
“It works fine for me now.”
“Okay.”
“It’s just a wand.”
“I know.”

Hermione turned back to stare at the ceiling and she heard Theo sigh. “You really should eat something, Hermione.”
“Maybe later.”
She knew she was frustrating him, and she knew she was being unbearably difficult. She knew these things but still she persisted, hoping that he’ll get sick of her and go back home. Oh, how she didn’t want him to go back home. But... she did want him to go, because then her misery would be whole and complete.

These were her thoughts and she hated herself.

“Let's go out for a bit.”
“Why?”
“Just...” Theo shrugged, trying for lightness but chewing his tongue frantically, “It’s nice out. This is what they call winter around here, can you believe it?”
“Where will we go?”
“Anywhere. What do they call it here... walkabout?”

He took her down to Southgate Avenue, where there were pubs, cafes, and restaurants galore, and they strolled among the tall structures of steel, glass, and concrete for hours. The wind was nippy in the best way – a light sting against her skin. She took in a deep gulp of cool and clean air and looked up at the heavens: Home of the almighty, apparently. The Lord, God, Allah, Vishnu, Zeus,
Odin... She was playing their game now, wasn’t she?

She revisited the Wilkins’ clinic again, a week after her first visit. It was just as packed, and she didn’t bother going inside. She stood – disillusioned – outside, just minutes before closing time. Sure enough, not too long later, the blond receptionist skipped out. And then, five... seven... ten minutes after that...

“...Sullivan brat is a damned menace I tell you,” dad grumbled as he held the door open for mum, “He tried to bite my finger off SIX TIMES!”

Mum grinned, her face rosy in the light of the setting sun, “Why do you think I conveniently had an urgent phone call to attend to the moment I saw him in the waiting room?”

“You cow!”

They kept walking down the pavement, rather than going towards the row of cars parked across the street. Hermione followed. She was so focused on tailing them that she knocked into at least a dozen people – there would probably be a news report tomorrow about how this area was suddenly haunted.

At a T-junction they turned left, and suddenly they were on a road running alongside a beach. Mum pulled her jacket tighter against her body as the cold sea breeze rushed to greet them. They walked on ahead for another ten minutes or so.

The house they entered was a pretty, stucco-finished thing with large glass windows. The patio was enormous, complete with a grill and deckchairs. The gentle sound of moving water tied the whole scene together beautifully.

Hermione followed them down their smooth concrete path, (so unlike the rocky pathway back home). Mum ran her fingers over the straight top of the tidy hedge that ran along it, (so unlike the unruly hedegrow back home.)

“I’ve been dreaming of wine all evening,” she murmured.

“And as the man of your dreams who makes all your dreams come true, I will ensure that you –”

She cut him off with a kiss and they both walked into their home, and their daughter-who-wasn’t... finally knew.

“Maybe we should go over the plan one more time?”
Hermione bit her lip and glanced at Theo. He was immersed in some ludicrous show called Who Dares Wins.

“Morgan’s dried up tits – he’s not really going to jump! Oh fuck me, he is! He’s going to jump! He’s – HEY! Why do you keep doing that?!”
Hermione had switched the telly off. She glared at him. “I said,” she gritted out, “We should go over the plan one more time.”

“I know it backwards. And I also have a good handle on what I have to do: Nod along and smile. I’m good at nodding, and my smile is a wonder of the world. I have it covered. Don’t you worry about it, darling. I’m solid. I’m ready and rearing to go. I’m –”
“Jesus.”
“Erm, no. His dad, actually.”

She couldn’t stop the exasperated smile and eye-roll that that quip inspired, and Theo, delighted at the reaction, nudged her shoulder with his. “It’ll be fine, Hermione.”
In a flash, the smile slipped of her face. “Until it won’t.”
He shook his head, “I didn’t say it’ll be easy, or pleasant, or quick... but it will be fine. It will be.”
“When did you become such an optimist?” she asked, keeping her voice low to ensure that it wouldn’t tremble.
“I’m not an optimist. But where you’re concerned, Hermione... I always hope for nothing short of the best.”

Here’s what had happened: Time had frozen for a spell, with her mum and dad framed in their doorway, looking at each other and smiling. Time had frozen and they had turned into a picture: A picture nearly identical to one in Hermione’s beaded bag... with but one difference. The one in Hermione’s bag included her.
And at that precise moment, she knew. She belonged in the picture before her too. She belonged with them, and to them. They belonged to her.

It was that simple. Nothing in the world would be right until they’d found each other again.

She held onto Theo’s wrist like it was the only thing tethering her to the ground. The innocuous wooden door in front of her seemed to get larger and larger with every passing second...

“Er... planning to knock?” Theo asked with the kind of mild curiosity generally reserved for asking your local grocer about his wife’s health while he bagged your goods.
“Yes,” Hermione whispered.

The door was enormous really and definitely burning hot to touch and it probably secretly had teeth.

“Hermione?”
“What?”
“Knock.”
“Yes.”

....

“Hermione!”

She lifted her hand and pounded on the door like a maniac: Loud, with machinegun-like persistence. (“Bloody hell, you – !!”)

The door was yanked open and dad blinked down at them in alarm.
“Hullo?” he said, eyes darting from her to Theo, and back.
“Hello,” Hermione gasped, and then he looked straight at her.

It wasn’t the right look; it wasn’t the way he was supposed to look at her – the way he’d always looked at her – with immeasurable warmth and uncontainable delight. She wasn’t being nostalgic or emotional; dad always used to look at her like she was a miracle he was blessed to behold. So badly did she ache to see that look on him, so badly did she want him to pull her into his arms that it stunned her speechless.

“Yes?” he prompted, cocking his brow.
Theo smiled. Widely.
“We’re sorry to bother you, uh, sir,” Hermione pulled herself together and began awkwardly, (more than a little distracted by the way Theo was ardently nodding,) “My name is Hermione, and this is Theodore.” (- Cue for Theodore to offer another devastating smile -) “We’re students... from the department of Anthropology in LSE... here on an exchange program. We’re doing a survey on British expats and integration and...” Hermione waved her hand about desperately, “such things, and, um, if you don’t mind, we’d like to ask you... and your wife... a few questions.”

Looking highly sceptical, dad eyed the two of them for a moment before asking, “How did you find out about us?”

“Well, you’re quite famous around here, sir,” Hermione gushed. She grinned her most charming grin – “Everybody’s favourite dentist couple.”

It worked. It always used to work, and the fact that it did once more, when dad wasn’t really dad gave her a glimmer of hope.

“Come on in,” he said cheerfully, it was almost, nearly right.

He led them down a short hallway, with eggshell walls covered with an impressive collection of prints and paintings – Hermione didn’t look at them; she knew them all. Her focus was on the back of her father’s head. Those curls, his curls, her curls........ she clasped her hands together to stop herself from running up to him and hugging him from behind.

“Who was it?” said a voice from the room they were just about to enter.
“Couple of kids from back home. They’ve got some questions for us.”

She was comfortably coiled on an armchair with a book in her lap, wearing an ugly, misshapen muffler that Hermione had knitted for her during the height of her SPEW days. Why on earth had she kept that when all its sentimental value had been erased from her mind?

“Um... come again?” mum enquired, smiling gently at the two strange young people in her home. (They must’ve looked very strange: Hermione knew her cheeks had to be scarlet and Theo... Hadn’t. Stopped. Beaming. For a second.)
Hermione barely looked at the pretty sitting room – at the large windows and the many bookshelves and the rustic furniture – once again, she found herself unable to formulate a sentence. Dad shrugged, “Students from... LSE, yes?” (Theo nodded. ) “Right-oh. Tell the lady why you’re here then,” dad said pointing towards a sofa for them to sit on, “I’ll get us something to drink. Fresh lemonade alright? I make the most fantastic lemonade you’ll ever taste. Tell them, Monica.”
Mum rolled her eyes and deadpanned, “He makes the most fantastic lemonade you’ll ever taste.”

“Well,” mum said once dad had gone, still with her lovely, good-natured smile. Hermione swallowed all her emotions and gave her the same flimsy excuse she had given dad. Mum squinted, watching her closely as she explained. “I see,” she stated after Hermione’s voice had petered out, “What exactly are you hoping to prove?”

“The... the ease of social integration in first world countries post-globalisation.”
“Hmm. Fascinating.”
They were rescued from mum’s penetrating stare (and the intensity of her Academic Persona,) by the arrival of dad, carrying a tray with four tall glasses of pale yellow liquid. Dad’s famous lemonade – it had been a summer staple her entire life.

The moment the tray was set on the coffee table, Hermione launched into action.
“Excuse me, sir, madam,” she said politely, “Would you mind if I took a closer look at your bookshelf? I’ve been unable to stop staring at it...”
As she’d hoped, both her parents brightened, and accompanied her to their vast collection of books. “How have you organised these,” she breathed with believable awe, running her fingers along the books’ spines. She quizzed them relentlessly about things she already knew: Why was Spinoza next to Wittgenstein? Were the fiction novels categorised by style... oh, and geography!
She froze when, on the small bit of wall between the second and third bookshelf, she encountered a framed photograph: The ex-Grangers standing in front of a fountain in Hyde park, with a gap between them where a tiny girl of about three could easily have fit.
“That’s a lovely photograph,” she croaked.
Mum and dad came to stand on either side of her, unconsciously mimicking the picture as it used to be.
“Thank you,” mum murmured, “This was what... 81? 82?”
“82,” dad said, turning to smile at mum. Then he looked down at Hermione and -- his eyes widened. He stared back up at mum.
“Blimey,” he breathed, “Damned if you both don’t loo—”
“You were right, Mr. Wilkins,” Theo broke in loudly, “Best lemonade I’ve ever had.”
“I – er – yes – thank you,” dad muttered.
They went back to sit and Theo gave Hermione the subtlest of nods. “You’ve got to try this,” he urged, pushing the only remaining unspiked glass towards her.

The last of her parents’ memories – the last night they’d known her – had been restored. The final silvery thread had seeped through their skulls and back into their minds. Hermione dropped her hand and took a step back. “I’m done.”

A minute passed. Then three more. Mum and Dad were slumped against each other breathing erratically, and their eyes were darting around behind their closed eyelids.
“I can’t do it, Theo.”
The room was so silent, such a pretty little cocoon of peace. Hermione thought she was going to die.
“Shall I?” he whispered, ducking his head to look at her face.
“Okay,” she tried to say, but couldn’t quite manage it.
With a reassuring squeeze of her shoulder, he placed himself before the sleeping couple, and without fanfare or ceremony, uttered, “Renervate.”
He stepped back when mum let out a soft hum, and dad sucked in a sharp breath. Hermione watched them slowly come to, on dread-anticipation-burgeoning-wonder shaped tenterhooks: A
slow build-up of *O Fortuna* in her head...

“Ugh,” dad groaned, and pressed his palms against his eyes. Mum’s eyelashes fluttered as she sluggishly blinked into a state of wakefulness.


“Mum?” Hermione whispered, “Dad?”

They both jerked like they’d been electrocuted. Their heads snapped towards her with violent celerity.

“Hermione?” dad gasped, “What – *Hermione*?” He was on his feet a moment later, eyes wide with an un tethered terror.

“Dad – calm down – I can explain –”

“Explain? What? Explain what? What happened – you... I didn’t know you... I...”

He reached towards her and shrank back in one fluid move. Still on the sofa, mum whimpered. Both her hands were pressed against her mouth as she fixed a look of utter dismay on her daughter.

“It’s okay,” Hermione begged, and she took a step toward them... only to see them flinch. “Mum... dad... everything will be okay now. Please, please calm down... yes, sit down dad... I’ll explain... I’ll tell you what happened.”

Dad lowered himself back onto the sofa, never once looking away from her. Mum, however, didn’t lower her hands.

“What do you remember?”

“Remember?” dad muttered weakly.

“Yes... what is the last thing you –”

“You and... this boy... you said you’re students... I believed you. I didn’t know you. You. I didn’t know you, Hermione! What the – I haven’t... this whole year... I didn’t...”

“Do you remember the last night at home?” Hermione interrupted his panicked stuttering, keeping her tone as soft and even as she could, “You’d sent me up to my room to pack; we were meant to leave for Australia the next day. You both were watching telly, and I got you some tea, and...”

She broke off abruptly, and something swirled in both her parents’ eyes.

“I remember the tea... then...” dad blinked. Then he exploded, “Jesus Christ! Then what? I remember waking up... and suddenly we’re... I’m not... WHAT WAS IN THAT BLOODY TEA, HERMIONE?”

He’d never yelled at her before. Not like that. Not in that heart-rending, scary manner. “Nothing. There wasn’t anything in – well, a drop of sleeping draught but –”

“What?”

“After you fell asleep... I... *ugh*. She hung her head and confessed in one breath: modified your memories. I changed your identities, made it so that you moved here for good. And I made you forget you ever had a daughter.”

She’d dropped the bomb, and it’s chilling, devastating repercussion lasted for an eternal moment. The silence after an earth-shattering explosion is always the most profound. Above her fingertips, mum’s eyes were brimming with unshed tears. Dad’s mouth had fallen open in horror.

“What,” he hissed by and by, “You did what?”

“I – um, I –”

“Why? Why would you – how dare you –”

“I didn’t have a choice!” Hermione wailed in desperation, “They were coming after me! They would have used you to get to me! They would have hurt you... *tortured* you –”

“What ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? Who are *they*?”

“Death Eaters,” she cried, “Voldemort! There was a war... I had to keep you safe, or else they’d have – no listen – I’m... Listen, mum! I was a target! They knew I was friends with Harry – not to mention a muggleborn – and they knew where you lived, and... and I did what I had to do to keep you safe! To keep you alive!”
Mum squeezed her eyes shut.
“A war?! THAT’S your excuse?” dad bayed, “A sodding war? You violated our minds because of a war that nobody noticed happened?!?”
“It was mostly confined to the magical community – but you’d been seeing the news, hadn’t you? All those murders, the so-called natural disasters…”
“It’s true,” Theo piped up hoarsely from behind her, “It got very –”
“Who are you?” dad snapped.
“He’s my friend. Theo. He –”
“Why didn’t you tell us any of this? Why didn’t you talk to us? You had NO RIGHT to do this. How could you? To me? To your mother?”
“I’m sorry!” Hermione cried, “I am so, so, so very sorry. Please believe me. If I thought I had any other option, I’d –”

“Get out.”
It appeared that mum had finally removed her hands from her face. Her mouth was turned down in a livid scowl.
“Mum... wha...?”
“Get. Out.”
“No, please,” Hermione implored, half raising her hand, “Just let me –”
“GET OUT,” mum shot up to her feet, “Get out... NOW.”
“You’d better leave,” Dad ground out. He was glaring determinedly out of a window.
Hermione felt her soul rumple. “Just....... Please......”

She was pulled out the room by Theo’s gently coaxing arms.....

“If you would just listen!”

His arms wrapped around her the moment they were back in the hallway....

“No... Please. Please...”

He disapparated them and the final syllable of her anguished plea dissolved into nothing.

*

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don’t have any kids yourself.

Three hearts had been broken by her so far. Ron’s face morphed into dad’s face morphed into mum’s face.
She’d tried to apologise to them all – she’d tried to apologise to Malfoy. She was delirious with guilt and grief, so she pushed open the window of her room and whispered an apology to Bellatrix out into the night.
She dragged her head back inside at the sound of a knock: “Yeah?”
Theo popped his head around the door, mouth pressed into a straight line. “I take it you aren’t
joining me for supper then?”
“Nope,” Hermione answered, dragging her fingers through her hair.
He huffed, “Well I have something for you,” and held out a small phial.
“Dreamless sleep?”
“Yes.”
“No thank you,” she declined emphatically.
“You need to sleep, Hermione,” he ground out impatiently, “When was the last time you slept?”
She shrugged.
“Well, it shows,” Theo continued, “You look ghastly.”
She smiled thinly, “But don’t you think these purple rings make my eyes pop?”
The unamused look he levelled on her made her want to apologise again.

The next morning, Hermione sat down in front of the telly with a bag of crisps and a bottle of wine.

*

Later that afternoon, she was still in front of the telly, the former bag of crisps was a crumpled ball on the floor, and the bottle of wine was nearly empty.

Theo didn’t seem to be around.

*

In the evening, the room got steadily darker and darker, and she remained in front of the telly with a fresh bottle of wine. There was some inane game show going on, and the host was an obnoxious, vivacious bugger with gleaming teeth. He probably had a great dentist.

*

At night she gently rolled off the sofa and onto the thick carpet. The room was awash with flickering, unnatural blue light spilling out of the television screen which she had muted, and with the way her vision was swimming, she could pretend she was underwater.
Droooooooooooowninggggggg.

With a small *jump*, a head landed beside hers, and her eyelids fluttered as she smiled at Theo.
“Hi,” she breathed.
“Alright?” he asked with a half smile of his own.
“Completely blotto.”
He chuckled, and they both stared up at the chandelier above them.
“You know,” Hermione drawled, “There was a chandelier hanging over me when Bellatrix was torturing me, too. It was much grander than this one.”
Theo’s pinkie brushed against hers as he said, “Well, nothing but the best for the Malfoys.”
“Of course,” she snorted, “But the point is... this is torture too. This. Right now. Let's go back ho--
Ha! Let’s go back to England.”
“Let’s just hang around a little longer.”
“For what? For fucking what? Bleh!” She slapped her hands over her eyes. Hard.
“Give them some time, Hermione,” Theo advised softly, “Just a little more time.”

* *

“What the fuck is that?!”

Those were the first words out of Theo’s mouth when he woke up. They’d both fallen asleep on the carpet at some point last night, and Hermione had managed two full hours of shut eye. But now, the sun was streaming in through the windows and Theo rubbed his eyes as he gaped, appalled, at the telly.

“They’re bananas,” Hermione told him, “In pyjamas.”
“I can see that!” he snapped, “But... just... why?”
Hermione tilted her head, “I’m not sure.”
“What the hell are they eating?”
“Munchy honey cakes.”
“Good grief, they’re terrifying. Luna would love them.”

* *

It was late in the evening when their telephone rang.

“HERMIONE!” Theo hollered from the sitting room, “OI! WHAT’S IT DOING?!?”
With a sigh, she rolled off her bed and shuffled over to where he was perched, charily poking the receiver.
“Is this how muggles communicate? It’s worse than a howler!”
“Oh, move off,” she muttered, “Hello?”
“Good evening, Ms. Granger. Reception. There are two people here – a Mr. and Mrs Granger waiting to –”
“Send them up,” Hermione rushed out.
“Of course, miss.”

Hermione set the receiver down in a daze, her breathing escalated till she was near-hyperventilating.
“What?” Theo demanded, “What is it?”
“They’re here! My parents... they’re here!”
“Ah.”
“What do you mean ‘ah’?! How did they know where to find me?”
“Well,” he hedged, “I may have nipped out while you were determinedly getting pissed yesterday, and I may have gone by their place and left a note on the front door...”
“You did what?” she stared at him.
“Well, I had to give them the option of reaching out to you if they wanted it... and you know they’d have wanted it...”
But before Hermione could respond, a sweet little tinkle announced the arrival of her parents. They were there – right there – behind the door. Her legs had turned to lead, so it was left up to Theo to walk over and let them in. The light from the corridor puddled around the threshold, and she fixed her eyes on it. She watched two pairs of shoes – scuffy grey brogues and shiny black boots – step into the pool and make their way towards her. As they approached, her eyes climbed upwards, and she took in their faces: grim, tired, and faded. All the abundant joy she had witnessed a few days back had dissipated; she was to blame for that.

“H–h–hello,” she whispered, clasping her hands together.

Dad nodded. Mum looked away.

“Thank you... thank you for coming.”

Mum still wouldn’t look at her. Dad sighed. “You wanted us to listen,” he said curtly, “So we’ll listen. Tell us everything, Hermione... all that you’ve been hiding and omitting for god knows how many years.”

“Yes, okay, I’ll –”

“No lies. I need... we deserve to know everything.”

“I will tell you everything,” she avowed and swallowed thickly, “I promise.”

Their shadows loomed large and grotesquely distorted, thrown onto the walls by the light of a single lamp. There were four glasses, a bottle of scotch, and a bucket of ice sitting on the table, the last of which was dotted with tiny drops of condensation. Everybody was technically silent, but the impact of Hermione’s monologue seemed to boom and echo around the room like the sound of a hundred brass gongs.

A monologue is exactly what she had launched into, and she told her parents everything. All the horrible things she’d had to contend with over the years, things that she had glossed over or not mentioned at all. Dad had sunk lower and lower in his chair as she’d gone on, interrupting only two or three times to ask a question. Mum had begun crying very early on... and she hadn’t stopped. But she still wouldn’t look at Hermione.

“Well, that’s what happened,” Hermione mumbled weakly.

Dad reached out to pour himself another healthy helping of scotch, and downed it in one go.

“You mean to tell me that I nearly lost you a dozen times since you joined that blasted school and... honestly... what kind of hellish school is it? What is this world you’re a part of? God damn it. Every year we let you go to that place, thinking you’re learning how to pull fucking rabbits out of a hat, and you’re out there fighting for your life, fighting against some evil –”

He broke off to pour himself another glass. Mum sniffed loudly.

“How could you not tell us?” dad demanded furiously, “How could you not say a word? We’re your parents! We are supposed to protect you, not you us! What were you thinking!”

“They were witches and wizards dad,” Hermione muttered, imploring him to understand, “who hated people with no magic. They would have tortured you and ki–”

“FINE!” dad thundered, “I get it. We’re weak little muggy things who didn’t stand a chance! But we’re not stupid, are we? You should have told us! And you should have let us take care of you... take you away from all that!”

Hermione closed her eyes. “How could I have left, dad? Left Harry? Ron? Ginny? All my friends? All the other muggleborns and halfbloods who didn’t stand a chance?”

“Bugger that!”

“No, dad. I did what you taught me. I fought for what was right. I fought alongside my friends and
for my rights, and against oppression and tyranny –”
“Oh shut up,” mum sobbed. Still, she didn’t look at her.
“Mum,” Hermione entreated, putting all her everything in the word.
“What if you had died, Hermione,” dad asked hoarsely, “What would we have done?”
“That’s why I made you forget me,” she replied, closing her eyes once more.
“My god,” dad groaned, “I can’t believe you did this. I just... shit... I can’t. Can’t believe it.” Then he laughed a pained humourless laugh that hurt every bit as much as her mother’s tears did.

Quietude roared again... until Theo cleared his throat.
“If I may,” he enquired in a low voice.
“Ha,” dad barked yanking his hair off his forehead, “Go ahead.”
“I have the happy advantage of being well-acquainted with the other side – the Death Eaters. My father’s one of them, see? Charming fellow, terrorised me, killed my mum, worked tirelessly to legalise muggle hunting once more, etcetera, etcetera. Now, I’m sure Hermione has convinced you that this war was serious business already, but let me tell you that taking her away would’ve amounted to fuck al – er, pardon me – nothing. The Dark – Voldemort had great ambitions... and if he hadn’t been defeated, you lot would’ve spent the rest of your lives running. And they would’ve been very short lives.
“Because if it wasn’t for Hermione... Voldemort... would not have been defeated. Potter would’ve been long dead if it wasn’t for her, and we’d all be languishing under the rule of an unhinged, bloodthirsty despot. She wasn’t just a foot soldier in this war, Mr. and Mrs. Granger – she was in the vanguard. If it wasn’t for her staggering brilliance and bravery, we’d all have been done for.”

Hermione wanted the floor to swallow her up, and she peer down at it pathetically, hoping that it would oblige. But who ever listened to her, right?
The floor did not swallow her up.

She looked up when the motion of mum tugging at dad’s sleeve caught her eye.
“Right,” dad nodded and stood up, “We’ll be off then.”
“Wait... what...?” Hermione gasped, a new wave of dread washing over her. Was that it then?
“It’s late,” dad replied, “We should head back. But...” he coughed awkwardly, “I am making dinner tomorrow – that vague estimation of paella that you love so much – so... it would be nice if you could come by. Monica doesn’t appreciate it half as much.”
“Evelyn,” mum rasped, “My name is Evelyn.”
Then she walked out the door, and Hermione didn’t even get a parting glance. Dad let out a shuddering sigh and followed.

“Are you okay?”
“I suppose.”
“Dinner is a good sign, yeah?”
“I hope so.”

They were sitting on some steps on the Yarra river promenade, watching people meander around in their Sunday best.

“I don’t think mum will ever forgive me.”
Theo shook his head, “She will.”
“You don’t know that,” Hermione replied dully.
“Oh I think I do,” he quirked his mouth at her, “You, darling, are impossible to stay angry at. Ask me. You’re adorable when repentant… it’s irresistible. Do you think I let just anyone get away with ignoring me? I mean, you somehow even got Draco to stop wanting to obliterate you for screaming at him.”

She felt her face heat up and she looked away… a gust of wind skidded over the water and rushed to cool her down again.

She received a letter from Harry and Ginny via the consulate sometime around noon. They asked her how everything was going and she sent a reply saying everything was going well.

Dad’s (vague estimation of) paella was as sumptuous as ever, yet Hermione struggled to keep eating. She was hyperaware of the way dad was watching her so closely, and the way mum wasn’t looking at her at all.

Theo, however, was scarfing down spoonful after spoonful.

“Excellent stuff, Mr. Granger,” he pronounced, “Truly exemplary.”

“Er, thank you,” dad mumbled. He pushed his food around his plate for a moment before asking, “So… how long have you two been together?”

It was truly unfortunate that Hermione was taking a sip of water at the time.

“Nope,” Theo said hastily, as she hacked out a lung, “Not together, sir. I’m the greatest person Hermione knows, but that’s about it. I have a girlfriend… she’s wonderfully dotty. Hermione introduced us, actually; just another reason why I’m so desperately grateful to her. She’s truly the best friend a bloke could ask for… except when she’s throwing a tantrum for no reason, or when she’s making me spend hours in the library, or when she’s the reason I have to endure death defying situations… like riding on the back of a blind dragon… alongside a Weasley. But all worth it of course, when you weigh the pros and cons. She’s brilliant, isn’t she? So compassionate, and yet so ferocious… I mean, she’s the only person I know who can make my prat of a brother shut up. It’s glorious. Furthermore, I’ve even come to find that –”

“Theo,” Hermione choked, “Why don’t you shut up?”

He was affronted in the most Theo manner. “Well excuse me for trying to extol your virtues so that your parents decide to forgive you sooner!”

She could only open and close her mouth wordlessly at that. But then, amazingly, dad laughed. A true laugh, a real expression of mirth, an authentic Dad Laugh. He threw his crazy hair back and guffawed. Hermione shot a startled glance at Theo and he grinned back at her triumphantly. She then stole a surreptitious look at mum, and though she was still steadfastly staring down at her plate, she was most definitely fighting a smile. She never could resist dad’s laugh.
The evening was blustery and dad lit up a small fire in the back garden for them to sit around.
“I’m going to bed,” mum announced not five minutes after they’d settled.
“Evie, come on...” dad murmured, reaching for her hand.
“Goodnight,” she said firmly and walked back inside.

Staring at the bright flames as they flickered and disappeared into smoke, Hermione conjured all sorts of trite metaphors about life’s inconsistencies. She felt odd... vacantly burdened. Squeamishly comfortable.
Dad sighed and swept a hand through his hair. “You’ll be moving in here now, wont you?” he asked Hermione.
“I...” she swallowed, “I hadn’t planned on it.”
“Of course you are,” dad said decisively, “We’ve a spare room that could only have been meant for you... I see no other reason for us to have decided to paint the walls purple.”
“Is that wise, dad?” she wondered, “I don’t think mum would like it.”
“She’ll come around, Hermione. You know her, don’t you? She always comes around.”
But it’s different this time, she wanted to say... instead she found herself rolling her eyes when Theo proclaimed, “That’s exactly what I told her!”
“On what basis did you make that claim?” dad asked with raised brows, even as his mouth twitched with amusement.
“Man’s intuition,” Theo replied superciliously.
“Right,” dad grinned, then turned to Hermione, “This chap’s a nutter. Where on earth did you find him?”
Hermione huffed a laugh. “Oh, he’s always been around, skulking all over Hogwarts like a surly bat –”
“Sod off, Hermione –”
“But then he suddenly attached himself to me, and I couldn’t shake him off. Not only was he unspeakably persistent, he didn’t even ease me into his true personality. I was delivered the full Theo experience from the get go.”
“Sounds harrowing,” dad muttered with faux-gravity.
“She was charmed, I tell you! Utterly charmed –”
“Then I sicced Luna at him – thought that would shake him up a little... but he went and fell in love with her –”
“Unbelievable.”
“She fell in love with me too! Because I’m a gem–”
“And then I had to endure months of him pining –”
“I did not pine!”
“– getting all flustered and ridiculous –”
“– and speaking of pining... do you REALLY want me to bring up your ginger obsession?”
“–finish all the sweets and cakes you used to send me! Literally gobble them up like some sort of monster –”
“You offered! You bloody well OFFERED!”
“You know,” dad broke in in a firm voice, “we do have neighbours. I don’t think they care for screaming young men.”
“Honestly, Theo,” Hermione shook her head, “Do control yourself.”
He stuck his tongue out at her, and she laughed.

Only Theo could’ve done that. Only Theo could have taken a moment that really ought to have been heavy and severe, and turned it into one full of bubbling lightness.
“Well then,” she whispered in the last few minutes they had left in their suite.
“Well then,” Theo parroted.
They hugged each other tightly.

In the lift he said, “How long do you plan on staying?”
She replied, “I’m not sure... but I’ll be back well before term starts.”
“Mm. Good.”
“Give my love to Luna. And Ginny and Harry if you see them.”
“I will never give Potter love, Hermione. Not even for you.”
“Prat.”
“But if I come across Thomas, Finnigan, or Longbottom... yeah. I’ll give them your love.”
“Gosh, thanks,” Hermione intoned dryly.
“And who else...” Theo quirked his brow at her, “Bill and Fleur?”
“Sure?”
“Xenophilius?”
“Er...”
“Draco?”
Hermione stuck her nose in the air and declared, “I will never send Malfoy love, Theo. Not even for you.”

For the rest of the journey down to the lobby Theo wore a small, enigmatic smile on his face as he hummed the _Bananas in Pyjamas_ theme song.

The walls of the room were her favourite shade of purple. The bed had two large, fluffy pillows – just as she preferred it. Above the bed was a framed print of bottles painted by Morandi. There was an enormous bookshelf running across the length of one wall, half full of novels that she loved, poetry anthologies, art history tomes, and political treatises.
It was, to summarise, exactly the sort of room she’d claim as her own. Her parents had made it so even when they didn’t know she existed; it seemed to her that while she had successfully erased herself from her parents’ minds, she hadn’t been able to remove herself from their... souls? Ah, that annoying schism once more. Nonetheless, whatever... impulse... had driven them to prepare this room was something Hermione cherished.

She set her beaded bag on the floor, and sat on the edge of the bed with a sigh. From the open window, a cold breeze rushed in, tickling the ceramic chime that hung from its frame and caused it to dingle melodically. She could see the tops of trees and the blurry hint of the bay beyond.

“All settled in?”
Hermione started, then gathered herself and smiled faintly at her father who’d appeared at her door.
“Yes,” she replied, “Thank you.”
He stared at her. “Dinner will be ready in an hour or so. I’m making grilled chicken.”
“Sounds fantastic.”
He continued to stare at her. She blinked awkwardly, fighting the urge to wring her hands... until
finally, he raised his arms and said, “Oh come here, you little monkey.”
She sobbed, wailed, gasped – made some sort of *noise* – and ran to him. He hauled her up into his arms, squeezed her, and it was like being bathed in mad, overpowering relief. Fear, hunger, hurt, torture, death – she’d seen it all and now there she was, being soothed in an embrace that made her feel safe, full, warm, and loved. She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against the slightly rough fabric of dad’s shirt.
Forty-Five

Home is where the heart is. But what would you call it if the heart is broken?

It had been a week. Every morning, Hermione pretended to be asleep as her parents got ready and left for work. Then she wandered around the empty house, picking up books at random to read, or staring glassy-eyed at the telly, or going for walks down to the beach. Dad had been trying to be cheerful. He’d smile at her, ramble about his day as he fixed dinner and Hermione stood by him, chopping or peeling things as he’d request. And while the tightness in his eyes hadn’t fully disappeared, and he’d still flinch every time Hermione made a sudden movement, he was coping far better than mum who still wasn’t speaking to her. She wouldn’t even look at her. It was truly the worst Hermione had ever felt in her life. She felt repulsive.

Well, most of the time. There were moments when her indignation would reign supreme: Moments when she’d feel that no matter how hurtful her actions had been, her parents were alive because of it. And by some miracle, she was alive too. We’re all alive, mum! Don’t you see how phenomenal that is?!

“So now we don’t know whether to stick with the name, or change it to Granger’,” dad said as he and Hermione sat sipping tea in the kitchen one evening, “We’re quite well known as the Wilkins’... it’d be odd and inconvenient to change it. And I don’t know... are we supposed to go around telling people we aren’t called Wendell and Monica anymore?” Hermione squirmed. Though he had spoken lightly and conversationally, his posture was rigid. He was not feeling light or conversational.

“Um,” she rasped, “You... plan on staying here?”

“Yeah. We spoke about it, your mum and I... we like it here. Not to mention the fact that all our brothers and sisters are furious that we left with barely a word and haven’t felt the need to stay in touch all year. Was that part of your curse?”

“It wasn’t a curse, dad.”

“Whatever,” he said curtly, “The point is, their collective wrath is not something either your mother or I have the energy or patience to deal with.”

“And you’re... you’re going to remain as the Wilkins?”

Dad shrugged, “Professionally, at least.”

“I – I see.”

She wasn’t prepared for how badly that stung. She had been so sure that they would go back with her and become the Grangers in their house in Hampstead again. Maybe when they’d all be back with the right names, in the right place... everything would be right again. But they were going to inhabit their new guise and they would stay in their new home and their new lives, all which had nothing to do with her.

“Why are you crying?” dad asked, looking flustered.

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s never nothing.”

“It’s just – I – I thought we’d all go back home. Together.”
He sighed heavily, and shifted his chair closer to hers, so he could put an arm around her. “This is our home now, Hermione.”
“O–Okay then.” She turned her face away as she felt it scrunch up with anguish.
“Damn it, Hermione,” dad cried, “You messed with our minds! There had to be some repercussions! We’ve spent a year here building a life and reputation, growing roots... this is who we are now!”
“I get it –”
“No you don’t! You did your spell, you blotted yourself out of our memories, but we were still us. We came to Melbourne, we set up our clinic, we made a life here. It wasn’t all some dream we can wake up and walk away from. Besides... I... I can’t imagine going back to that house. My life’s been fractured, Hermione. I can’t go back.”
She nodded, and while still looking at the floor said, “And I can’t stay here.”
“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that,” dad began, “Er... hey. Do you mind looking at me? There you go, my pretty girl. Now. I don’t think I’m very comfortable with the idea of you going back to that school.”
“How –?”
“Are you really surprised, after everything you’ve told me?” he asked incredulously.
“Voldemort is dead, dad. It’s not going to be like that anymore.”
“Look, Hermione,” he insisted, “There hasn’t been a year of your life since age eleven that you haven’t faced grave danger. And it’s all because of that school! How do you think I feel, as your father, as someone who’s done his sodding best to keep you sheltered and safe –”
“As someone who’s taught me the importance of education, I think you’d understand why I have to go back!” she retaliated.
“What education? What are you even learning?! What has that place done to you that you feel justified in doing what you did to us?”
Hermione’s chair scraped loudly as she shot up to her feet, “I told you why I did it! You said you understood –”
“I understood why you did it, sure. I just don’t understand how. How could you even bring yourself to –”
“Do you think it was easy?” She was shouting now. “Do you think I didn’t agonise over it endlessly? That it didn’t wreck me? Do you think I don’t feel awful – absolutely bloody awful – for doing that to you?! But I do not regret it, dad. No. I don’t. Because you’re alive. You know, Lupin – who was also killed by the way – had told me that one of the first places the Death Eater’s planned to attack was our neighbourhood. Think that’s a coincidence? And Theo told you what would have happened if I had run away with you. This was... it was the only thing I could think of while I – while I taught myself to survive, and spent my time planning and practicing and and god, knowing that Harry could very possibly die – and that would be the end – and – I just – he was counting on me to have answers – and I – I saw you dead, dad. You and mum... when I was being tortured... please, dad –”

Her words died out to make way for great, gasping sobs, and she folded her arms around her waist, nearly doubling over. Dad gripped her shoulder with one hand, but otherwise didn’t move. And though her vision was foggy, she could tell that he was crying too.

It was around ten in the morning when she stepped out of her room, clad in a tracksuit, ready to run laps by the sea. Being unable to sleep was killing her, so she thought she’d tire herself until she couldn’t possibly stay awake.
But in the hallway she encountered mum, struggling to manoeuvre a wheeled suitcase while checking her pager. There was also a bulky looking duffle bag on her shoulder. She froze when she noticed Hermione.

“Um, would you like some help?”
Mum faltered, oddly deer-in-the-headlights-like, considering. Hermione just hoped she wouldn’t ignore her, because she simply couldn’t handle another blatant rebuff.

“No thank you,” mum gritted out, “I’ll manage.”
Hermione pushed her luck: “Where are you off to?”

“Seminar in Perth.”

And then mum rushed past her, the wheels on her trolley-bag scraped against the wall and left a razor thin scratch on the blue wallpaper.

“Bye,” Hermione muttered to the empty corridor.

She huffed and panted, bent over with her hands against her knees. She must have run for over an hour. Beads of sweat dotted her temples and her legs burnt from overexertion.

Such a magnificent feeling.

It was an overcast afternoon, but sunlight still broke through the cloudy canopy above dazzlingly, catching random waves being tossed around by the wind. The wind that Hermione had run against. She looked back at the path she had sprinted – the tiny craters that her haphazard footfalls had created – before unceremoniously dropping to the ground with a thump. She lay back and squinted against the flashing beams of light, while her hands clenched and dug into the sand.

Sand: The tighter you tried to hold onto it, the quicker it slipped through your fingers.

* *

By the time she got back home, her sweat had dried off and so had her endorphin-fuelled high. She stood under a hot gush of water for twenty minutes before crawling into bed and she slept till the sun had set and dad came to call her down for supper.

Three days after mum had left, dad took off from work. Hermione became aware of this at six in the morning, when he pounded at her door and demand that she get dressed, (“Sturdy, comfy clothes, alright?”) and hurry downstairs.
“What’s the matter?” she asked him.
“We’re going for a walk,” he replied nonchalantly.

And so they went for a walk. Dad took her to Mentone beach, down a small path along the coastline. The beauty of the seaside when the day was just being born was, of course, sublime.
“The Heidelberg School artists used to camp about here,” dad said, gesturing around him.
“Australian Impressionists?”
“Yeah. You can see why, right? I mean, this sort of landscape is just...”
He trailed off, so Hermione muttered, “Made for light and colour exploration.”
“Heh,” dad chuckled, “Exactement. Now come on, we’re not here to stroll. A brisk early morning walk is very good for the Englishman’s – and woman’s – heart.”

Hermione’s legs were still so stiff from her run that she suffered, (oh she suffered!) but she suffered in silence. The nippy air felt good against her face as it heated up.
“So dad,” she huffed, “How’d you manage to take off work?”
“When your mother isn’t around, sweetheart, I’m the boss. I gave myself a holiday. I’m very generous that way.”
She laughed, and he laughed at her laugh. Frothy waves on one side, dusky wilderness on the other, and for the first time in a long time, Hermione felt centred.

They were quite for some time, before dad exclaimed, “Oh Hermione... you’ll never guess who stops by the clinic every time he’s in town!”
“Who?” she asked, piqued.
“Well... guess!”
“Dad, you just said I’ll never guess.”
“Hmph,” he grunted, but his grin was intact. “Steve Waugh! I’m officially Steve bloody Waugh’s dentist. Er, when he’s in town. ...Which, to be honest, isn’t all that often...”
She raised her brow.
“Well, alright. He’s visited twice.”
“That’s serious patronage, dad. Wow.”
Dad scowled. “You’re so like your mother. That’s exactly what she’d said.”

The mention of mum sobered Hermione immediately, and dad realised it. They fell into silence again, and this time it lasted for a much longer spell of time.

They reached a jetty, shooting off the shore and placing them in the middle of sea and sky like they were standing on the edge of the earth. Dad stooped to rest his elbows against the wooden railing and peered at the horizon.
“You should talk to mum,” he said, “When she gets back.”
Hermione stood next to him, laid her head on his shoulder, and muttered, “She doesn’t want to talk to me.”
“She does, my love. She really does. But she’s... feeling so much that she doesn’t know how to start. You need to make her talk to you.” When she didn’t respond, he sighed and gently nudged her head with his shoulder. “Hey... you know her. She sulks, but she always wants to talk things out. Promise me you’ll try.”
Hermione lifted her hand and rested it on his wrist. “I’ll try. I promise.”

A little blue and white bird landed atop a corner post and shook its wings... and then fluttered off
again.

“I never fully realised what it meant,” Dad murmured, “You being a witch. Never really internalised it. It was such a bizarre and... whacky... thing. Then you’d come back from school and tell me you can make things fly, and turn teapots into mice and what not... and I just,” he sighed again, “Everything was so fantastical that I didn’t involve myself enough. You spoke about things, about your life and ambitions – and I was so terribly proud, never doubt that – but I just listened. That’s all. I didn’t question you enough... I didn’t pay close enough attention... I... damn it... I’ve not been a very good father to you, have I?”

She was aghast, and she immediately straightened to stare at him, “You are a wonderful father! You and mum have been the most supportive and loving –”

“Supportive and loving, sure,” dad interrupted with a sardonic twist to his mouth, “But absent. We’ve been absent. I will never forgive myself for that. I should have grilled you for answers. I should have been more aware! My little girl had been playing with her life year after year, and I didn’t have an effing clue! What kind of father am I? Tell me... why didn’t I push to meet your teachers even once in six years? I talked to Arthur about electric generators for hours but I didn’t once ask him about how he thought our kids were doing. I didn’t ask him about the school, or how your world functions. I didn’t bother to learn much about anything that constituted your new life. And I am... I’m so ashamed, Hermione. I’m so very sorry –”

“Dad...” she choked out, “Don’t.”

“If I had involved myself more... been a father rather than a dumb, enthralled spectator, maybe you wouldn’t have done what you did. Maybe you would have trusted me with the truth. Maybe we could have helped each other. Maybe... maybe... oh, I don’t know.”

The cracks in the cloudy sky were golden yellow like syrup.

“I want to be able to move on,” Hermione sniffled, “I want to move past the chaos, the violence, the hurt. I want to go back to school, and ace the N.E.W.T.s. I want to get a job that I’ve earned, and that’ll let me work for things I care about. I want to live my life, and hang around with my friends, and sit down for dinner with you and mum while we talk about... about... Rumi. I want to feel okay. I just want to finally feel okay.”

That little blue and white bird returned to perch on the same post as before, this time with a winged insect in its beak.

“You know I love you more than anything in the world, don’t you?” dad asked.
She spun around to see dad jogging towards her with a big smile on his face. “Ready for lunch?” “Absolutely,” she smiled.

“Great.” He then regarded his receptionist, (who was looking most curious,) and said, “Olivia, this is my daughter.”

“Now where’d you get a daughter from?” Dad sighed tragically. “Look, Olivia, if your parents haven’t told you about the facts of life yet, I really can’t help you.”

“Ooh, you’re funny, doc,” Olivia sniped dryly, “I mean... I’ve never seen her around before.” “I was at boarding school. In Scotland,” Hermione told her, fighting a grin.

“Right. Beaut. What’s your name again?” “Hermione.” Olivia peered at dad. “You and lady doc are really good at naming things, aren’t you?” “Yes,” he said simply, “Now we’ll be off, alright? Be good. And for the love of god, please be back on time.” “Sure thing,” Olivia grinned, and waved as dad led Hermione out of the building.

The letter arrived in the mid-morning... that familiar crisp white envelope with the Hogwarts’ seal. But her name and address weren’t written in spidery cursive and the usual glittering purple ink, no; they were neatly printed across the front in sharp, no-nonsense black.

Headmistress McGonagall was pleased to let her know that Hogwarts was ready to reopen. She would be delighted if Ms. Granger would return to complete her schooling. She had immense faith in Ms. Granger’s abilities, blah bloody blah. She was also please to announce that Ms. Granger had been appointed as Hogwarts’ Head Girl for the year, 1998-99.

Hermione didn’t stop to mourn the demise of another childhood dream when she sent the shiny golden badge back to McGonagall, along with a terse letter expressing (something akin to) regret. It wasn’t something she was sad about. In fact, she smiled at the notion; for once, she had declined to shoulder responsibility. You see Headmistress, Ms. Granger would like to be accountable for no one but herself for a while. Ms. Granger wanted to spot kids breaking rules and look the other way. Ms. Granger wanted to defy curfew without feeling guilty. Ms. Granger wanted to drink illicit alcohol for fun, rather than because the world was too hard to bear sober.

That night when she woke up with a gasp after another nightmare about giant snakes and desecrating fire and Tonks, Fred, Lupin, Colin, Lavender... she walked over to her window to press her face against the cool glass. When she pulled away, the glass was wet and splotchy. Those were the dreams she chose to mourn.

“Here,” dad said in a conspiratorial quasi-whisper as he shoved two bottles of beer in her hand,
“Go on.”

Mum had gotten back the day before, twisting at the door to drag her suitcase in, and Hermione hadn’t given her a moment’s notice – she’d barrelled into her and hugged her. It stunned her, the immediacy with which mum embraced her back. And not in a perfunctory, placating manner, either. Mum held her tightly, (one long squeeze during which Hermione felt the kind of wholesomeness that she’d been craving,) for a few moments. But the second her arms slipped away, she walked around Hermione and disappeared upstairs.

That brought us to the current moment: Six-thirty in the evening, and dad was in the kitchen, steaming fish for dinner. “Go on!!” he urged, gesturing wildly towards the patio where mum was draped on a deck chair. “I’m going,” Hermione gritted out.

With trepidation sitting like an iron ball in her throat, she dawdled her way towards the door and out; mum looked up at her, eyed the bottles in her hand, and sighed. Shaking her head in a way that was almost amused she asked, “Your father’s idea?” Mum was looking at her and speaking to her. “Yes,” Hermione blinked, “Um, here.” She handed her a bottle, and diffidently sat down on the chair beside her. “Didn’t think to give you a bottle opener, did he?” “Oh. Oh no. It’s no problem, I’ll...” But when Hermione took out Bellatrix’s wand to sort out their problem, mum blanched and recoiled away from her. “Sorry!” Hermione gasped, “I’m sorry! I’ll –” “It’s fine,” mum muttered tightly as she slowly straightened her posture once more, “You can... it’s fine.” She held her bottle out and Hermione sheepishly tapped Bellatrix’s wand on its cap. “Sorry.”

They sipped from their bottles to the tune of meticulous chirping – a hundred cicadas making their strange, esoteric music. The light from inside fell in small specks across the patio floor, and threw weird shadows all across the lawn. “It’s a lovely garden, mum.” “Thank you. Nothing like the old one, I know. But the climate here is a bit different.” Hermione breathed a laugh. “Quite an understatement, that.” Mum didn’t respond, making Hermione wonder if she’d somehow offended her by attempting to make rubbish small talk. (To be fair... it was mum who had brought up the weather.)

“How was the seminar?” she tried again. “Dull.” “Ah. That’s a pity.” “Hm.”

They sipped from their bottles, and now the chirping of crickets felt like a horrendously appropriate sound effect. “Dad took me to the clinic the other day. It’s very nice.” “Thank you.” “And I met Olivia. She seems like quite a character.” “She is.”

They sipped from their bottles, and Hermione was so close to tears.

“So does that friend of yours.”
She all but spat the sip she’d been taking right back into the bottle in her haste to reply. “Huh?”
“Sheo. He seems like quite a character, too.”
As always, the thought of Theo’s character made her smile. “Oh, he really, really is.”
“He’s gone back to England?”
“Yes. Though he said he might visit sometime.”
“Your dad thinks he’s fantastic.”
“Hermione nodded eagerly, “He practically inhaled the whole thing. He also loved her cinnamon biscuits. And her butterscotch fudge. And her date and walnut loaf.”
That earned her a full smile.

The next couple of sips were laced with hope and hazard. Hermione knew very well that they could continue talking in that manner all evening; it would be pleasant... and so very wrong. Glossing over the resentment just wouldn’t do.

“Are you ready to talk to me, mum?” she asked in a small voice, (Mum’s only reaction was one prolonged blink, and a loud exhale,) “Please?”
“What do you need me to say?” mum whispered hoarsely.
“I – I know you’re angry, and –”
“Angry?!” she spat, “Hermione, I’m furious. The kind of fury that’s almost incomprehensible!”
“God, I know. I know, I know. And I wish I hadn’t had to do that to you. But...” her voice withered as mum’s eyes flashed.
“But what?”
“I vastly prefer you being angry with me than you not being here at all.”
Oh but that was apparently the wrong thing to say. Mum set her beer bottle down on the ground with a kind of dangerous slowness. She sat up till her back was ramrod straight. “And I,” she hissed, “Would vastly prefer having control over my own mind.”
“I didn’t change who you are mum,” Hermione said in the same small voice, “I didn’t touch your thoughts, feelings, or rationale. I just –”
“You just zapped yourself from my head. Yes.” Mum’s tone was getting louder with each word, “And tell me, do you think any of those thoughts and feelings have any meaning to me without you? To hell with everything else. You are what matters to me more than any of that! And what if you had —— died. What then?”
“You wouldn’t have known—”
“I wouldn’t have known. My daughter is dead, and I wouldn’t know. Don’t give me that bullshit about it not mattering because I didn’t remember you. No matter what the scenario, you are and always will me my daughter. You took that away from me. And if you had died, Hermione... oh. If that had happened, I would want to feel every second of it. I’d want to be consumed by the sheer agony of it.”
Hermione opened her mouth to speak but mum wouldn’t allow it.
“I don’t give a damn about the ethicality of what you did. I can’t even think about anything beyond the fact that you stole yourself away from me and happily leapt into a suicide mission.”

Mum got up and left after that. She didn’t join dad and Hermione for dinner.
Breakfast the next morning was as strained as Hermione expected. Mum was puffy-eyed, dad was white-faced, and she didn’t even want to know what her own face was like.

Four days went by and Hermione kept up her daily runs by the beach. She read *Of Human Bondage* for the second time.

> It is an illusion that youth is happy, an illusion of those who have lost it; but the young know they are wretched for they are full of the truthless ideal which have been instilled into them, and each time they come in contact with the real, they are bruised and wounded.

One Sunday, when Hermione came back from her run practically shaking from the exertion, she found mum waiting for her in the kitchen.

“I think you might be overdoing it,” she said.

Hermione tried to remain impassive... as opposed to screaming, or freezing, or jolly well exploding with anxiety. “I’m fine.”

“You’re far too thin. You look ill. Sit,” she commanded, nodding her head towards a chair.

Hermione complied, and seconds later there was a tall glass in front of her. “Um...”

“Chocolate milkshake,” mum supplied, and sat down on the seat opposite her.

“Thank you.”

Hermione kept her eyes on the layer of froth lining the rim of her glass as she drank. Mum didn’t say anything, but she was watching her so very closely.

“You need to take bigger servings of your meals, too,” mum ordered once Hermione had finished.

“Okay.”

“Are you drinking enough water?”

“I think so?”

Mum snorted delicately. “No. You aren’t. And you’re clearly not sleeping very much either.”

“It’s a lot better now,” Hermione mumbled, fiddling with the hair band around her wrist, “I’m managing to sleep through most of the night. I think being here has helped... it’s so completely removed from... from... everything.”

“That’s good,” said mum with narrowed eyes, “Do you really think going back to that school is the best idea then? Isn’t it central to the trauma you’ve been through?”

Hermione suppressed a sigh. But of course she’d share dad’s opinion on that matter; however mum had the remarkable ability to remain clinical in such situations.

“It’s more than just that. And I want to see Hogwarts become Hogwarts again – not the place of the final battle – the place where my friends died – but the place where I finally felt...”

“Finally felt what?” mum insisted impatiently.

“Like I wasn’t a complete freak.”

Mum’s face twitched. After exactly four seconds she asked, “Are Harry and Ron going back as well?”

“No.”

“How come?”

“They accepted jobs at the ministry.”

“Weren’t you offered one too?” Mum looked annoyed.

“Yes.”

“Well, why didn’t you take it?”
“I want to pass my exams first.”
Mum’s annoyance turned into something far too complicated to label. “I see. What about Theo?”
“He’ll be there. And Luna and Ginny. Dean, too... I think. And –”
“You probably want to take a shower,” mum cut in abruptly.
Hermione sucked in a breath. “…Yes. I mean... okay.”
“There’s a lovely little bookshop nearby; just twenty minutes away. Hurry down and I’ll take you.”

A crooked sort of peace descended upon the Grangers over the next week. June had trickled into
July, and the air turned colder, the wind sharper.

Mum had set up a daily routine for her. She ran, she read, she ate, (seeing which, dad’s cooking got
more and more elaborate,) and she slept. Sometimes her nightmares would wake her up within
minutes. Sometimes strange shadows would turn her blood into ice. Sometimes she’d
spontaneously burst into tears while standing under the shower.

But she also watched bad telly with dad and laughed till her stomach hurt. She pruned the garden
with mum. She walked over to their clinic every afternoon and chatted with Olivia while she
waited for them to join her for lunch. One evening, they sat out around the smouldering fire pit and
Hermione took in their faces and asked them if she could show them something. They didn’t flinch
when she pulled out Bellatrix’s wand, and were delighted by the sight of her shimmering otter
patronus.

The day Hermione finally decided to restore all their old photographs was a difficult one. They
spread the lot out on the living room floor, and all three of them had tears in their eyes.

Dad tried to teach her driving one day. Hermione refused point blank the next day. One evening,
they gathered around the telly to watch a film about the RMS Titanic that had gotten rave reviews.
Mum fell asleep halfway through and dad was more focused on a sports magazine. Hermione
found it quite tedious as well. (Except for the male lead, who was rather... well. But he also
reminded her – vaguely – of Malfoy and that certainly was tedious. Malfoy was more like the vile
fiancé, anyway.)

And finally, the day that Theo was meant to visit arrived. Hermione came out after a long shower,
steaming and humming... and she paused in front of the mirror. Her skin was glowing, and her
cheeks were flushed scarlet. Her hair had grown considerably; the rings under her eyes were
absent.
She stared at her reflection and thought, Hermione Granger, and... Blimey! It was a perfect fit.
Hermione sat with her face pressed against a window, staring at the gate to the house like a hyper-vigilant watchdog. Dad was sitting in a nearby armchair, ostensibly reading the paper, but mostly he was laughing. At her. The moment she saw his lanky frame step into the garden pathway, she was off like a rocket. She dashed towards him with a humungous grin that he mirrored and then she was being spun around as he hugged her.

“Hello,” she said laughingly.
“Hello, you,” said Theo.

She dragged him towards the house, and mum and dad were standing at the door, smiling indulgently.
“Dr. and Dr. Granger! Lovely to see you again!”
“You too, lad,” dad chuckled, “Come on in. Can I offer you some –”
“Lemonade? Merlin, yes. I have dreamed of that lemonade so many times in the past two months.”
With another chuckle, dad disappeared into the kitchen.

*

“Well this is a nice change,” Theo exclaimed loudly when mum affectionately ruffled Hermione’s hair as they sat in the living room.
Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s all right, Theo. We’ve talked and things are getting better. You really don’t have to be obnoxious and make uncomfortable jokes.”
“Really?” he beamed, “Thank Theo.”
“Thank... um, what?” mum spluttered.
“No!” Hermione moaned, “Please don’t ask.”
But by the size of Theo’s grin, she knew it was too late.

*

The locals were hosting a small market that day, selling trinkets, baubles, and plants. A row of diverse food trucks lined the back. Mum, dad, Theo, and Hermione roamed amongst the colourful spread while sipping hot cider from paper cups.
At a clothes stall, Theo bought a *Bananas in Pyjamas* t-shirt.
“You know that’s for a three year old, right?”
“I am a wizard,” he declared loftily, “Perfectly adept at casting growing charms.”
At the same stall, he also insisted on buying scarves for mum and Hermione.
“You really don’t –”
“Don’t be absurd, young man –”
“Oh, I insist. You’ve paid for all my food and I know I don’t eat like a bird.”
He took advantage of the fact that mum’s hands were full of Agave plants, and threw a wad of money at the seller. He also bought a long tie-and-dye gypsy skirt for Luna.
They wandered further, and dad got caught at an antique shop that was selling a cricket ball that may or may not have been used during the 1992 world cup final. Mum stayed back to stop him
from spending an exorbitant sum on it, ("What do you want it for, anyway... England lost that final!") and Theo and Hermione strolled ahead.

At one point, he stopped dead.
“I need that lamp,” he declared. The lamp in question, covered in seashells coated in glitter, was the tackiest thing Hermione had ever seen.
“That’s the tackiest thing I have ever seen,” she said.
“Exactly. I need that lamp. For the centre table in my new flat.”
“Did you hear me correctly? I said it’s TACKY.”
“And did you hear me say EXACTLY? It’s for my flatmate.”
“Yes... I suppose... if anyone could appreciate the, ah, uniqueness of that lamp, it’s Luna.”
“I won’t be living with Luna.”
“No?” Hermione blinked.
“Nope. Xeno still needs her around, apparently. Laying it on a little thick, if you ask me.”
“I see.”
“Yeah. I need that lamp.”
“But wait,” Hermione stuttered, “If you’re not living with Luna, then who...” she broke off when Theo shot a who-do-you-think look at her.
But of course. Who else? Hermione considered the hideous lamp once again, and pictured grey eyes widening in horror. A sneer. What the fuck....?!
“You need that lamp,” she affirmed.

“... and so she set a flock of angry canaries at him,” Theo finished his unnecessary rendition of a certain anecdote from Hermione’s life with much relish.
“Can you stop,” Hermione groaned, attempting to shake her hair forward to cover her face while dad’s laughter resounded all around the room.
“And one time,” Theo went on after spearing more of dad’s fine lasagne into his mouth, “she kept wizarding Britain’s top journalist in a jar for weeks.”
“Excuse me, what?!” mum sputtered.
“I would hardly call her a journalist –”
“Oh, and let me tell you about how she organised a dissident group – an army if you will – in fifth year to stick it to the establishment, and turn out the malicious woman who was out to ruin Hogwarts.”
“Umbridge is actually evil, alright! She deserved –”
“Deserved to be carried through the forest by a herd of blood-thirsty centaurs?”
“Excuse me, what?!” mum sputtered, while dad continued to laugh.
“You should have heard my inquisitorial housemates moaning about you lot that year.”
“Shameless sycophants, all of them!”
“I’m sorry,” mum interjected, “Can we go back to the blood thirsty centaurs?”

Long after dinner, and long after mum and dad had retired to bed, Hermione took Theo down to the shore. He conjured a thick woollen blanket and they lay side by side, like they used to by the Hogwarts’ lake.
“McGonagall wanted me to be Head Girl, you know,” Hermione told him. The sky was so thick with clouds that not a single star was visible.
“Hmm.”
“I turned it down.”
“I know. She gave the job to Susan Bones.”
“Oh,” Hermione smiled, “She’ll be good for it.”
“You know who the head boy is?”
“No. Who is it?”
Theo didn’t reply till she’d looked at him, and with a face full of glee he said, “Longbottom.”
Hermione felt the top of her head fly off. “Oh my.... wow!”
“Right? Would you have ever thought...?”
“No! But he deserves it. Absolutely.” And she laughed with pure delight, “He must be thrilled!”
“He is. When he told me he was about six shots of firewhiskey down, and singing songs about
glory.”
Grinning, Hermione wondered, “When was that?”
“Draco’s birthday. Finnigan made it his personal mission to get us all plastered.”
“Dra – uh – what?”
Theo smirked, “It was one wild party, Hermione. Thomas was there too, and he taught us how to
dribble a football using a stuffed troll’s head. Tracey and Padma Patil were there. Joined at the hip,
they are, and......”
“...And?” she prompted when he suddenly stopped speaking.
“Oh. Sorry. I got distracted by the thought of the two of them joined at the –”
“You’re a prat.”
“Yeah. Oh, and Bill and Fleur showed up too. Did you know Bill can chug a galleon of beer
without breathing? Corner passed out in an alleyway. I shagged Luna in a bathroom stall. So... to
summarise... it’s a crazy new world back home, full of strange friendships and stranger bedfellows.
You’d better prepare yourself.”
For a whole week after Theo left, Hermione had to recap every detail of every year she’d spent at Hogwarts. She cursed her best friend to hell. After all, she had already told her parents all the big things that’d happened. Broadly.

It led them to in depth discussions about how the Magical bureaucracy worked, and about how the Magical media worked, to how the media in general worked, until finally, they were talking about human rights and moral values, and Hermione had once again turned into a complete heroine in their eyes.

Huh. Well, perhaps Theo didn’t have to go to hell after all.

“I was angrier with myself than I was with you.”

It was the morning after the crescendo of their discussions, and Hermione and her mother were sitting in the garden sipping tea.

“What do you mean?” Hermione probed.

“I understood why you’d done it even before the initial flash of red hot rage had dissipated. I – I got it. You wanted to keep us safe and happy because you love us. You stayed with your friends because you are loyal and compassionate. You opposed that Lord and you fought for your rightful place in the world because you are brave and strong. And you are brilliantly intelligent and capable, so of course you had to be a pivotal part of the resistance.

“That’s when it hit me... you aren’t the woman I’d hoped I’d raised you to be. You’re better. You’re... just... so... amazing. I was furious with you, yes; but that didn’t stop me from feeling proud. I was in awe – in helpless awe – and I hated myself for it.”

Hermione had no words in her head, no voice in her throat. She felt cut off from all her faculties, and could only feel things she couldn’t name.

“I wanted to be a mother angry with her daughter. I wanted to focus on what ifs and worst case scenarios, but all I could think was – now, there’s a woman!

“Look, Hermione... I’m not saying that my resentment has disappeared, or that I’m not hurt anymore. I am. But you should know how about the kind of person you’ve become. I always knew you were extraordinary, my darling... anyone who’s met you can confirm that. Just think of what it means that you’ve surpassed even my expectations!”

For hours Hermione lay with her head in mum’s lap, crying uncontrollably. Fingers gently carded through her hair, and the morning carried on.

Lobster, Hermione decided, was not her favourite food. Performing bloody surgery to get to her lunch was not something she cared for.

“Isn’t it brilliant?” dad gushed.
They walked back to the clinic at a leisurely pace, and the moment they stepped inside, mum grumbled, “Well, of course Olivia isn’t here. Damn it, Mr. Ivanekov will be here any second. Oh, er... Hermione... do you mind manning the reception till she gets here?”

It took a lot to keep from making a face. “Of course not.” She just really, really didn’t want to.

“Okay. Extension one for my office, and two for your dad’s. But send Ivanekov to him please.”

With that, she rushed away, and dad followed while muttering, “I always get that painful bugger.”

Hermione dealt with Mr. Ivanekov, (she would swear he was part of the mafia,) and Missus Jo, and Ms. Browning and Mr. Prakash, before Olivia swaggered in.

“What are you doing here?”

“Young job,” Hermione replied tersely.

“Oops. Late again, am I? Sorry.”

“It’s quite alright.” Stupid girl.

“It’s my birthday on Saturday. My friends and I are going to a bar by the beach to celebrate. It’ll be nice if you show up.”

Hermione’s brows lifted in surprise. “Oh. I...”

“Come on. Let’s get you rotten. My boyfriend Matty's got hold of some really cool herbs, if you know what I mean...” Olivia winked wickedly.

...it’s a crazy new world...

“Sure. I’ll come. Thanks.”

It had started with one light beer. One innocent, harmless light beer that had loosened her nerves enough to vaguely enjoy the company of five complete strangers. There was Olivia, her boyfriend Matty, a Jake, a Matthew, a Jenny, and a Tabatha.

But then three rounds of tequila shots happened. Then somebody pressed a fucking strong gin and tonic into her hand. Then two shots of something awful and pink that Jake insisted they try happened. Then another... one... two... what... rounds of tequila....

They were a giggling, stumbling hoard when they left the bar. Hermione was moving in a time lapse. Blink, and she was outside the bar, and blink, she was at a beach. The whole world was the sea and it was made of waves. Her heeled boots weren’t letting her walk on sand, so Matthew lifted her off the ground and carried her. She may have whooped, and perhaps that’s what encouraged him to swing her around and around.

She vomited behind a bush.

They sat on the floor of a small blue gazebo that was floating through pure black nothingness. Matty pulled out two fat rolls of paper.

“Happy birthday, baby,” he said to Olivia, “Best weed old Vic has to offer.”

After her first drag, Hermione coughed for seventy five years. The rest of them laughed and laughed dissonantly. After her second drag, she thought she might vomit again. After her third drag, she felt the railing behind her hit her back obladi oblada life goes on, brah.

Forth drag, Tabatha and Jake were saying some bullshit about how the universe was magical. Ha. What did they know? Fifth drag and the unbearable lightness of being. Suspended in nothingness.
Dawn was blooming when Hermione peeled herself off the floor. Her companions were strewn carelessly around her in various, undignified poses. Well, all except...

Hermione stood up, (Jesus Christ!) and closed her eyes against the wave of swirling nausea that triggered. She staggered to the other end of the gazebo, and collapsed against a post. Olivia and Matty were sitting right at the edge of the shore; the water must’ve been coming all the way up to the place where their legs lay, tangled together. They made a rather cheesy silhouette, posed against a standard sunrise-by-the-sea background. ...But then she tipped her head up to look at him, and he bent his down to kiss her, and something in Hermione’s soul twisted so terribly, it gutted her. She was an echo chamber for loneliness.

The couple on the beach fell onto their backs, and Matty rolled them so that he was hovering over Olivia ——

Hermione turned away, and pressed her palms against her eyes for a moment. Just a moment.

She gathered her hair into a bun, stepped over the scattered bodies and set off on the long walk to her parent’s home.

She broke the news over breakfast: “I think it’s time I went back.”

“Already?!” dad baulked, “But term doesn’t begin till September!”

“I know... but it’s Harry’s birthday on Friday, and I have to get all my books and supplies ready. There’s also a very ill-tempered portrait in my bag that needs to be returned to his rightful place.”

She wondered what state 12, Grimmauld Place would be in. Mum set her fork and knife down. “When will you leave?”

“Tomorrow evening.”

“So soon!”

Hermione sighed and offered her parents a small, sad smile. “I’ll be back for the Christmas hols.”

“But not soon enough,” dad groused.
Percy and Mr. Weasley met Hermione outside the lifts in the British Ministry of Magic. It was quite late in the evening – nearing nine – and she was quite surprised to see them.

“We’ve been working overtime this whole month, trying to get things back in order,” Mr. Weasley explained as they walked towards the atrium, “Every time we think we’ve got things on track, something else goes wrong.”

Percy added, “Just two days ago, a group of snatchers that had gotten away, waylaid a muggle bus in Briton. Nobody was hurt,” he hastened to assure Hermione at her gasp, “But we had a lot of obliterating to do. Not to mention, more trials – thought we were done with those – and now we know about at least a dozen nooks all over the country where more fugitives are hiding. Poor Aurors are getting run ragged. Well, here we are. Ahem – The Burrow.”

She’d barely just stepped out of the blazing green flames, and the world narrowed down to a squeal, a hug, and bright red hair.

“Hello, Ginny,” she laughed and hugged her back.

“Herms!” she cried, “You’re back.”

With a scowl, Hermione pretended to turn back towards the fireplace. “And I’m leaving again.”

“Oh come now,” Ginny grinned and began dragging her towards the kitchen, “No herms no foul.”

They were all there in the kitchen, waiting to greet her with smiles and a table laden with food. But George wasn’t among them.

“So lovely to see you again,” Mrs. Weasley cooed, shoving her onto a chair and pouring her a glass of pumpkin juice.

Hermione hummed a reply, and beamed when the occupant in the chair next to her nudged her with his shoulder.

“Alright, Hermione?”

“Not bad. You?”

Harry smiled, “Not bad. How’d it go then? Your letters were surprisingly brief - almost disturbingly so. I was expecting the usual thirty feet long parchment full of every little thought you _”

“Oh shut up,” she laughed, “I’m not that bad.”

She spooned some carrots onto her plate and Harry peered at her. “You didn’t answer my question. How’d it go?”

“It...” she sighed, “It went fine. They have their memories back, but they’re going to stay put in Australia... for now. I’ll visit them again in Christmas. They told me to tell you hello. Um, Charlie, could you pass me the gravy, please?”

Harry didn’t push her further, and they all ate, listening to Mr. Weasley talk about his day at work. It was only after pudding had been dished around that Hermione risked a peek at Ron. She choked on an inhale when she realised that he was already looking right at her. Tentatively, she turned the corners of her mouth upwards... and he jerked his head. It was a nod, she was certain.

After everything she’d been through with her parents, Hermione recognised that every little gesture, every little acknowledgement counted.
Under the light of a single taper, she ended up telling Ginny every detail of her stay in Australia. They were quiet for a long time afterwards, each lying in their respective beds, watching the candlelight cast moving liquid shadows on the ceiling of Ginny’s room.

“How have you been sleeping?” Hermione asked by and by.
“Much better,” Ginny replied with a sigh, “I used to need to fly for hours to tire myself... or have Harry really brutally, unforgivingly pound me into a mattress. Really savage like, I mean –”
“Please stop.”
“Oh, shove off.” From the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Ginny turn her head and smirk. “Tell me something, you went and got completely pissed on a beach, with two stray blokes around, and you didn’t shag either of them?”
“No Ginny, I didn’t.”
“Why not?”
“Ginny!”
“But isn’t that your thing? Experience something traumatic, and then find the closest pri–”
“I will suffocate you with your silly Harpies cushion and feel no remorse.”
Ginny giggled.

“I went running,” Hermione muttered as she flipped over to lie on her stomach, “On the beach. Every day.”
“Nice,” Ginny muttered around a yawn. She was obviously close to nodding off, and Hermione, who was still running on Australia time, was wide awake.
“George still hasn’t left his room?”

Ginny didn’t reply and they didn’t speak anymore that night. For a long time after the other girl had fallen asleep, Hermione lay in bed and read *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*; Wilde’s heart rending lament rang across eras to knock the breath out of her. And when the first hints of dawn seeped into the sky, she put her book away, slipped on her trainers, and walked out into the early morning. She ran around the orchard, until the ease of it frustrated her. So she ran up hills, trying to recreate the strain of running through sand. She ran for... some stretch of time... she still hadn’t mended or replaced her watch.

When the sky had turned hazy gold, she sat atop a hillock – *her* hillock – and scanned her surroundings dazedly. She felt so dislocated and jarred – less than a day ago, her life was eternal frothy waves and sand, a tidy tiled patio, a telly, mum and dad and a faltering reconciliation... But suddenly she was here: Trees and hills and scummy ponds, broken people and broken systems; brokenness that was a part of her and that she was a part of. She’d have to set aside her peace of mind and start a separate course of healing here, in this world. Her world? They were both hers, weren’t they? Or were they just territories that she’d appropriated by accident and a twist of fate? The feeling of homelessness was a sick punch in the gut, and she missed her parents so terribly, it hurt.

*Can I sail through the changing ocean tides?*
*Can I handle the seasons of my life?*

A month from now she’d be back at Hogwarts. The rapidity and brusqueness of things made her whole body sway. Hermione blinked, and it lasted longer than necessary. Her head began swimming with that familiar, welcomed lethargy that physical exertion bestowed upon her.
Somehow, she willed herself to get up and trudge back to the Burrow.

Harry’s eighteenth birthday was a sober event. Of course, Mrs. Weasley, bless her soul, did the very best she could to try and make it special. There was a cake that was smothered in chocolate frosting, and there was a lavish spread of delicacies, including two plates full of Harry’s favourite treacle tart.

But Hermione was sure that they were all remembering Harry’s last birthday, when Fred and George had insisted on decorating the garden with balloons and lights. When Tonks had hand-fed Lupin cake, and he had looked drained beyond measure.

They were out in the garden, anticipating an influx of expected and unexpected guests. Hagrid came by, his massive boots leaving craters across the lawn where earlier, the afternoon’s shower had softened the soil, and wrapped Harry up in one of his near-fatal hugs. He looked very mawkish. Professor McGonagall showed up as well, and when Hermione smiled at her, all she got was a slightly frosty nod in return.

(“Oooh,” Theo breathed into her ear, “Bad move, turning down head girl.”)

Neville, Dean, and Seamus apparated in together, and while Hermione rushed to congratulate Neville on his newly acquired designation, she saw Dean and Seamus pounding Theo on the back with easy camaraderie.

Right. They had bonded on Malfoy’s birthday. She wondered if he might show up as well...

Ha, she shook her head at herself.

When dinner had been done with, they moved into the living room so that Harry could open his presents.

Hagrid stepped outside briefly, and returned with a cage.... inside which was an owl. White and brown – and rather small and fluffy – with beautiful, large amber eyes, it hooted softly when Harry stroked the top of its head in awe.

“Thank you,” he said to Hagrid arduously, his eyes suspiciously bright.

Hagrid bashfully scratched the back of his head, “Thought it was righ’ that I be the one ter.... yeh know,” he muttered roughly.

(“You should name it Hermione,” Theo suggested.
“Jesus, yes!” Dean exclaimed, “It kind of does look like –”
Hermione’s withering glare shut him down.)

Harry was overcome again, when he saw the present Ginny and Hermione had pooled their resources to buy. He gazed enraptured at the brand new broom in his hands, and then lifted his head to gape at them.

“I know it’s no Firebolt,” Hermione began, but her words petered out when Harry walked over and hugged her tightly. He pulled Ginny out of her seat, and uncaring about the fact that her entire family was in attendance, he set her down on his lap.

McGonagall had bought him a series of books about Aurors. The Weasleys had all chipped in to buy him a set of half a dozen sleek robes in various colours. Luna had made him a painting of Dobby surrounded by decorous wreaths of pastel-coloured flowers.

Harry let out a short shaky laugh, and because Hermione knew him so well, she could see his slight irritation as not being able to completely reign in his emotions. Ginny kissed his temple, right then, and he nearly came undone.

That was when the boys – Dean, Seamus, Neville, and Theo – handed over their gift: A bloody
crate full of firewhiskey and a Honeydukes hamper. Mrs. Weasley and McGonagall’s identical looks of disapproval had them all sniggering, and so the tension ebbed away. Percy brought out another package, (“From Minister Shacklebolt; he’s sorry he couldn’t make it,”) which contained a dragon-hide wand-holster.

Eventually, one of the bottles in the crate was opened, and they all drank to Harry’s health. Hagrid, Mrs. Weasley, and Bill all claimed to want to make a toast, but Harry shook his head. “No. Please. This... this is enough. More than enough,” he sighed and stared into his glass, “I know, alright? I know. Thank you... all of you.”

A cosy, brilliant lull set in. McGonagall left very soon after, and then Luna, (who had to get back to give her father his potions,) and Theo. Bill and Fleur left, Hagrid left. Hermione settled deep into a sofa, slowly sipped her drink and looked around the room, smiling to herself. Harry was playing exploding snap with Neville, Dean, and Seamus, Ginny still on his lap, cheering him on. Percy and Mr. Weasley were deep in conversation, the latter had his wife’s feet on his lap and he gently massaged the soles. Charlie had cracked open a window to smoke, and he stared pensively into the night. Hermione started when the sofa creaked and started again when she saw who’d taken a seat next to her. “Ron,” she gasped softly.

He cleared his throat. “Hey.”

“Hi.”

He looked horribly uncomfortable, almost like he regretted making the overture, but Hermione was too dazed and delighted to care. He had come to her. “Amazing isn’t it,” she murmured.

“What?” he asked with a frown.

Hermione gestured towards the rowdy group gathered around the coffee table. “It’s Harry’s eighteenth birthday.”

Ron blinked, and Hermione watched as his mouth curled into a small smile. “Yeah,” he agreed, “It’s bloody amazing.”

It was nearly midnight when the last of their guests got ready to leave. Seamus stood up and stretched and yawned in an obnoxiously loud manner.

“Aright then, mate,” Dean said to Harry, “We’ll see you around.”

But just as they got to the door, the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs made every single one of them freeze. In one collective motion, they all turned around – “George!” Mrs. Weasley cried.

Nobody else seemed to be able to manage a word. “Yeah,” George muttered. His voice was raspy from lack of use. “Happy birthday, Harry.” “Th–thanks.” “Could you all come out to the garden for a bit?” he asked and walked out without waiting for their affirmation. Hermione exchanged a startled glance with Ginny as they all hastened to follow.

Once outside, George set a small box on the ground, took about ten steps back, and then set it
aflame with his wand. All of a sudden, the world was alit! Tiny explosions sounded one after the other and sparkling, dazzling colours bloomed across the inky sky. Patented Weasley fireworks: beautiful, spectacular, in every imaginable colour, forming stars, and planets, and spinning wheels, and exotic birds with twinkling plumes. It was a majestic show... staggering in fact... and while its audience remained captivated, George slipped away and returned to his prison.

Hermione was alone in Ginny’s room that night, since her roommate had gone off to give her boyfriend a special, private birthday present. Still not acclimatised to BST, she plodded about the space moodily, too foggy-headed to put her mind to a book. She pulled Bellatrix’s wand out of her pocket and conjured her patronus to keep her company. The little otter bounded around the room, and for a while Hermione contemplated giving chase to tire herself out... but shit; who had the energy for that. She thought back to how gaunt and wan George had looked, and juxtaposed it with Harry’s overwhelmed countenance while going through his gifts. She remembered Ron’s reluctant smile, and Neville’s broad glowing one. The affection in Ginny’s eyes as she looked at Harry... the gentleness with which Mr. Weasley touched his wife... She was almost too aware of the moment Bellatrix’s wand slipped through her fingers. The silvery light in the room vanished, and abruptly, she was asleep.

On a bright and warm Saturday afternoon, Hermione and Ginny decided to go to Diagon Alley to get their books for school. It was the first clear day they had seen after four days of relentless rain. Hermione was really looking forward to seeing Diagon Alley restored to its former splendour: The way it had looked under Voldemort’s regime was an image she was quite ready to expunge from her mind. Feeling bizarrely optimistic, she slipped into the pretty, sleeveless purple blouse that mum had bought for her as a “gift for the birthday I’d missed,” and hopped down to the kitchen for breakfast, where Ginny, Harry, Percy, and the Weasley-parents were already seated.

“Ron’s sleeping in again?” Hermione asked Harry. It turned out that their ceasefire had been temporary: Ron had gone right back to avoiding her after Harry’s birthday.

“Of course,” Harry chuckled, “Says he needs to sleep all he can before Auror training starts.”

“Are you coming with us to Diagon?”

“Yes he is,” Ginny replied for him.

“Are you coming with us to Diagon?”

“Yes,” said Ginny.

“No,” said Harry.

“Yes,” said Ginny.

“Um,” Hermione continued as she spread butter on her toast, “There is a chance that Malfoy will be there, too.”

“Okay,” said Ginny.

“I’m not going,” said Harry.
“You are,” Ginny assured him with a patronising pat on the back of his hand.
And that was that.

* 

Flourish and Bolts was packed with students and parents, teeming with witches and wizards young and old, *swarming* with all manner of magical folk... and Hermione thought her heart might burst. She stood immobilized by the door, gawking and breathing it all in, and Ginny had to drag her inside.
“You were blocking the way! Damn, Hermione... I know books get you all flustered, but –”
“It’s not just the books,” Hermione shot her a glare, “It’s everything. All this... I mean...”
“I know what you mean.” She squeezed the elbow she’d been using to tow her around.

With her booklist in hand, Hermione strolled among the towering shelves. She was Mary Lennox in her secret garden. She was Wordsworth among his daffodils. She was Holly Golightly at Tiffany’s.
At one point, she paused to help a hapless looking muggleborn and his parents.
“Are you a muggleborn, too?” the little boy asked shyly.
“Yes,” she replied, “Yes, I am.”

* 

All the seedy, unsavoury shops had been re-replaced by their original edifices. They ambled down the alley in companionable silence. Ollivander’s shop had the gleam of a place freshly renovated. Florean Fortescue’s seemed to be in the process of being mended.
“I wonder who’s going to run it now,” Ginny mused.
Neither of them looked at the shop with the bright orange and purple facade, all barred and boarded.

Stares and whispers followed them all around. The crowd parted for them. “*It’s Hermione Granger!*” she heard often enough to make her dislike her own name. Some people even pointed. She couldn’t imagine the chaos that would’ve descended had Harry not been invisible.
“I hate this,” she grumbled.
Ginny suppressed a smile, and she heard Harry’s snigger. It sounded horribly smug.

“So where is their damned flat?” Harry muttered in her ear after they’d reached the other end of the alley. Gringotts loomed before them, betraying no evidence that not too long ago a great, big dragon had burst out of it.
“Huh?”
“Nott’s place, Hermione,” Harry repeated impatiently, “Where is it?”
“Right.” She tore her eyes away from the imposing building. “Er... Luna said she’d meet us here and – Oh! There she is. Luna. Here... Luna! Hello!”
Dressed in the skirt Theo had bought for her and with a wreath of daisies on her head, Luna looked like a prime oddity amongst the crowd swelling around her.
An incorporeal “*What?!*” caused a nearby group of kids to jump and scatter.
“How did you...” Ginny hissed, “How did you know Harry was here?”
“I sensed him,” Luna stated casually, “Harry has a very forceful presence. Come on then.”
Luna led them down a small path between two shops, past a row of workshops to a small park, opposite which was a multi-storied building made of polished grey sandstone and dotted with tall arched windows.
“Posh,” Ginny sniffed.
“Well, what did you expect?” Harry’s disembodied voice said scathingly, “Just the sort of place prodigal pureblood would put up.”

They walked through a lobby – all shiny marble and potted plants – and into a glass lift that took them up and up...

Hermione was not prepared for the sight that greeted her when she walked into flat number seventy-two.
She didn’t notice the furniture, she didn’t cast her eye about to take in the fixtures, the colour of the walls or the paintings on them; all she could do was stare at Theo and Malfoy in the centre of a vast sitting room, poised in duelling stance and snarling at each other.
“What the hell is going on?” Ginny exclaimed.

“How do you undo a permanent sticking charm?”
“Um – wha–?”
“Tell me!”

She blinked. “A finite ought to do it?”
“That DIDN’T WORK!” Theo bellowed. In the background, Malfoy barked a laugh.
“Are you sure?”
“Yes!”
“Um... what incantation did you use to stick... whatever it is you’ve stuck?” She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.
“I didn’t!” Theo wailed.
“Oh. Only the caster can undo a permanent sticking charm.”
Theo gnashed his teeth and spun around. “Undo it, you fucker,” he howled at Malfoy.
“First undo the one you put on that lamp!” Malfoy retorted bitingly.
“No!”
“Then the wallpaper fucking stays!”

Hermione’s quickly glanced at the walls – a tasteful, innocuous cream –

“Draco, I swear –”
“Bugger off! You asked for it!”
“Remove. It. Now.”
“Not a chance!” Malfoy growled through his teeth.
“It’s my bedroom, arsehole!”
“And this is my drawing room –”
“Our drawing room! Shared space! And I say the lamp stays!”
“Then so does the wallpaper!”

They were back in combat mode, knees bent and wands trained on each other.
“How the fuck am I supposed to sleep in a room like that?” Theo demanded, shooting a hex at Malfoy.
Nimbly, Malfoy deflected it. “Do you think I care? Sleep here then. Next to your ghastly, tacky lamp!”
“Glittering purple snakeskin, Draco! Seriously?!”
The moment Theo uttered those words, Hermione knew she was a lost cause. She felt it in the pit of her stomach, and then it burst out of her, small and breathy, but unmistakably... a giggle. She slapped a hand on her mouth but it was too late. Both the combatants turned to look at her. Theo had a hilariously scandalised – borderline hurt – look on his face, while Malfoy just arched his brows. One lock of his hair fell right down the middle of his forehead like a plum line, bringing to prominence the ridiculous symmetry of his features. From somewhere behind her, Hermione heard Harry rasp, “Glittering... purple... *snakeskin,*” at which Theo boomed, “Can you bloody well believe it? He’s even covered the ceiling! It’s seizure-inducing!”

“Excellent!” Malfoy snapped, “I hope you have a sodding seizure the next time you and Lovegood are trying to bring the building down with your loud rutt–”

“We are young, enthusiastic lovers! Just because you aren’t getting any –”

“SILENCING CHARMS!” Malfoy roared, “Silencing charms, you boneheaded bellend!”

“Ahh! That’s never going to happen now! And you want me to sleep here in this room? Fine. I’ll sleep here. I’ll sleep here with Luna. All over your precious velvet upholstery!”

“I’ll kill you! I’ll drag you down to the middle of Diagon Alley and publicly behead you –”

“FIX MY ROOM!”

“NO!”

“I THINK!” Luna burst out in a volume so unlike her norm that everybody reeled, “I think that snakeskin will be a very intriguing texture to feel against my back; much more so than velvet.”

And Hermione was off again, giggling insanely into her hand. Ginny was faring no better.

“Dear god,” Harry groaned.

Theo looked flabbergasted, his mouth hanging half open. But the best part of it all was, without a doubt, the expression on Malfoy’s face.

George made an appearance on Ginny’s birthday as well. He’d been calm and taciturn all through dinner, and handed Ginny a special deluxe Skiving Snackbox, which he claimed she’d absolutely need now that she was planning to go back to school. He retired back to his room not long after that.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Hermione asked later, when it was just the two of them in Ginny’s room, “That he’s making things again?”

“That he’s making things again?”

“I hope so,” Ginny replied as she twirled before her mirror in a brand new white sundress.

Then three days later when Charlie was leaving for Romania and Mrs. Weasley was beside herself with emotion, George came down again and tossed a smart turquoise blue vest at his departing brother.

“Fireproof, dust-repellent, and will loudly announce when you’re feeling hot and bothered. You know. Like *that.*”

“Gosh, thanks,” Charlie drawled. He may have been trying to sound dry and sarcastic, but his grin let him down.
The day-long rain had simmered to a pleasant pitter-patter, so Hermione stowed away her big blue brolly. She was trudging alone through wet and grey London. Against the darkly monotonous city landscape full of muted silhouettes and shadowy figures, streetlamps and headlights and windows glowed like radioactive elements. The cacophony of water drizzling against the pavement, of cars and busses whizzing across the road, of blazing horns, of random, endless conversations made the air even denser.

It swept her up and carried her away... as cities often do.

There was a group of four young people in front of her, dressed in a lot of denim, and sharing a cigarette. Their bubbling laughter got drowned out by a passing double-decker, and... Hermione fell in love with the sound of its motor: The guttural purr it made, the way its wheels crunched the wet gravel underneath.

“Fuck off, ya tosser!”
The boys in front got into a playfight, and the girls laughed and rolled their eyes.
“Chavs!”
“Honestly!”

Hermione stopped at the corner of the street, stepped niftily into a telephone kiosk, and listened to the sound of her breaths in the jarring peace within. Then she made a call.

Ring-ring... Ring-ring... Ring-ring... Ring–
“Hello?”
“Hello, mum.”

They couldn’t talk for long, but it was wonderful nonetheless. Hermione stepped back out into the world feeling less remote.

For once she was glad it was raining.

Diagon Alley was crowded like mad at four in the afternoon and Hermione was grateful for having a reason to keep her hood up. Nobody could spot her hair, (twice as large thanks to the humidity,) and recognise her.
As she made her way down the cobbled street, she noted that Fortescue’s had reopened. There was a swarm outside, and above it floated a charmed harmonica playing a whimsical tune.

She took the same route she’d as the last time – first to Gringotts, and down the side alley. When she knocked on the door to Theo and Malfoy’s flat, it opened of its own accord.
“Welcome Hermione,” the door... er, said, “Theodore is in the second bedroom and expecting you.”

Hermione thanked the plain panel of dark wood and strolled down the long hallway. She was able to inspect the place this time, and she admired the elegant damask wallpaper and the intermittent, contrasting panels. She passed by the living room door, the dining room door opposite it, a
bathroom, and sliding glass doors opening to a small terrace. At the end of the hallway were two closed doors and one that was slightly ajar, around which Hermione peeked and –

“What on earth are you doing!?”
“Decorating,” Theo replied flippantly.

What that explanation didn’t quite indicate was the fact that he was covering every conceivable surface in the room with large pink, orange, red, and yellow butterflies.

“Theo,” Hermione breathed in horror, “Have you lost your mind?”
“Noope,” he stated decisively as he placed a red butterfly on top of a bedpost, “He had it coming.”

“Are you using perman–”
“–ent sticking charms? But of course.”

Malfoy’s room looked like a little girl’s dream. ...A not completely sane little girl. His bookshelves and his carpet were covered. His stylish mahogany desk was covered. His beautiful grand piano was covered. His comfortable looking settee was covered. Hermione Granger was standing in Draco Malfoy’s bedroom, and that actually wasn’t the most absurd part of the situation.

She groaned loudly, and Theo blinked up at her from where he was working by the bed. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? He’ll murder you.”

“Nah,” he scoffed, planting butterflies across the headboard.

“This is so stupid.” She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“It’ll force him to fix my walls. I think it’s brilliant.”

“You’re so stupid.”

He placed a pink butterfly on Malfoy’s bedside lamp and sniffed. “I am not.”

“What if he walks in right now?”

“He won’t,” Theo said confidently, admiring the yellow-orange-pink-yellow-orange-pink sequence he had arranged on Malfoy’s side table, “He’s visiting Narcissa, and he’s meeting your Gryffindor lads for drinks at the Leaky, after. He isn’t going to see this till late at night.” He paused to grin wickedly. “And he’ll be drunk off his arse.”

“It was nice knowing you,” Hermione muttered weakly.

“Have you so little faith in me? Ouch.”

“You’ll be saying a lot worse than ouch soon enough.”

“Pshaw.” Theo waved away her concerns merrily. “Come here and tell me if this spot needs more pink.”

“I will have absolutely nothing to do with this madne–”

“Yes, more pink. Definitely more pink. There can never be enough pink.”

By the third week of August, the rain had intensified. Watching it thunder and pour from inside the burrow while drinking rich hot chocolate was an agreeable way to pass some time. Hermione was alone in the kitchen, and she’d dragged a chair to the open door so she could bask in the fresh petrichor.

“Have you seen Ginny and Harry?”

“Hmm?” Hermione looked over her shoulder at Mrs. Weasley.

“Ginny and Harry. Would you happen to know where they are? I asked Ron and he didn’t know.”

Ginny and Harry were locked up in Charlie’s now vacant room. “I haven’t seen them.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Weasley wrung her hands. There was so much grey in her hair that hadn’t been there
“Will you sit with me?” Hermione enquired, “And would you like some cocoa?”
“I–” she blinked, “I – yes – thank you, dear. That sounds lovely.”

Once they were settled Mrs. Weasley asked to hear about the details about her trip to Australia.
Hermione painted a pretty picture: A watercolour beach landscape, with a laughing woman and man with wild hair. It resonated oddly well with the rain and fresh greenery outside, and swirled sweetly through the decadent beverages they sipped on. Mrs. Weasley smiled as Hermione spoke and crinkles formed at the corners of her faraway eyes.

* 

The absolute second the rain stopped a different kind of thundering erupted. Harry, Ron, and Ginny stomped down the stairs and into the kitchen.
“Well, there you are!” Mrs. Weasley belted.
“No time to talk, mum!” Ginny sang, “We’re going to play quidditch.”

They were gone as suddenly and as boisterously as they’d arrived.
“What?!” she hissed, her heart juddered to a stop.
“When Mrs. Weasley went to give him tea, his door was open and he wasn’t there. That was over an hour ago.”
“Mr. Weasley and Percy went to the Ministry to get a search party together. Bill’s scouting Diagon. There’s nothing else we can do.”
“Has anyone spoken to Lee or Angelina?”
“Yeah. They don’t know anything. But they’re looking around too.”
Hermione gnawed at her lip as her eyes flickered back to Mrs. Weasley and Ginny. “Can’t the
Ministry track him somehow? They must –”

“I dunno,” Harry muttered.

Just then, the fireplace let out a loud *whoosh*, and Charlie burst into the room.

“Just got dad’s owl! Have you found him?” he exclaimed.

“No,” Ron replied hoarsely, as Mrs Weasley’s wails redoubled.

“Shit,” Charlie spat, and marched over to kneel on the floor by his mother.

The next time the fireplace glowed green, it was Bill. He didn’t say a word; simply shook his head gravely.

For twenty minutes they all existed there, not speaking, stewing in anxiety until Ron exploded:

“Fuck this. This is mad, just sitting here. Let’s go and look for him!”

“The Aurors are on it, Ron,” Bill said with forced calm.

“I don’t care! We can’t just –”

The fireplace roared to life. And it was George.

A high-pitched, unearthly wail tore out of Mrs. Weasley’s throat. “YOU!” she shrieked, “You – where – oh, you!”

“Are you alright?” Bill asked urgently, rushing towards him.

The remaining five merely stared at him with amazement. He stared back, blinking owlishly from beneath his hood.

“I’m fine?” he replied tilting his head.

“Where were you?” Ginny demanded angrily, “You don’t come out of your room for months – and then you disappear, just like that, without saying a word!”

“Er, sorry?”

“SORRY!” At least four different voices echoed the word with incredulous anger.

“What?” George asked the room at large that was eyeing him closely.

“The Aurors are on it, Ron,” Bill snapped, “I checked.”

“Who’s – what – damn it,” Bill growled, “I’d better go tell Kingsley to call off the Aurors.”

He stalked off and flooed away.

“What?” George asked the room at large that was eyeing him closely.

“What’d you go to the shop for?” Charles posed carefully.

“Well, it’s high time I got it going again, yeah?”

“Oh,” Ginny gasped softly, and she was the only one who was able to muster a reaction. Hermione could see George seizing up, uncomfortable under such strong scrutiny.

“Yeah, alright then,” he garbled, “If that’s all....”

He pulled back his hood and Mrs. Weasley screamed.

“George! Georgie! Oh, but what is *that*!?”

*That* was what stood in place of the once gaping hole at the side of George’s head. *That* was a prosthetic ear of some kind. *That* was a bright and gleaming gold.

“Holy shite!” Ron cried.

“I like it,” George muttered stonily. The light from the candle on the kitchen table lit the shell of his new ear in the most dazzling way.

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Weasley moaned with dismay, “Let me take you to Mungo’s. They’ll fix you a nice, very real looking one and –”

“No, thank you.”

“George, please –”

“I like it,” he ground out.
“Honestly, Charlie, it’s not –”
“George Weasley,” Ginny said with pomp, “Roguish buccaneer. Forget having a gold earring, he has a gold ear.”
Mrs. Weasley’s mouth thinned with disapproval, but Hermione found herself speaking before she could stop herself.
“There was a Danish astronomer called Tycho who lost his nose in a duel, and he replaced it with a solid gold one. I believe he was very popular amongst the lady folk.”
As George’s eyes flitted across the room’s occupants, a slow smile spread across his face. “And I’ll bet this chap Tycho wasn’t half as good looking as I am.”
“Oh, of course not,” Hermione beamed back.

A few minutes later, when George’s ear was catching the light of the setting sun, Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Percy returned. The first let his head fall into his hands, the second said, “Cool,” and the third walked into a chair.

A little while later after they’d all eaten, Hermione and Harry went out for a walk around the garden, so that the Weasleys may have some time to themselves. George’s sudden decision to get back among the living had given his entire family a new lease on life.

“Not exactly sudden though, is it?” Harry said, “He’d been locked in his room for so long... he must have gone through things. Worked it out.”
“All on his own?”
Harry simply shrugged... but then he was used to pushing through hard times by himself. George had never been alone; not since the day he was born.

They strolled around the house, and to the nearest pond where patches of reflected sky poked through a thick layer of moss. There were so many clouds hanging above them... surely it was bound to rain again soon.

“Training’s going to start next week,” said Harry.
“Are you looking forward to it?”
“Yes. Oh fuck, yes. Just sitting around has been... you know.” He made a face and turned his eyes heavenwards.
“I know,” Hermione agreed.
“I’ve been thinking,” he hedged, “That I want to move out of here. I can’t keep expecting the Weasley’s to put me up.”
“They want you here,” she chided, “You know that. You’re family.”
He sighed and looked at her. His hands went to perform their habitual tic of rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, I know. But I want my own place. I mean, I have my own place. I think it’s time that I –”
“Oh my god, Grimmauld Place!”
“Er, yes, I–”
“We have to go there!” Hermione gazed at him with wide-eyed consternation.
“Yes, that’s what I’m –”
“No – Harry – it’s Phineas Nigellus! He’s still in my bag!”
His mouth and eyes rounded in slow motion, and then he was in hysterics.
“It’s not *that* funny!” Hermione cried. “It is! It’s – it’s – been a year!” Harry wheezed, “He’s been trapped in your bag for a whole sodding year!”

Hermione huffed, “Well it’s not like he doesn’t have other portraits he can visit!” “Not in his precious ancestral home he doesn’t!” Harry sagged forward, pressing his palms against his ribs, “God, he must be so furious.” “Yes, well,” Hermione began, but she was interrupted by the appearance of a vast, gleaming patronus in the shape of a manta ray. It spoke in the voice of Theo: “Help me. Quickly. Wards in the living room are down; apparate right in. Please, please, hurry.”

Harry whispered something in shock, and Hermione didn’t bother saying anything back. She grabbed his wrist and spun on the spot.

When they appeared inside the large drawing room, they found Malfoy sitting in an armchair, legs stretched out and loosely crossed at the ankles, ostensibly reading. He didn’t look up at all, even though their arrival had been a loud one, and merely said, “He’s in his room.”

And then one corner of his mouth pulled up into a smirk. *Jesus.* How had she ended up getting so involved in this ridiculous, childish prank-war they had going? She groaned, bracing herself to see something undoubtedly preposterous, and set off down the hallway. Harry followed. “What is happening?”

“I don’t have the energy or the words to explain it,” Hermione grumbled.

So she’d prepared herself, right? She’d been ready for anything. Oh, but not this: She opened the door to Theo’s room, and a gush of air left her lungs to the tune of, “*holy fuck.*”

His room was thick with shimmering silver spangled ropes. They fell from the ceiling to the floor like vines; there had to be at least sixty, and they clashed hideously with the glittery, scaly paper covering his walls. Theo was in the centre of the room, tangled up in a bunch of them, suspended a few feet above the floor. His arms were pulled taut and away from him, so despite having his wand in his hand, it was pointing stupidly towards the ceiling. His legs, in contrast, were curled and pressed against his stomach in a way that could not possibly be comfortable.

“Help. Me.” he croaked.

“Damn,” Harry breathed, and he ran his fingers down one rope – “POTTER NOOOoooo!”

In an instant, there were ten more ropes around them.

“You twat!” Theo growled, “They’ve got the Lestrange vault curse thing on them!”

“Well you could’ve mentioned that!” Harry spat and backed out of the room.

“As you can see, I’m a bit...” “Caught up?”

“Oh, hardy har, Hermione. GET ME OUT OF THESE, WILL YOU, PLEASE.”

Hermione sighed for the enth time and slipped out Bellatrix’s wand and cast a repelling charm on herself. It was effective – the twinkling ropes didn’t touch her and she managed to get to Theo to cast the same charm on him. He slipped through the silvery snarl.


He glowered, “Do I look like I’m in the mood for – Argh! I’m in the mood to skin a fucking blond wankstain. DRACO!”

He flew out of the room like a vengeful demon, and the iridescent ropes went berserk, first swinging away from him... then swinging back into place... then swinging away again when
Hermione ran after him.

Back in the living room, Theo (red-faced, furious,) and Malfoy (completely aloof,) were facing off. “Too far, Draco!”
“I don’t see how it was any worse than the butterflies.”
(“Butterflies?” Harry asked in an undertone. Hermione rolled her eyes.)
“I was stuck! They fucking grabbed me!”
“Ah yes...” Malfoy looked down his nose at Theo, “How did you escape?” His eyes did the quickest of darts towards Hermione.
“Bugger off! If you think you’re going to get away with this –”
“Sure, sure,” Malfoy drawled, “I think you should be more concerned about the fact that you can’t enter your room anymore.”
“Ha! Unfortunately, you git, you didn’t make those things immune to repelling charms, and –”
Malfoy frowned softly, “Didn’t I?”
“...No! And just you wait, you piece of shit, I’m going to – Hey! Draco? Where are you – Oi. NO! COME BACK HERE.... DON’T YOU DARE.......... DRACO.......... DRACO..........!”

Left alone, Hermione and Harry listened to the slow fade of thundering footsteps and yelling.
With utmost tiredness, Harry whimpered. “Are we going to –”
“Leave?” Hermione completed, “Yes.”
“Oh thank fu –”
He disapparated.

On a damp and drizzly Sunday morning, Hermione, Harry, Ginny, and Bill apparated to 12, Grimmauld Place. Staring at its scuffed, black front door, Hermione had a sudden flashback of the awful panic she’d felt when she’d accidentally brought a small army of Death Eater’s here.

...The fingers gripping her robes... Harry’s hand in hers, slick with sweat... having to cast the quickest of spells... she remembered the dense forest... Ron writhing on the floor, his blood everywhere...

She shuddered.

Ron had refused to go along with them when they’d asked. “No thanks,” he’d grunted coldly, his eyes fixed on Hermione. It could be said that the time after they’d escaped from the Ministry was when the fissure in their relationship had started to grow. The locket-horcrux, Ron’s burgeoning resentment, the way he’d abandoned them –
But that was all over now. They were here to launch a new chapter in Harry’s life. She took a deep breath and shoved away old memories as Bill pushed open the door.
“Stand back, all of you,” he instructed. “Mad-Eye’s curses are painfully complex; this will take a while.

So while Bill got rid of the tongue-tying curse and dust-bunny Dumbledore, the three of them sat on the steps and watched puddles form.
How scared they’d been when they were taking shelter here! Apparating under the invisibility cloak, peeking out from behind curtains at this very view: Watching Death Eaters standing by the fence that was now covered in ivy.
Hermione looked at Harry from the corner of her eye and wondered what he was thinking about.

“All done!” Bill called from inside.

They stepped in cautiously; Hermione’s heart was trouncing in her chest as her mind assaulted her with visuals: A hurt and angry Lupin storming away after his row with Harry... Fred and George being chastised by their mother for doing magic all over the place... Tonks with a pig’s snout at the dinner table... Sirius, lounging broodily in a poufy, moth-eaten chair... Snape stalking down the halls with arms full of parchments and secrets.

She registered Ginny’s soft, “wow!” before she had the presence of mind to understand what they were looking at. But when she did, her wonder was much like her friend’s. The bleak old house was positively gleaming. Gone was the overpowering stale, musty, dusty smell – the air had a hint of lemon and pine. The gas lamps were all lit, and the crystal chandelier above glittered like diamonds made of fire. The grimy curtain that used to cover Walburga Black’s portrait had been replaced with royal blue silk.

“Blimey!” Harry intoned. “Master has returned!”

They looked at the door leading to the dining room, and there was Kreacher, wrapped in a perfectly pressed linen sheet.

“Kreacher, the place looks amazing!” Hermione gushed, smiling toothily at the elf that regarded her sourly.

He did, nonetheless, spit out an acidic, “Thank you, miss,” before turning back to Harry and bowing. “Kreacher has been waiting for Master Harry Potter for months. Rooms have been prepared for you, Master, and for your...” (He paused, possibly to remind himself that blood slurs were not nice,) “...Friends.”

“Thanks, Kreacher!” Harry cheered, “This is great! Hey... you wouldn’t happen to have any walnut cake lying around, would you?”

Hermione suppressed a growl at the sheer presumption, but of course Kreacher nodded and led them into the dining room.

“*You do it.”
“What?! Why?”
“Please, Harry!”
“You’re the one who shoved him into your bag!”
“And you’re the one who said it was brilliant of me to do so!”
“No, actually, I’m quite sure it was Ron who said that.”
“Haaaarryyyyy!”
“Nope.”
“I hate you.”

“I’ll do it!” Ginny snapped, yanking Hermione’s bag away. She set it on the (fluffy, perfectly clean and carpeted,) floor, and as she rummaged about with her entire arm inside the bag, Hermione and Harry exchanged a sheepish look. “Ah! There it is!”

The framed canvas Ginny drew out was... empty.

“Well, that was anticlimactic,” Harry muttered after they’d put it back up on the wall. “I hope he returns in the middle of the night and pitches a fit.”
“Well, I’ll be sure to send you a howler so that you won’t miss out.”
Hermione stuck her tongue out at him.
“You know I will,” Harry threatened, “And of course I’ll ask my dear new owl Herms to –”
“If you don’t change his name, Harry, I’ll –”
“I think it’s a hoot,” Ginny trilled with a daft grin.

They climbed further up the stairs to explore the bedrooms, passing by those awful mounted House-Elf heads.
“Definitely getting rid of those,” Harry grunted softly.

Harry was all packed up and ready to leave the Burrow early next day, when Ron descended with a trunk in tow, unceremoniously announcing that he was going to live with Harry.
“Auror trainees have mad work hours, it just makes sense... Oh come now, mum, please don’t cry! Bloody hell, s’not like I’m moving to Tibet!”

Mrs. Weasley hadn’t stopped crying since. To put that into perspective, it was now seven in the evening. Hermione and Ginny were the only ones in the house with her.
“For Godric’s sake, they said they’ll visit every weekend!” Ginny cried with exasperation as they sat to eat. Mrs. Weasley was diluting her stew with tears, and that was tragic as it was rather excellent stew.
“Oh, I know!” she blubbered, “I’m being silly. But once they start work, I just know I’ll barely get to see them. Charlie’s gone, Bill has his own life, you and Hermione are going off to Hogwarts... I’ll just... I’m going to be alone... George has his shop... Arthur and Percy have the Ministry...”
“Oh mum,” Ginny whispered, and flew around the table to her side, “I don’t have to go –”
“Yes, you do!” Mrs. Weasley barked forcefully. She sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes. “You have to go finish your schooling, young lady. Don’t go thinking I resent any one of you for having things to do! The only thing keeping me sane is seeing you move on with your lives! I want you to be happy and productive – all of you. Don’t pay attention to this, dear... I’m an old woman now. Weak.”
“You are the absolute farthest thing from weak!” Ginny sputtered, “If we’re moving on, it’s all thanks to the strength we draw from you!”
“Oh!” Mrs. Weasley broke into a fresh bout of tears.

Hermione twisted her napkin tightly between her fingers. She wanted so desperately to slip away, but there was no way to do so without making a ruckus and disturbing the moment. It reminded her so much of her talk with mum in her garden, and her conversation with dad on the jetty. It was so raw, so personal, and she felt like a shameless voyeur, sitting there and staring down at her lap.

How had the month already gone by?

Hermione was having one of those too-frequent bloody-hell-what-is-my-life, mind-boggling, demi-existential crises. Would the next year in school be about nothing but reminders of the final battle?
Would she find herself eating toast in the Great Hall at the exact spot where someone’s dead body had lain? Would she spend the entire time running away from ghosts of the past, fighting, grasping, and begging for some composure?

How would she be able to think about transfiguration in a room where blood might still linger in the dirt between the stones? Could she learn to perform brand new magic with a wand that had flayed her inside and out, and look at stars from a tower above which she couldn’t not picture a terrible snake-tongued skull?

Her school books were in a pile by her open trunk, and it was the first time ever that she hadn’t read them all before term had begun. She hadn’t even flipped through them. She hadn’t even cracked them open.

But she would. She’d devour them and absorb every word, and pour it all out onto her exam parchments. She’d talk about transfiguration, and perform brand new magic because that’s what it was all about, wasn’t it: The great, strenuous task of persevering, ‘IN SPITE OF’. Overcoming, or whatever.

It got George back into the shop that he’d never be able to separate from memories of his twin, and it got Harry to move into the house where he’d lived as a miserable fugitive, and where his beloved godfather had lived as a miserable fugitive. A brave lot from Dumbledore’s Army was going back to Hogwarts after suffering through unrelenting torture and trauma within those very same walls. Were they proving a point to the universe, or to themselves? Hermione didn’t know. All she knew was that something was simmering inside her – an enormously confusing concoction of gristly, barbed fear and softer, lighter anticipation. She fell into a mad conflux of emotions.

*This too shall pass?*

– Can it get better –
– Will it get worse –

With palms pressed tightly against her eyes she let stars explode behind her lids and wondered if she’d actually really grown in this past year of dreadful chaos. It was true that she sometimes couldn’t recognise herself... but was it growth?

*All her growth was the conveying of a corpse of hope.*

She dragged the corpse and packed it along with her books.
Forty-Seven

Chapter Notes

Just a short, transitional chapter.
I'm terribly sorry for not replying to any of your reviews for the last chapter - my plate is extremely full at the moment. I'm going to use whatever free time I have to write, and I think you might like updates over PMs?

There was a crowd and there was conversation; there were students of all ages and families of all sizes. Superficially, nothing was amiss – platform nine and three quarters looked as it always had, year after year.

Everything was different.

And it wasn’t because Hermione hadn’t had her parents drive her to the station, or because there was only George and no Fred, or because she saw fewer familiar faces than usual. It was the atmosphere, oppressive with its overriding heaviness. Parents held their children for longer.

The last time Hermione was here, she’d been plagued by a certain hyper-awareness and foreboding. This time she felt abstracted and disassociated.

The Hogwarts Express fizzled and hissed as it came to a gradual stop, its chrome red body and gleaming windows reflected the hundreds of faces that watched its arrival.

“It’s going to be so strange,” Hermione muttered, “Getting on board without you and Ron.”

Harry half-smiled in a rueful manner. “Look at it this way – there’ll be no twats around to distract you from your studies.”

As if on cue, a voice speared through the multitude: “Hi there, buddy!”

“Hello, Theo,” Hermione said, biting her lip as Harry laughed, “Luna. How’s your father?”

“Much better,” Luna replied happily, “He’s marrying his nurse.”

“What?!” Hermione, Harry, and Ginny, (who’d just escaped from her mother’s clutches,) cried.

Theo stared upwards and pursed his lips, looking determined to say nothing.

“He’s marrying his nurse,” Luna repeated her words extremely slowly. “Oh look, it’s Neville!”

Indeed it was, and the intriguing subject of Xenophilius’ great love affair was unceremoniously and unfortunately dropped. Instead, they stood around quietly and listened to Neville’s grandmother’s acidic monologue against muggle fashion. (“What is that scrap of cloth she’s wearing? A skirt! You call that a skirt?”)

Therefore - and quite understandably - it came as no little relief when the warning bell sounded and it was time for them to climb aboard.
Her mind was full of Ron’s half-arsed half-wave, Mrs. Weasley’s highly dramatic weeping, and Harry’s long parting hug. She blindly followed Theo down the train, passing by open compartment doors with students stowing away their luggage and chattering indistinguishably. It was a strange thing to be witnessing while only partly paying attention: It was like she was standing still, unmoving, and flashes of random people’s lives were flying past her. In one compartment, four first years were meeting for the first time... perhaps they’d become friends for life. In another, three Ravenclaws and a Slytherin were arguing about charms. In yet another, an amorous couple was reuniting. Further on, there were two strangers, silently staring out the window. She witnessed beginnings and middles, friendships and love, excitement and quietude.... the whole glorious medley of life like a series of Edward Hopper paintings.

They were walking in line, with Neville in the lead, followed by Luna, Theo, Hermione, and finally Ginny who had receded into herself much like Hermione had.

“Here we are!” Neville declared eventually, coming to a stop. Hermione emerged from her stupor like a gopher bursting out of the soil.

Dean greeted them cheerfully when they entered the cabin, smiling warmly at them all one by one. He was stretched across the entire length of one row of seats, so Theo returned his salutation by knocking his feet to the ground.

On the opposite row, by the seat closest to the window, with his hair artfully dishevelled and robes loose around his neck was Malfoy. He nodded at Luna, sneered at Theo, and ignored Hermione entirely, and nodded once again at Ginny.

He said to Neville, “Where’s your crown, Longbottom? And what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in your special, gilded, ruby studded head boy cabin?” “No thanks,” Neville replied as he shoved his trunk under the bench. “You don’t sound bitter at all,” Theo chirruped with glee, and when Malfoy sneered at him again, he beamed, “Dear me, Draco. Are you still sulking?” “Fuck off.” “Aw, come on. It’s just a harmless little singing fountain in the middle of your room! I think it looks lovely with all those butterflies fluttering around it.” Malfoy set his jaw and glared out the window, ignoring Theo... and everybody else who’d begun to laugh. “It’s such an enchanting scene, I tell you,” Theo went on, “And don’t you just love how it actually never stops singing? It was a tricky charm to master... but I did it. For you.” “What’s it singing?” Dean asked as he gasped with laughter. Theo’s answering smile was angelic. “Bananas in Pyjamas.”

The countryside zipped by in broad strokes of green and grey, the landscape thick and lush with rain. Little drops struck against the window, splattering like tiny water balloons. The atmosphere inside the compartment was one of ease. Luna, Neville, Theo and Ginny were playing gobstones, (Luna’s... er... “improved” version,) as Dean cheered them on. Malfoy was still
Chapter One: Advanced Human Transfiguration.

Well, she’d successfully altered Ron’s appearance before their Gringott’s break-in. She supposed she’d be able to manage that.

“Hey,” she heard in her ear, and looked up into Dean’s smiling face.

“Yes?”

His smile widened. “Nothing. You just looked so much like... you, you know?”

“Hermione Granger reading a book, you mean?”

“Exactly. It’s comforting.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Theo muttered without looking away from the little rocks in front of him, “I think I prefer the sight of Hermione screaming bloody murder from the back of a blind dragon.” (“Can’t believe you made me sit that one out,” Dean grumbled.)

“Me?” Hermione sputtered, “I was screaming?”

“Yes, you were,” Theo informed her.

“Was I the one raving about ending up in Poland?”

“Finland.”

“Aha!” She tapped him on the arm with her book, and he acted as though she had brutally battered him.

And she loved him for it. She loved them all for it, actually; that they could sit there after everything, and make inane jokes about it all.

(“Oi!” Neville cried, pointing at Theo, “That’s cheating you lousy Slytherin! Watch it! Don’t you know I’m a powerful, world famous snake-slayer?”)

As she chuckled, Hermione’s eyes wandered to the lone quiet member of their congregation. The dense cloud cover outside had rendered reflective the glass before him; and Malfoy was watching them. She might have believed that he was peering through the mirror image, but then their gazes met. Her laughter died, and she blinked... and when her eyes reopened he’d looked away.

She shook her head, and turned her attention back to Dean. “So why isn’t Seamus here?”

“His grandmother died.”

“Oh my! I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Ha,” Dean barked, “You’d be the only one. Nasty old shrew, she was. Fucking batty, bitter old crone.”

“I think that’s how they make all grandmothers.” Neville mused idly.

“But she did one good thing before copping it,” Dean went on.

“And what’s that?” Hermione asked.

“She left him a mountain of galleons.”

“That’s nice.”


“I am not! Oh. Heh. I am Nott. That never gets old.”)

“Bugger’s over the moon.”

“Has he any plans for this fortune?”

(“Luna, my star, tell these horrible people that I am not a cheater.”

“As the official creator of Gobgood Lovestones, I hereby declare that Theo is not a cheater.”)
“YOU’RE A CHEATER, TOO!”

“Yeah. He’s bought a pub.”

Hermione was laughing again. “That’s just so... so...”

“So Seamus?”

“God, yes!”

Dean sniggered, “Well he’s completely obsessed with making it perfect. Obviously, N.E.W.T.’s and all that shite is hardly as important.”

“What’s it called then?”

“Finnigan’s.”

“Of course.”

“I mean... what else could it be? He wants me to paint a mural over the Christmas hols.”

“That’s wonderful!” Hermione exclaimed, “Any ideas?”

“A Toulouse-Lautrec Moulin Rouge sort of scene. But with Leprechauns.”

Ginny had looped her arm around Hermione’s as they strolled towards the carriages that would take them to the castle. When they stepped out from under the station’s roof, Hermione drew out Bellatrix’s wand and cast a quick water repelling charm over the both of them.

“Thanks,” Ginny said and peered upwards, “I really hope this bloody rain stops before quidditch practice begins.”

“Who’s the captain this year?” Hermione asked, trying to sound like she cared.

“Demelza,” Ginny replied loftily, and her eye twitched.

Thestrals stood in a long line, scuffing the ground with their hooves and shaking their giant wings. “Over here!” Neville shouted, waving them over to a carriage, but Hermione sucked in a sharp breath and jogged off in the other direction. When she’d reached the Thestral with the oddly short tail, it snorted affectionately and nuzzled her hand.

“Hello,” she whispered as she ran her fingers down the silky mane that she’d once clung to for dear life, “How are you?”

The thestral responded with another expulsion of air.

“I hardly think about that night anymore,” she told it, “So much happened after –”

“What are you doing?”

Hermione looked irritably over her shoulder. “Catching up,” she snapped.

“With a thestral?” Theo clarified.

“I look forward to it every year, too,” Luna cut in happily, “They’re such lovely company.”

Hermione cocked a brow at Theo, daring him to say something now.

“Oh, let’s just get in,” he mumbled, taking Luna’s hand and pulling her into a coach. Hermione gave her thestral a parting pat and followed.

...She immediately wished she’d gone back to where Neville and Ginny were.

Of course, Theo and Luna sat side by side, so it left her to take the seat next to Malfoy. Save for a
barely noticeable huff, he didn’t react at all. They rode in silence, looking out at Hogsmeade and the evening sky. Like Diagon, every building here had been restored, and that old, quaint, rustic charm of the village was right back to what it once was. But there was no erasing the visions that Hermione’s brain superimposed upon the scene: Of apparating with Harry under the cloak, of running from Death Eaters, of Aberforth, and Neville’s scarred face.

Closer and closer they got to Hogwarts; the beat of the Thestrals’ hooves against the ground was the rhythm of Hermione’s heart... and they accelerated in tandem. The rickety motion of their vehicle racing over cobbled streets jangled her no worse than the convulsing of her soul. She took in big gulps of rain-fresh air and peeked over at the opposite seats. Light from the streetlamps outside was sweeping over Theo and Luna’s faces periodically, revealing their strained expressions. She didn’t care to look at Malfoy; it was bad enough that most of the tension inside that small space seemed to be radiating from him. But before she looked back out, she did, from the extreme corner of her eye, notice that his hands were closed in tight fists on his knees.

Phoenix analogies were trite, particularly in this context, so Hermione actively did not think that Hogwarts rose like one from the horizon. She did not think back to its crumbled, broken... ashy... state, and marvel at how sturdy and whole it now looked.

While the castle did look spectacular, it wasn’t like seeing it again for the first time. Yet again, a ghostly film appeared before her vision and she saw fiendfire. She heard explosions, and walls caving in. The sizzle of a curse that just flew by her ear. Percy’s cry of no no no, Malfoy saying Crabbe, Hagrid being carried away by giant spiders, Greyback on Lavender, Harry! NO! Harry! Bellatrix raising her wand at Theo –

She breathed out and it broke into a sob. What the hell... she was actually crying. She blinked hard – once, twice, thrice – and after the teary layer had gone from her eyes, she forced herself to look at the castle; she forced herself to see the present. Every window was lit and glowing.

They neared the grounds where the Whomping Willow’s twisty branches stuck out against everything, as though paralysed in the middle of a feral dance. She turned to look at the other side to see that familiar column of smoke that would be leaking out of Hagrid’s hut. What she was confronted with instead was Malfoy’s profile, blanched and on edge. The bright lights emitting from the castle had given him a thin golden outline. Hermione followed the line down his face and throat and robes, to the space on the seat between them, finally reaching her own hands. They were clasped together tightly, pale and trembling. She heard a small whimper and looked up to see Luna bury her face into Theo’s neck, and he put his arm around her and sighed. His eyes found Hermione and they seemed to ask, are we ready for this, and Hermione stared back. She had no idea what her face was telling him – she had no idea what to think of his question – but he would read and understand what she was feeling anyway. He always did.

As their carriage slowed, some part of its mechanism creaked. They were well in the grounds, and the main entrance to Hogwarts, that large glowing archway, was the light at the end of her tunnel vision.

Clip clop clip clop clip clop

They were in the courtyard where Harry’s believed to be dead body had lain. Ginny’s awful cry, Hagrid’s anguish sob, Voldemort’s sick delight all echoed in her ears. And then they came to a stop. For a moment, none of them moved. Hermione and Theo looked at each other again and – Are we ready for this?

We have to be.

Theo was the first to disembark, and he held out his hand to help Luna and Hermione down. They were soon enough joined by Neville, Ginny, Dean... and Ernie Macmillan, who shook everybody’s hands like he was going to solicit them for votes.
“Difficult business isn’t it, coming back?” he muttered, “Yes, indeed. Quite difficult. Although I
must commend those responsible for rebuilding the old place...”
He continued to ramble as he walked, and Hermione hung back so that she wouldn’t have to listen,
(and apparently, Theo, Luna, Ginny, and Malfoy had had the same brilliant idea.) She watched the
backs of her friends as they trundled down the pathway, slowly getting swallowed up by the
luminosity emitting from the castle. She inhaled deeply, and it was like her lungs where crumpled
paper bags that crackled as they filled with air.
“Come on,” she whispered to Ginny who’d been staring at the spot where Harry had lain. “Come
on.”

Obviously, there had been many poignant, heavy instances in Hermione’s crazy life – instances she
could recall in high detail and in saturated Technicolor. The kind of moments when time slowed so
every second was embossed onto her mind, reshaping her cerebral crevices so her brain was like
the wall reliefs in Buddhist temples, telling the story of her life in images.
...She was far from the enlightened one.
But anyway, she lived another poignant, heavy instance as she climbed up the steps to the entrance
hall. Step one: The stones under her feet felt solid and lumpy, like her heart that had jumped up into
her throat.
Step two: The insides of the hall became clearer as her eyes got accustomed to the dazzling light.
Step three: The polished wooden doors were on either side of her like arms open for an embrace.
She could see the shining marble banister of the grand staircase that had been decimated during the
battle.

And then she was inside.
Every occupant of every painting was standing and watching. Every torch was blazing, and every
gem in the house point hour glasses was glinting. Hermione’s vision swam again, but she shook her
head before another flashback could assault her. A large hand squeezed her arm, and she turned to
offer Theo a tight smile.
We’re ready, right?
Right.

The Great Hall was quiet. That itself threw Hermione off completely. Her group appeared to be one
of the last to arrive, and this time, she couldn’t stave off the influx of memories. That terrifying,
awful row of dead across the centre of this room...
The room that was full of floating candles hovering under an open sky; that had long wooden
tables and benches and colourful banners and tall bronze candelabras.
No dead bodies.
No dead bodies.
She was shaking as she made her way to the Gryffindor table, seating herself between Neville and
Ginny. She watched Luna float over to the Ravenclaw table after pressing a kiss on Theo’s cheek.
Theo and Malfoy walked stiffly across the room to the Slytherin table.
Hermione tracked and noted other faces from her year: Zabini, Greengrass, and Tracy Davis.
Padma, Michael, Anthony, Terry, Lisa, and Mandy. Ernie, Hannah, Susan, and Justin.
...Parvati wasn’t there. Would Hermione be alone in her dorm? To think she’d longed for that
every year...

From the teacher’s table, Hagrid waved at her. Professor Slughorn had busied himself with a bottle
of wine, but every other professor was watching their students with absolute focus. A few had eyes
too bright. Madam Pomfrey was dabbing at hers with a handkerchief. Trelawney was outright bawling.
And at the centre, Professor McGonagall sat with her back straight, and it looked completely wrong for that seat to be occupied by anyone but a towering man with a long white beard. Hermione hadn’t thought about Dumbledore for quite some time... and now that she did, she realised that the edge of bitterness hadn’t faded yet; honestly, she didn’t think she’d ever forgive him. Then there was the absence of Snape – another jarring anomaly. The table looked incomplete without his sallow, sneering face. He’d been the most unpleasant shit of a man, who’d surrendered himself for the love of a dead woman.
The self-appointed puppet master was the epitome of Gryffindor-ness. The Slytherin was self-sacrificing. There was no veracity in those stupid houses. The red and gold scarf around Hermione’s neck was yet another pointless, meaningless label forced onto her, and she was sick of it. All she wanted to do was tear it off herself.

The silence in the hall meant that they heard them long before they appeared. Shuffling, tentative footsteps that conveyed trepidation and uncertainty. Professor Sprout led the lot, as frumpy as ever, but less pink faced and cherubic. The fifty-odd children that followed gazed about themselves with round eyes that were full of stars made out of reflected candle flames.
The sorting began and the hapless kids were sent into their respective boxes. The little boy whom Hermione had helped in Flourish and Blotts got sorted into Hufflepuff, and when she smiled at him he tripped over nothing.

To her, the feast had tasted like chalk and sawdust, prepared by the unappreciated rank of Hogwarts’ soldiers: The house-elves. Not among them was the one who’d been murdered in front of her. Not among them was brave, barmy, devoted, free-spirited Dobby.
Ugh, this is just what she’d been afraid of; spending every second remembering things she was supposed to be moving past. And it had just been an hour and a half since she’d stepped into the castle.

The sound of clinking cutlery stemmed and soon the food disappeared. Professor – Headmistress McGonagall fluidly got to her feet and cast a serious, searching look around the hall.
“Good evening, students,” she intoned in her brittle, matter of fact way. There was no playful twinkle in her eyes, her voice was not gentle and comforting in a way that forced you to trust her only to later find out that she’d been manipulating you all along. Poor Harry, Hermione thought and bit her lip. He spoke of Dumbledore with reverence once again, and it had everything to do with this strange death vision. She wouldn’t be surprised if he’d do something ludicrous like naming his firstborn after the old man.

“...new dawn, and a new era in the history of Hogwarts and the history of Wizardkind.”

Wow, she really hadn’t expected that kind of sentimentalism from someone like McGonagall. Blether. She zoned out again, and watched Luna make her glove tap dance on the Ravenclaw table.
“...extremely proud of each and every one of you, for the way you stood to defend your school and your peers...”

Theo and Malfoy were watching Luna too, and it looked like it was killing them to keep their laughter contained. Hermione averted her eyes immediately, lest she catch their mirth. They fell instead on Neville, and he was listening to McGonagall drone on with such rapt solemnity that Hermione damn near lost it anyway.

“...know that the late – the great – Albus Dumbledore would be so honoured to have called you all his students...”

Christ, Hermione had to bite her lips between her teeth and curl her toes to stay in control. She felt Ginny nudge her side sharply.

“What’s wrong with you?!?” she hissed at her through her teeth.

Seriously, what was wrong with her –

“...each of you demonstrated the finest traits and characteristics that your houses espouse...”

A soft, silly laugh gushed out of her and she slapped her hands over her mouth. On either side of her, ten people turned to stare. Dean winked at her. The idiot.

“But that said, this year is going to be tough. You will need to work thrice as hard to learn all that you missed out on last year, as well as cover your current year’s curriculum. Expect no leniency as far as academics is concerned. It is also my pleasure to introduce to you the new members of our esteemed faculty: Professor Herbert Jansen, who will be teaching Muggle Studies, and Auror Hestia Jones, who will be taking over Defence Against the Dark Arts.

“Now, please head back to your respective common rooms and have a good night’s rest. Hogwarts is truly delighted to have you all back within its walls. I request the students re-doing their seventh year to stay back, please.”

The cacophony that ensued was achingly familiar, and it sobered Hermione up at once. God, but the way she was oscillating between emotions would surely drive her mad very soon. Among the scuffling feet and chairs being scraped, Ginny bade them farewell. The call of “first years, this way,” rebounded all around, gliding over a muddle of random phrases –

“– Fuck, I’m so tired –”

“– chocolate soufflé was as good as ever –”

“– I just... I just can’t believe that she won’t be with us anymore!”

When the room was cleared of all but Hermione and her classmates, McGonagall stepped around the staff table and walked so she was nearer to the doors, gesturing them all to come closer. Now that the gathering was more intimate, and they were all who they were, their old professor dropped her stern facade a tad. She smiled at them, though her eyes were sad, and she said, “It is absolutely wonderful to see you all.”

She looked at them, one by one, and while nobody could ever possibly accuse McGonagall of having a grandmotherly air, this was as close as she’d get to it.
“For a long time we – the staff, board of governors, and I – had thought we’d be putting you all up in your respective house towers, like always. It would have just been a matter of fitting in an extra room or two, and of course that wouldn’t have been a bother.

“But then I thought about what you all have been through...” she sighed heavily and looked a hundred years older, “You rose to the challenge last year so admirably. You rallied together, forgot your enmities and took care of the school, of the younger children, of each other–”

McGonagall broke off again, and her gaze shifted to something far, far away.

“The bonds and friendships you have formed are something not even – not even Albus could have – Oh, dear me. We... have converted the dark tower into a dormitory for you. Mr. Filch will show you the way. Goodnight.”

She left as abruptly as Filch suddenly sprung out from behind the large wooden doors. “C’man” he muttered, and they tottered aftered him. Not that Hermione needed his help in finding the place.

So here was something to unite her and Harry and Ron again: They would all be living in a place Sirius had felt hopeless in.

Her room was essentially identical to her old dorm, but much smaller. There was a four-poster bed, a thick carpet on the floor, a wardrobe, a desk and chair, and a tiny attached bathroom. Very serviceable, perfectly comfortable, and decked in the safely neutral colours of purple and copper.

Purple and copper suffused the round common room outside her closed door, too.

Hermione shed her clothes as she slowly ambled over to the window. Standing before it in nothing but her shirt and knickers, she wrapped her arms around herself and looked out at the dark cloudy sky and the darker grounds. She stared until an onslaught of raindrops against the pane startled her. Fifteen minutes later she was curled up in bed, as wide awake as she’d ever been, listening to the downpour and intermittent rumbles of thunder.
A flurry of owls descended upon them during breakfast. Hermione was examining her timetable when Herms (damn you, Potter) landed in front of Ginny bearing a missive from Harry.
“A letter on the first day,” Hermione said smilingly, “He’s really doing his best to be a good boyfriend, isn’t he?”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “He’s anxious, what with him being there, and me being here... with Dean.”
“Don’t tell me he’s actually worried!”
“He is. Said some bullshit about me being too popular for my own good. So he’s going to remind me he exists every day.”
“Right,” Hermione huffed, turning away from her bowl of porridge (it had been usurped by owls), “If there’s one person it’s easy to forget in the wizarding world, it’s Harry Potter.”

Ginny was lost not long after that, falling into her letter. And so Hermione returned to admiring her schedule. Charms, Transfiguration, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Arithmancy, Herbology, Potions, and Ancient Runes spread neatly across the week with an hour off every day. She was most eagerly looking forward to drowning in course work, beginning......

Now.
The bell sounded, signalling the launch of their first lesson.
She started. “Oh, yes. Yes. Herbology.”

With a faint smile she stowed away Harry’s note, and they both set off towards the greenhouses.

The marsh-like ground squelched under their boots and the sky above rumbled forebodingly – perfectly gloomy weather to set the day going. They collected people along the way: Theo and Luna, Neville, Anthony, and Malfoy, Padma and Tracy...
“I really hope it won’t be those Venomous Tentaculas again,” Theo groused. Seeing him in his Hogwarts robes once again, (with his hair in his eyes, wearing the bluegreen scarf and a petulant expression,) made Hermione grin.
“They’re actually really fascinating...” Neville countered with such Neville-like earnestness. The badge pinned on his lapel matched the twinkle in his eye.
“You think Bubotuber pods are fascinating,” Malfoy sniped.
“Well, they are!”

Sprout set them the task of repotting walking plants. It was difficult as the roots were fond of chucking away soil quicker than a human could cover them. Soon enough, dirt was flying everywhere, landing on clothing, in eyes, mouths...
(“MOTHERFFFFFFRTTH!” Anthony spat. His hands grabbed the shoot as though wanting to strangle it.)
...And hair. There was mud in Hermione’s hair and her hair wasn’t made to have mud in it. It was a mysterious portal where things could get lost forever...
“HEEL, YOU FIEND!” someone yelled from across the room.

“Freezing charms!” Sprout hollered over the din, “Use freezing charms!”

A collective groan went around – they were all united by the frustration that came with ‘now why didn’t I think of that?’
With her brilliant, exemplary, war-sharpened reflexes, Hermione whipped out Bellatrix’s wand and... *En-garde!*... cast the spell. The plant froze, fell harmlessly into its pot, and she blew at the end of the wand like a total heroine.

“Oh, *bravo*,” Ginny lauded sarcastically. Her walking plant tossed a lump of mud at her head. “Good boy,” Hermione told it.


She attended Ancient Runes and sat next to Theo as Professor Babbling ran them through the range of scripts they’d be deciphering that year.

She spent the lunch hour shaking soil out of her hair in a courtyard while a couple of boys played football with a hat they’d transfigured into a crude ball.

She sat through Slughorn’s bloated lecture on Alihotsy Draughts and tried her best to smile when he *Oh miss Granger*-ed her at the end of the class.

She turned Terry Boot’s (rather large) ears into antlers without batting an eyelid in Transfiguration. “You’re really so brilliant,” he gushed at her, and she didn’t roll her eyes. Really.

The day had made her feel preoccupied in the best possible way. She was high on the smell wafting out of every crisp roll of parchment she unfurled. She was exhilarated by the rush that came with taking down her first lot of notes for the year. She kept her head down and focused, she performed her tasks with thoroughness.

Thus, it was understandable that it took her the whole day to notice the stares. It was only when she was walking alone to the Great Hall for supper that she became aware of them: The side-glances, the shameless gawking, the murmurs. Some of the younger students would stop dead just to gape at her with stupid round eyes. One slightly older boy with oily ringlets and sallow skin had actually *winked* at her; his yellow teeth would have made her parents weep. Hermione kept her gaze locked straight ahead of her as she walked as fast as she could without breaking into a run. She was not used to this, and she longed for the time she could scurry around the castle with a bulging satchel and ink-stained fingers, and nobody would give her a second look.

She felt a burst of relief when she saw Neville and Dean waving at her from the Gryffindor table.

“So?” Dean began, scooching over to make room for her on the bench, “Good first day?”

“It’s been okay,” she replied, eyeing a plate piled with lamb chops.

“Yeah,” he agreed, “Not bad.”


When heading back to the common room, she encountered Ginny standing still like a statue on the fifth floor. She was staring at a wall with glazed eyes. Hermione cautiously approached her, and in the gentlest of voices said, “Ginny?”

In spite of the mildness of her tone, Ginny jumped. “This is the place, right?”

“Y–Yes.”
“Tell me how it happened.”
Hermione inhaled deeply. She’d already told her what’d happened countless times during dark nights when they’d both lain wide awake and anxious in their beds. Ginny never reacted, she’d just sigh and close her eyes... and then ask her again a few nights later.
“We – Harry, Ron, and I – came running down here from The Room of Requirement, and saw Fred and Percy duelling a couple of Death Eaters. We stopped to help. They were quite a team, you know? Powerful. Holding their own. Full of confidence. Percy... Percy made a joke... I don’t – I don’t remember what it was, but Fred was laughing, and then suddenly... out of nowhere... a huge explosion struck and we were all sent flying in different directions. I hit a pillar – that one right there – it took me a few moments to recover. Then... Then Harry and I found each other, and just as we were beginning to look for the others, we heard Percy cry out. It was over there... that’s where he – where they were.”
“Fuck,” Ginny choked. She fell against a wall, slid down to the floor, and buried her face between her knees. Hermione sat next to her and tipped her head back to stare at the ceiling. She stayed there quietly while Ginny cried and cried and cried.

The private “eighth year” common room, (as the real seventh years called it,) was an odd place. As homey as the Gryffindor one, yes, but it was seriously strange to see that particular assortment of people gathered together in one room, lounging, studying, chattering, or playing cards. Dean had brought Seamus’ gramophone along with him, and was currently in the process of introducing his peers to Radiohead.
Blaise Zabini was not a fan.
“If you do not shut that infernal thing down, I will eviscerate it,” he growled one evening over a haunting, lilting chant of nice dream, nice dream, nice dream.
“Nah.”
“I’m not joking–”
“You’re outnumbered, Zabini.”
Not long after that, he disappeared up the stairs leading to the boy’s dormitories.

Both he and Daphne Greengrass were surly, sneery, and stand-offish. They didn’t speak to anyone but each other, and stayed locked in their rooms most of the time. Hermione felt like she got the lion’s (–damn it, no house-associations, please–) the largest share of their contempt: They scowled at her for doing awfully obtrusive things like sitting, or breathing.

“Wanker,” Dean spat after Zabini’s retreating back, “Anyway, I’m knackered. Hagrid made us chase flitterbies around the ground today. I’m off to bed, mates.”
“Bye,” Hermione muttered, not really looking up from her very first homework assignment. An essay on Alihotsy, which was due in a week, and hers was just a paragraph away from completion.
“Put that away,” Theo whined, “I’m bored.”
“Tough,” she snapped.
“Hermione!”
“Go play with Neville or Malfoy.”
“They aren’t here!”
She finally looked up, and saw that besides Justin and Michael playing chess by the fireplace, the common room was empty.
She blinked. “Where is everyone?”
“Bed, darling,” Theo sighed, “It’s past midnight.”
“Oh! Why are you still here?”

“Keeping you company, obviously. But I can see that you don’t give a shit. Merlin, it’s such a thankless job, being your friend. I mean, I dote on you and what do I get? Go play with Neville or Malfoy, she says. Brushes me aside, she does. I give and I give and I try so hard to – OW! You hexed me!”

“Don’t be such a baby. It was a mild tweaking jinx.”

“Mild tweaking jinx, she says! Oh my, oh me! Such is my misery! Put upon for all eternity. You kick me and you hurt me, and yet I love you like my own limb, like my own blood! And you – you! Ah, I cannot even speak of the injustice anymore without welling up! Woe is –”

“Oh god, FINE,” she cut in while pinching the bridge of her nose, “I’ll stop working, okay, you attention-seeking freak.”

“Brilliant!” Theo grinned, “How about we – Oh, hello there, Draco!”

Hermione stiffened immediately.

She hadn’t been prepared to deal with so much Malfoy, and so often. Although, to be fair, she didn’t have to deal with anything more than his presence...

During classes. Between classes. In the common room at half past midnight.

He never spoke to her, barely acknowledged her existence, and she did her best to return the favour – she really did. But somehow, the discomfort of having him around never went away. At odd times, his voice would float over to her, making a dry remark to someone or the other, and she’d shake her head at the bizarreness of her friends’ laughter that would invariably follow. They liked him. Or at least, they tolerated him and they thought he was amusing. Neville, Luna... and even Ginny. It was in these moments that she felt completely alienated. She wasn’t a part of this merry group; this group that had suffered and strived together in the castle. The bond they’d formed was quite powerful – the understanding they shared was strong enough to completely extinguish the animosity that had previously existed between them.

She took a deep breath and watched him approach with apprehension. He was wearing a plain black t-shirt and joggers, and his hair was a right mess. His frame seemed to be thrumming with irritation.

“Can’t sleep again?” Theo asked as he eyed him speculatively.

Malfoy replied with a sharp, “No,” and shot a pointed glance at Hermione, clearly indicating that he did not wish to discuss it in front of her.

“Well I,” Hermione said, (her voice a little too high,) “I’m going to bed.”

She pulled out Bellatrix’s wand to quickly spell her belongings into her bag and get away from there as soon as –

“What the hell?”

She froze, startled, and blinked quizzically at Malfoy. “I beg your pardon?”

“Is that aun – That’s Bellatrix’s wand!” He looked aghast, eyes narrowed and mouth turned down.

“No,” Hermione answered quickly, and jumped to her feet.

“Cut the bullshit, Granger, I’d recognise it anywhere. That’s Bellatrix’s wand!”

“Bellatrix Lestrange is dead, and dead people don’t have wa–”

“I told you to cut the bullshit,” he snarled, “What’s wrong with you? Why would you keep that?”

(“Leave it, Draco–”)

“I needed a wand, you know, since mine was taken from me when I’d swung by your lovely home. I’m sure you remember.”

Malfoy took a step closer, and his upper lip curled menacingly. “This wand? Of all the –”

Hermione’s blood boiled over with no warning. “It’s a perfectly good wand!” she said through gritted teeth, “And –”
“No. It. Isn’t.”
“And wands were a bit hard to come by while I was on the run –”
“Yes, Granger,” he matched her tone, “While you were on the run. But seeing the amount you ate at dinner, I doubt you’ll be running anytime soon–”
“Excuse me?”
(“Fuck’s sake... Stop. Both of you... please!”)
“I’m sure somewhere in that outstanding brain of yours, you might have registered that the war is over? Go to Ollivander’s, get a new fucking wand, and destroy that monstrosity!”
“I don’t want to!”

She’d ended up shrieking that last sentence. In the quiet common room, the echoes of her voice lingered for a painfully long time. Some part of her knew that Theo was deeply distressed, and that Justin and Michael were probably watching the scene with perverse fascination. But mostly she didn’t care because all her concentration was focused on stopping herself from inflicting bodily harm on the pushy arsehole in front of her.

Something shifted in his expression. Anger made way for clarity swathed in disgust.
“Ah,” he pronounced harshly, “I see.”
Hermione waited for him to elaborate but he didn’t. His face fell back into its usual arrangement, and besides his rage-reddened cheeks, nothing about him betrayed his fury.
(“Ooooorrkkay, then. Let’s all just call it a day now, yeah?”)

“It’s a trophy, isn’t it?”
“What?” Hermione hissed.
“Of course. Little goody-goody Granger slayed the evil witch and now she goes about brandishing her wand like a ba–”
“Shut up! You don’t know what you’re talking about!”
“Please, it’s painfully obvious, and such a depressing cliché.” He’d also reverted to his bored, condescending manner of speaking, and she... wanted to hit him.
“Get rid of the wand, Granger. I don’t care for your trite symbolism.”
Hermione clenched her fists. “Well, I don’t care for... what you care for.”
“Eloquent,” he drawled, arching a single brow.
“Go fuck yourself. Goodnight, Theo.”

She stormed away before she could explode with rage... or worse... burst into tears. She could feel them building up, a messy mix of anger, helplessness, and... god damn it... hurt. She heard Theo loudly chastising Malfoy, calling him a “prick” – among other things – and she sped up so that she wouldn’t have to hear what Malfoy said in retaliation.
Her vision was already blurring by the time she’d reached her room. There was something vicious bubbling inside her, and the moment the door slammed shut behind her, she hurled the blasted wand across the room. It sparked as it hit a wall and fell with a clatter onto the floor.
Pacing around madly in her room, she clamped down on her overbearing desire to scream. A trophy? A fucking trophy? That wand had bobbed before her while she’d experienced the worse pain of her life... a trophy?! That wand had made her a killer... a trophy?!

It had been with her through awful life defining moments, preyed upon her and made her a predator... trite symbolism – that ignorant bastard... it was tied to her and she was shackled to it. Couldn’t he see – didn’t he understand – she would never be free of it.
The weekend brought with it more downpours, pelting the earth with pitiless abandon. The world outside was a solid sheet of grey, and Hermione gazed at it through tall arched windows in the library.

Ah, the Hogwarts library.
She was immensely glad she hadn’t seen how the battle had ravaged it: In her mind, it remained as it always had been... and it was simply perfect. Her beautiful little sanctuary.

Curled up in an armchair, she penned a letter to her parents, one to Mrs. Weasley, one to Harry, and one to Ron. She kept them light and short, making an added effort to sound friendly in the last one, even though she didn’t think Ron would bother to read it.
Afterwards, she pulled her hair forward to fall across her face and closed her eyes.

On Sunday, at five-thirty in the morning, she slipped on her trainers and went out for a run. The grounds by the lake were soggy, so she charmed her shoes to prevent them from sinking. She panted as she ran up and down the length of the forest; humidity was making it difficult to breathe. Halfway through her third lap she doubled over. A light drizzle had commenced, and the moisture mingled with her sweat most unpleasantly. She walked back slowly, savouring the picture that Hogwarts made at dawn: A picture perfect fairytale castle.

Alas, her determined march towards her bathroom was unfortunately deterred when she got to the common room. Neville and Hannah Abbot were entwined on a sofa, kissing like their lives depended on it. In addition to that, they were both topless.
“Oh my god!” Hermione squealed, and immediately turned her back to them.
“Hermione! Shit!”
“No... It’s fine... I’m so sorry. Please... er, carry on.”
She did the speediest, most awkward side shuffle and got the hell away from them. When she was finally free of her damp clothes and standing under a cascade of warm water, her thoughts wandered. She felt a twang of hot envy for everybody who was getting to wade through the war’s aftermath with a lover by their side. She always, always noticed the way they reached out to each other in moments of weakness, and the way their smiles sometimes held the kind of blinding joy that had no reason to exist in the current times. How amazing it must be to have a warm, solid body pressed against yours during the darkest of nights! She thought back to her night with Pete and how, for a few seconds, she’d actually felt unburdened.
She wanted that. She really wanted that. She wanted – Ugh.
She leant against the tiled wall and widened her stance. Her eyes fluttered shut and she rubbed between her legs and thought back to the way she’d felt that night – tightness, trembles, so much warmth, and alarming fullness. The pressure built, it coiled deep inside her, and she rubbed relentlessly, occasionally slipping two fingers inside herself. As tremors shimmied down her legs, she slid lower down the wall and her knees bent inelegantly to lend her better access and to support her.
When relief came it was far too short and miserably mild. A broken sob tore its way out of her – like an alarm to indicate that maximum frustration levels had been reached. *Mayday, mayday, mayday, mayd–*

She got back into bed without bothering to dress, and conjured six fluffy pillows to enclose herself within. Thus ensconced, she lay there and thought about how miserable it was that Ron hadn’t been who she’d built him up to be. She missed a happy ending that never could have been. From her bag, she summoned her charmed galleon to inform Theo that she wouldn’t be showing up at Hogsmeade that day.

Hestia Jones was the kind of lively young teacher you couldn’t help but admire. A bit like Miss Honey, if Miss Honey was a badass thug thwarting witch who wore wine-red lipstick. She’d been teaching them advanced variants of *protego*, and Hermione felt like giggling in every lesson. After all, she could cast them all wandlessly, in bad weather, when shaken and injured, (with a raving, unconscious Harry Potter on the ground beside her,) after just barely evading Voldemort’s clutches...

Yes, that made her want to giggle. Was it late-onset cruciatus-inflicted insanity? She felt INSANE.

Professor Jones, (weird calling her that after she’d been ‘Hestia’ for so long,) told them to write an essay and set them off when the bell rang. Hermione thought she would go to the library for her free period when she went flying back as someone had pulled at the strap of her bag.

“What’s your problem?” she huffed at her assailant.

“Let's go for a walk.”

“Theo, it’s pouring.”

“I didn’t say outside, did I?” He rolled his eyes. “Walk with me.”

He led her to the viaduct and the moment they stepped onto it, cold wind slapped against her face. She swiftly cast a warming charm over the both of them. They strolled down that narrow strip of stone as brutal rain roared like deafening white noise on either side. It was like balancing on the thin line of sanity... like walking a tightrope through oblivion. She ran her fingers along the rough stones to her right, and her fingers came away icy and damp.

“Look,” Theo sighed bracingly, “I’m sorry about what Draco said.”

“Pfff.” Hermione’s lip curled involuntarily. “You don’t have to apologise on his behalf.”

“I know. But I am sorry. He shouldn’t have said any of what he did.”

“Yes, well, that’s never stopped him before.”

Theo sighed once more, and lightly touched her arm to bring her to a halt. “Hermione. Come on... he’s trying to be less of a dick. *He is.* It’s just that he doesn’t have very good memories involving that wand.”

“Oooh, I wonder what that’s like,” Hermione snapped. She shrugged his hand off and recommenced her stroll.

He followed, but didn’t say anything for a long time. Only when they’d walked the length of the bridge and back did he, once again, stop her. With both his hands on her shoulders, he looked searchingly at her face for a long moment, and said, “Do you think that maybe he has a point?”
“I’m sorry, what?!”
“Why are you still holding onto Bellatrix’s wand, Hermione.”
She whacked his arms away and made to charge back inside the castle, but he stopped her again by grabbing her elbow.
“Listen to me. Please.”
“No. No.” She tried to pull free, but he wouldn’t let her. “We spoke about this Theo! In Australia... I told you... and... and you said alright!”
He drew her closer and gave her the sort of soft, kind smile that she really did not want to see at that moment.
“I said alright because you were under far too much stress at the time. I’m still amazed at how you held it all together. And I promise I’ll say alright again if you just tell me why you’re so adamant on keeping Bell–”
“IT’S NOT HERS!” Hermione’s cry got engulfed by a thunder clap. “It’s just a wand –”
“It clearly isn’t.”
“Stop it,” she turned her face away and whispered, “Please, stop.”
He hugged her tightly then, one hand hooked around her shoulders and the other flat against the back of her head.

It’s raining, it’s pouring,
Self-pity is so boring.

“Let’s go,” she muttered after pulling away, and she went on to babble, “We should get started on this week’s runes assignment. It’s quite tricky. How about Thursday afternoon, after potions?”
“Sure,” he agreed, and slung an arm around her.

Arithmancy was the best. They had just one project for the whole year: Decoding Delphi’s personal diary of predictions. First, they had to translate the original Ancient Greek to Latin, and then they had to apply complex isopsephy.
Sat at her favourite table in the library, Hermione was surrounded by three fat dictionaries. It was one of the most challenging tasks she’d put her mind to in a long time, and she was giddy with excitement.

“Hello. Mind if I join you?”
It took her a moment to pull herself out of her work. Padma was standing gawkily at the other end of her table with a wry look on her face.
“Not at all,” Hermione told her.
“Thanks.” Padma sat down and began piling the table with her own books. “Working on the translation? It’s insanely difficult, isn’t it?”
“Only in the best way possible!”
“Of course!”

After working in silence for half an hour, Hermione hesitantly put forth the question that she’d been wanting to ask since day one – “How’s Parvati?”
Padma swallowed thickly and replied without looking up from her parchment. “Not good. Lavender’s death really messed her up. She couldn’t bring herself to come back here. We’ve had to get her a permanent caretaker after she took an overdose of calming draught.”
“Oh no,” Hermione gasped. “My parents found her in time, luckily. But they have to work; they can’t watch her all day.”
“I’m so sorry,” Hermione murmured.
“Yeah,” Padma breathed, “Me too. I really tried to help her out of it. Kept trying to talk to her, but she just doesn’t want to. We visited our grandparents in India for a few weeks to see if the change of scenery would help. It didn’t. I don’t know what to do.”
“George Weasley was like that too. He stayed locked in his room for almost the entire summer. And then one day he just snapped out of it. He seems much better now, and, er, maybe Parvati just needs some time, too?” Shrugging sadly, Padma muttered, “Maybe,” and after what appeared to be a tacit agreement, they both returned to their work.

But the air around them was unbearably heavy. In her infinite wisdom, Hermione decided to change the subject:
“So. You and Tracey Davis, huh?” she blurted. And she wanted to die. Holy shit, that was what she came up with? Wasn’t she a prized moron? But to her surprise, Padma smiled.
“Yeah. Me and Tracey Davis.” She seemed soothed by just the thought of the other girl. Hermione’s consequent grin marked the end of their conversation, and the scratching of quills against parchment was the only sound to be heard.

With the first two weeks gone by, the castle of Hogwarts appeared to have settled into a regular rhythm, moving to the sound of raindrops and fluttering robes.
Hermione couldn’t stop staring at it in the early morning mist and light as she slowly made her way back after her run. Her gaze scanned it from end to end – from the Greenhouses to the Quidditch hoops. A flock of yellow-orange crossbills exploded off the tops of distant trees and flew in an arc over the castle.
Lovely.
It looked serene, she felt serene, and she smiled to herself. She walked past the old pumpkin patch where Buckbeak was lying fast asleep; she thought she really ought to pay Hagrid a visit sometime soon. She swung her arms in an over-exaggerated, jaunty manner as her scuffy trainers hit the cobbled path leading to the main entrance. Today would be a good day. Yes. She’d go to Hogsmeade with her friends, have butterbeer, stop by Scrivenshaft’s, and maybe –

The sound of thudding footfalls from behind had her spinning around. It was Malfoy. With windswept hair and a broom in hand, he looked back at her and said, “Granger.”
She ran.
No.
No way.
It was going to be a good day and good days certainly did not involve an altercation with that prat. “Granger!” he called again and she ran faster, but of course, (and curse his long legs,) he caught up easily, overtaking her and forcing her to stop by planting himself directly in her path. She considered going around him and escaping... however, the determined look in his eyes stalled her. He would inevitably give chase and catch her again.
So she snapped, “Well?” with a scowl, and crossed her arms expectantly.
His mouth opened, but he wavered. His expression was a strange combination of irritation and resignation. He watched her silently, carefully, and just as she was about to spit out another well, he spoke.

“I – I owe you an...” Gosh, he was really struggling, “An apology.”

“I see.” Hermione raised her eyebrows.

A low, irritated rumble emitted out of his throat. “Well, I’m sor–”

“Remember when I tried to apologise to you at Fred’s funeral and you refused to let me?”

She nearly laughed out loud at the pure loathing on his face. And that was extremely odd, because she was also extremely furious.

“Alright, look –”

“Isn’t that also when you said that we should keep things civil between us? For Theo?”

“Listen you – Granger,” he growled... then stopped to take in a deep breath. “I reacted badly.”

“No, really?”

Malfoy’s stormy eyes narrowed. “Do you really have to be so difficult?”

“Me??” Hermione sputtered with outrage, “Difficult... Do I have to be –”

“Forget it,” he muttered and stalked off. She gaped after him, unable to speak or move till he was a good distance away.

“Was that your idea of an apology?” she yelled when he was nearly past the main doors. She didn’t know whether he’d heard her or not.
Hermione’s eyes opened slowly at dawn, blearily sweeping across her room: A patchwork of diffused purple light and deep shadows. She sat up, her mad mass of hair fell all around her, and she raised her arms high above her head to stretch. Rolling her neck, she kicked away her duvet and set her bare feet onto the plum rug by her bed. She bent to touch her toes, holding the pose until the muscles in the back of her thighs felt a pull. Her hair tumbled forward, spilling onto the floor. Such was her daily morning routine: She’d stretch, drink a glass of water, splash some on her face, pull her hair up, yank on her joggers, slip on her trainers, and then step outside into the cool morning to get her blood rushing and her heart thumping. It was her daily routine and she followed it every day, just as she did on that day; on just another regular old Saturday.

Dense, murky clouds had begun to infiltrate the sky by the time she had finished. She kept a measured pace while returning to her room, looking about the same old ground and at the same old castle on that very, very regular day. She spent a long time washing herself, generously slathering her skin with her favourite orange body wash. She conditioned her hair twice. She shaved her legs very carefully. She sang along with the sound of hundreds of drops of water hitting against the tiles.

*Baby's good to me, you know*
*She's happy as can be, you know*
*She said so*
*I'm in love with her and I feel fine*

She felt fine as she towelled herself off, and as she rubbed lotion onto herself, and as she roughly dried her hair with Bellatrix’s wand, and as she put on a pair of jeans and a light jumper. She helped herself to another glass of water. She sat on the edge of her bed and stared at the back of her door.

*Bugger.*

She shouldn’t have gone for that run. It had given her quite an appetite, and that really messed up her plan for that very ordinary day: SIR ADGO, i.e., Stay In Room And Don’t Go Out. Sir Adgo, she’d decided, had the temperament of Scrooge, and looked like W.G. Grace. A fine thing to aspire –

Shit, she was starving.

With an annoyed huff, she stood up, and decided it was still quite early. Perhaps nobody else would be awake, and she could run down to the Great Hall, scarf down a plate of eggs, and run back up. Okay. She nodded to herself.

But it was a mistake.

A big mistake if there ever was one. She knew it the moment she set foot in the common room.

They stood in a bloody line; Theo, Ginny, Luna, Neville, and Dean, all with giant shit-eating grins
on their faces.  
“Happy birthday!” they chorused.  
Hermione promptly spun around to return to quiet sanity, and –  
And someone caught her by the shoulders and dragged her back.  
“Don’t be a downer,” Theo muttered as he hugged her to his side.  
Hermione scowled as she was passed around, from one embrace to the other, ending up with Ginny  
gripping her arms and hopping on the spot like a deranged bunny rabbit.  
“We’re going to Hogsmeade after breakfast, alright?”  
“Ginny,” Hermione groaned, “Please–”  
“-To the bookshop,” Ginny went on loudly, “Everybody wants to buy you a present.”  
Somewhat mollified, Hermione let herself be dragged down by Ginny and Theo, both of whom had  
apprehended one of her arms each.  
“And then,” Ginny beamed, “There’s a surprise!”  
“What is it?”  
“A surprise, you ninny.”

It was highly disturbing, the number of people who wished her on the way. Random, unknown  
first years to seventh years, from all houses, threw ‘happy birthday’s at her in a way that made her  
want to duck for cover.  
“What is this?” she hissed, “Was there some kind of public announcement made or something?”  
“Er, a couple of days after the – the whole... battle... thing – the Prophet published a very detailed  
biography of Hermione Granger,” Theo replied wryly.  
“What?” she reeled, “How dare they!”  
“You’re a public figure, buddy. Better get used to it.”

Grumbling, Hermione settled down at the Gryffindor table and was angrily buttering her toast  
when an owl descended before her bearing an enormous package. From her parents no doubt and  
that was enough to make her smile a little. Over the course of the next half hour, two more parcels  
arrived: one wrapped in no-nonsense brown paper, and one shabbily bundled in bright yellow. She  
looked over at the faculty table to exchange a grin with McGonagall and Hagrid.  
“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!” Ginny warbled, bouncing on the balls of her feet with pointless  
excitement.  
“Ugh,” Hermione grunted, “I need to go back to my room.”  
“Sorry, no,” Theo stated with finality.  
“I can’t lug these around!” she wailed, indicating towards her armful of presents, “And I don’t have  
my jacket. It’s nippy outside.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Fine. Go with her, Theo. I don’t trust her. We’ll meet you at the entrance.”

The carriage ride to Hogsmeade was anything but peaceful. Theo rambled on and on about what  
cake Hermione’s parents might have sent for her. Ginny’s eyes twinkled with glee over her soon to  
be revealed surprise. Luna was spewing some waffle about the significance of the number nineteen  
that not even Neville was pretending to listen to. Hermione decided then and there that she would  
choose the most expensive books in the shop for them to buy for her.

Nevertheless, she was still Hermione Granger, the girl who turned into a contented little lump
whenever she found herself surrounded by books. She took her time pacing between the shelves, picking out tomes that piqued her interest and thumbing through them. If her companions were bored, they spoke nothing of it.

Afterwards, with a large paper bag in hand, they tripped into Honeydukes... and then Zonko’s, and then Gladrags, for no reason at all. It was not nearly as bad as Hermione had dreaded; simply wandering around the village with her friends... Well. There were worse ways to spend the day. Sir Adgo wouldn’t need to be visited by any ghosts tonight.

At around eleven, they decided to head to the Three Broomsticks for a bite and a pint, and just as they were turning the corner, Ginny grabbed Hermione’s arm and whispered, “There you are. Surprise.”

Hermione squealed when she spotted her messy haired, bespectacled surprise, and rushed to hug him.

“How?”

“How happy birthday!” he said into her hair as he held her.

“You’re here!” she broke away to beam at him, “You’re really here!”

“Well, of course! I couldn’t miss your birthday, could I... Gran.”

She shoved his shoulder playfully and with a laugh, and another very familiar voice piped up from behind her.

“How happy birthday, Hermione.”

She turned with dizzying speed and stared at Ron in amazement. He looked a little pained, and kept his hands crossed tightly across his chest, clearly rejecting the hug she wasn’t stupid enough to offer him.

“Thanks,” she breathed, feeling a stiff smile spread across her face.

He nodded, and then scowled up at the dull sky. “Looks like rain again. Let’s go in?”

They went in, breathing a collective sigh of relief at the toasty warmth of the pub, and found a corner table to settle around.

“Rosmerta,” Ron cooed in that detestable manner that he put on around her, “Jolly good to see you again. Looking lovely as always.”

He shot a glance at Hermione in between (literally) every two words. Was he hoping for an embarrassing display of jealousy like she’d been... unfortunately... prone to show in the past? She didn’t know what to do with herself, so she just gazed down at the grimy menu before her like it was a cipher she was trying to decode.

They placed their order and Rosmerta, with a flick of her hair, told them that it was all on the house. “I won’t have you lot paying in my establishment. Don’t you even try it.”

Ron stared at her hips as she sashayed away.

“Hey, Weasley,” Theo remarked, “No joke this time?”

“Get bent.”

“Ah, alright. I mean, it’ll be hard to top that last one. What was it? A hag and a healer and a – hey!”

Ron threw a napkin ring at him.

All in all – it was an enjoyable meal. Hot food, warm butterbeer, and good company: a combination one really couldn’t go wrong with. After the initial discomfort, Ron settled into being old Ron again once he and Harry began regaling the table with stories from Auror training.

“It’s basically been like a series of D.A.D.A. lessons so far – but a lot more gruelling, obviously. Oh, and our supervisor was very impressed by how quickly I picked up wandless magic, by the way. Nobody else has managed it so far. He said I must’ve had a very remarkable instructor.”

He winked at Hermione and she flushed with pleasure.

During a lull, Ginny asked, “How’s George?”

“Not bad,” Ron answered around a mouthful of steak, “Been helping him with the shop on the
weekends. It’s fucking swamped all day... George and Varity can barely handle it. But it’s good. Keeps him busy, you know.”
“Yes,” Ginny murmured.

Four rounds of butterbeer later, they parted. Hermione hugged Harry, waved at Ron and set off towards the castle. Ginny had stayed behind, Neville had gone to meet Hannah, and Theo and Luna got lost in their own world, strolling along with their arms wrapped around each other.
“Did you have fun then?” Dean smiled down at her.
“Yes,” she assured him, smiling back, “Thank you. It was lovely.”
“I have another present for you, by the way.”
“Oh,” she started, “You didn’t have to –”
“From Seamus,” he continued, “He’s cut a deal with a booze supplier, you see. Two bottles of prime firewhiskey await you.”
“Oh, brilliant,” she laughed.

Theo’s fifth guess turned out to be right. It was a rich black forest cake that her parents had sent her, and Hermione brought it out to the common room in the evening to share with everybody. On Ginny and Theo’s insistence, she was made to blow out candles and awkwardly stand there while everybody sang the birthday song. (In the middle of that tortuous rendition, Zabini and Greengrass stalked off.)
It was followed by a lot of (unnecessary) individual wishes and a lot of oh thank you, thank you on her part. Padma patted her on the back, and Tracey Davis spoke to her for the first time ever.
“Happy birthday.”
Hermione tried to not let that sully her opinion of the girl. “Oh thank you, thank you.”
Terry Boot hugged her, which she thought was quite uncalled for... and when he didn’t let go for a solid four seconds, she decided it was downright inappropriate.

It was when she was looking around the room to ensure that everybody had got a piece that she noticed Malfoy sitting by a window, reading. Hermione swallowed, sucked in a breath, rolled her shoulders, tapped her right foot, performed a whole assortment of similar procrastinating motions, before picking up a plate and walking over to him.
He looked up as she approached; first at her face, then at the cake, and back at her face. During that little dance, one of his eyebrows climbed up his forehead, so at the final glance, Hermione was presented with Draco Malfoy With An Arched Brow. It was almost a visual trope; an expression so completely bound to the single-dimensional notion of Malfoy As The Prized Git And Bully she’d always had, that she almost laughed. Her amusement must have shown, because both his brows pulled down, and please look, here we have the classic Draco Malfoy Scowl. She’d seen that expression so many times before.
He sat up straight as she got closer, gently shutting his book. The scowl persisted.
“Here,” she said in her ridiculous high voice, and thrust the plate towards him. When all he did was eye it mistrustfully, she huffed. “Go on, Malfoy. I haven’t poisoned it. It’s just a slice of birthday cake.”
He looked back at her, and the scowl was gone. His face was just... blank; every line was smooth, and every angle was sharp. He kept looking at her as he accepted the cake. Hermione turned away the moment her hand was free, but she’d taken no more than a step and a half, when his voice, soft
and a bit gravelly, washed over her.
“Happy birthday.”
She froze, but she didn’t turn around. “Thank you.”

Over an hour later, less than a quarter of the cake remained. Hagrid’s rock cakes were untouched. The second bottle of Seamus’ firewhiskey was half empty.
Half full?
Hermione rolled her eyes at herself. Even so, she was smiling. The scene around her filled her with warmth and affection. She supposed the bottle was half full after all. Well, it was, until Dean took care of it.
As another round made its way, Hermione followed Dean and the bottle. First there was Theo, (still eating cake,) and Luna, (who was feeding him the cake.) Then there were Padma and Tracey sat close together, playing a rowdy game of exploding snap with Justin and Susan. Neville had Hannah squirming and giggling on his lap as he tickled her, and from the next chair, Malfoy rolled his eyes. Michael was doing a highly dramatised re-enactment of Neville beheading Nagini.... with Anthony playing the snake.
“OW! I told you! Not so hard!”
“Hah! That’s the exact opposite of what your mum said to me last night!”
“You arsehole!”
Anthony chased him into the boy’s dorms.

Lisa waved to nobody in particular as she shuffled towards the girl’s dorms. And Terry – damn it. Terry was coming towards her. Hermione slid off the sofa and dropped onto the carpet next to Ginny, and rested her head on the other girl’s shoulder.
“So,” Ginny murmured, “It was a good day, wasn’t it?”
“Yeah.”
Hermione yawned, after which her face settled, once again, into a smile.

* *

Around one at night, she decided it was time to head to bed after realising that the reason the conversation she’d been engaged in had seemed one-sided was that Ginny had fallen asleep. Hermione conjured a blanket for her... and one for Dean, who was asleep on an armchair, and one for Justin who was asleep at the table, surrounded by playing cards.
“Goodnight,” she muttered to Theo and Luna – the last two stragglers in the room – who were still cozied up together.
“Wait!” Theo cried. He stumbled towards her and pushed a small wrapped box into her hand,
“Don’t forget your present.”
“You already bought me a book.”
“Yeah, so?” he challenged with narrowed eyes.
“Nothing,” she laughed, reaching out to squeeze his hand, “Thanks.”

She cried once she had unwrapped it. He’d got her a watch.
The Art of Transfiguration in Ancient Greece: Separating Myth from Reality was the title of the book McGonagall had given Hermione for her birthday. It was an unbelievably fascinating study, pulling down the great gods from their mountain top and deeming them nothing more than exceptionally talented witches and wizards. She remained transfixed to the book for three days, barely aware of life going on around her. The only reason she made it to lessons on time was the perfectly functional, pretty silver-strapped watch bound around her wrist. When Theo had first seen her wearing it, his smile was a beautiful thing to behold.

At six-forty-seven in the evening, sharp, she finally pulled out of the world of Greek legends to a nearly empty common room. Besides Justin and Anthony slaving over their Defence Against the Dark Art’s homework, nobody was around.

Hermione dropped the book back into her bag and stretched, feeling a hundred kinks and knots in her back. Perhaps a hot shower would help sort them out. But just as she stood to act on that idea, Theo sauntered into the room with his robes and scarf draped over an arm and his shirt untucked. “Well hullo,” he grinned, “Look who’s returned to the land of the living!”

“On the third floor. Some genius charmed all the suits of armour to dance the Furlana. It’s quite a show.”

“Oh my god!” Hermione gasped as her eyes widened, “Why are we here then? Let’s go!”

“Nah,” he drawled, and dumped his belongings onto an armchair, “Too crowded. And you’re so tiny, you won’t be able to see anything.”

“Theooooo,” she whined plaintively. She couldn’t get the image out of her head, and she really, really wanted to see it.

“Come with me. I want to show you something better.”

Without waiting for her to agree he took hold of her arm and pulled her up the narrow stairway that led to the tip of their tower. It was a tiny room with a conical ceiling and a large, round window. It had recently been assigned the official snogging (and other things) room, and she couldn’t imagine why he was taking her up there.

“How is this better than dancing armours?” she griped once they’d climbed.

“Have some patience, will you?”

He pushed the window open and stepped out onto the ledge.

“What are you doing?” Hermione shrieked.

“Oi!” he snapped, “Don’t startle me like that! Do you want me to fall off?”

“Get back in here!”

“You come out here!”

He’d walked off somewhere, and she, terrified to her core, peeked out the window and saw him sitting comfortably on the ledge, with his legs hanging down in empty air.

“Get back here this instance.”

“Calm down, darling,” he chided sweetly, “And join me. The view is spectacular.”

“It’s the exact same view from inside, without the danger of plummeting to certain death!”

Hermione’s voice was shrill with panic.

Unperturbed, Theo shook his head, “And that makes all the difference, you see? It’s amazing out here. Come on.”

“Not a chance in hell.”

“You won’t fall, Hermione,” he said with some exasperation, “This ledge is wide enough for a hippogriff.”

“No, it isn’t!”

He laughed, stood up and walked closer, extending his hand out. “Trust me, Hermione. It’s worth
“I – no. I can’t.”
And although those were the words that came out of her mouth, her hand reached out and took his of its own accord.
“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” she hyperventilated as he drew her out and, (“oh shit,”) once she was standing on the ledge, she scurried into his arms and looked anywhere but down.
“That’s it,” he cooed, “Good girl. Now let’s sit down, shall we? Easy, see?”
She felt a bit better once there was solid stone under her arse, and she hugged her legs to her chest, so that they weren’t dangling above an enormous drop.
“Open your eyes, you goose.”
“I can’t.”
“Hermione.”

She counted to five in her head with her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Then she let them open. The first thing she thought of was Monet’s *San Giorgio Maggiore At Dusk*. A scorching, speckled gradient of primary colours wrapped around her. The lake reflected the sky perfectly, and nothing else existed in that psychedelic wonderland.

While Hermione stared out in awe, Theo lay back against the slanting roof with his arms tucked behind his head. They didn’t need words to validate the scenery or the moment. But it wasn’t long before they were interrupted.

“Are you insane?”
Malfoy and Ginny were standing at the window looking scandalised.
“Only a little,” Theo responded glibly.
“I’ve been looking for you for ages!” Ginny keened, “And you’re sitting... here. Wait.” She gaped at Theo. “How did you manage to get Hermione out there!”
“Did you need something?” Hermione asked after she’d whacked Theo on the arm.

“Why are you even out there?” Malfoy asked with his patented sneer.
“The view,” Hermione and Theo said at the same time.
“You know the view’s the same from inside here, don’t you?”
While Hermione looked away, Theo chuckled. “Hmm... I think I’ve heard that before.”

Getting back inside was no less terrifying. Her legs shook precariously as she stood, and she kept both her hands pressed against the roof as she scuttled towards the window. Theo’s reassuring hand on her back did little to calm her. Just as she was stepping in, her foot got caught on the window frame and she tripped. Her arms reached out automatically as a startled squeak tore out of her, and she grabbed onto whatever she could manage to find.

It took her a mortifyingly long time to realise that the thing she’d grabbed was Malfoy. One hand on his chest, the other at his waist, the blank white expanse of his shirt flooding her vision – she was disturbingly close to him. Pushing away hastily, she muttered an apology, hating how hot her face felt. He was *Malfy With An Arched Brow* again, and he didn’t tell her it was okay, or that it was no big deal, or ask her if her foot was throbbing in pain or not, (it was.) He merely dusted the wrinkles off his shirt and turned away to watch Theo, who looked quite frazzled, leap in through the window.

“Shit, Hermione, are you all right?”
“Fine,” she mumbled.
“Can we go back down before people think we’re up to all sorts of naughtiness here?” Ginny
enquired impishly.
Malfy made a terrible face, and was the first to charge out of the room.

September slipped away like a raindrop dripping down a frosted pane of glass, and soon enough, the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness was upon them. Caught in the whirlwind of her timetable, Hermione went from day to day with her old vigour.

With her charms textbook in one hand, and the dead weight of Bellatrix’s wand in the other, she stood in the middle of the common room, trying to figure out how to undo Neville’s disastrous atmospheric charm, even as hot desert wind blistered all around her. No matter how many times she tried it, *Meteolojinx Recanto* just didn’t seem to do it. Even *finite* didn’t work.

“Seriously Longbottom, you’re the biggest twat that ever lived,” Zabini growled, pulling his sweat-damp shirt away from his skin.

“I said I’m sorry!” Neville cried, “It’s not like I did it deliberately!”

“Hello a – ah! Holy fuck, what happened here?” Dean, who’d just walked in gaped at the sand dunes around him with shock.

“Neville,” the entire room chanted.

Three weeks after her birthday, she was back in the Three Broomsticks with Harry and Ron, and this time they’d brought George along. He looked well, Hermione thought, dressed in smart purple robes. His gold ear had a small fanged earring dangling from it.

“Present from Bill,” he said with a grin.

They mostly just engaged in small talk, light and pleasant, and they ate enormous amounts of food. George had more luck with Rosmerta than Ron had ever managed – she giggled at all of his jokes. The resulting scowl on Ron’s face was so endearing that she couldn’t help but grin at him. And to her astonishment and great relief, he smiled back.

She returned to the castle alone – Harry had dragged Ginny away for some alone time not long after they’d eaten. The pathway was littered with fallen leaves, and the air smelt crisp and earthy after a hard spell of rain. With a full belly and a fuller heart, Hermione thought about the letter she would write to her parents when she got back to her room.

“You there! Young scholar! Are you ready to delve into the arcane depths of runic lore?”

Hermione giggled at Theo’s subsequent groan, and pushed a fresh sheet of parchment towards him.

“Chin up, lad. We’ve been looking forward to this all week!”

“You’ve been looking forward to this all week. And stop it. Stop being so cheerful. I like my
“Hermione all sullen and surly.”
“When am I ever sullen and surly?”
Theo blinked at her in surprise. “You’re always surly.”
“What rubbish.” She grinned as she opened Spellman’s Syllabary, and Theo groaned again.
“Well, then,” Hermione began with relish, “We should begin with the–”

“They’re always surly.”

“Theo!”
They both jumped as Malfoy entered the room with his usual aura of grating entitlement.
“Yeah?”
“Get up. We’re going flying.”
“Er–”
“Have you looked outside? The sun’s out. Fuck knows when that’ll happen again.”
“Not a good time, Draco –”
“Get your arse moving!”
“Theo is working on his ancient runes assignment right now,” Hermione spoke up in a clipped manner.
Malfoy didn’t even bother looking at her. “You can work on that later, it isn’t going anywhere.”
“Look Draco, we planned this a week ago.”
“You planned to do your homework a week in advance?” Malfoy was obviously appalled. “What on earth have you become? Good grief, just put it off for an hour.”
“We will not be putting anything off for your sake, Malfoy,” Hermione seethed, “We’re trying to work here, please go away.”
Finally, finally he deigned to look her way. It was a disdainful look, but that didn’t matter. She matched his scorn with her own, and then some.
“Stop trying to turn Theo into an unendurable bore like yourself.”
“Draco!”
“Sod off, Malfoy. Maybe he’d actually rather do his work than spend an hour mindlessly flying around with you.”
“No one remotely sane would enjoy being harped at by a painful swot who –”
“I’m sure being harped at is better than listening to an egomaniac go on about how expensive his broom is and how finely he doth fly–”
“What are you – argh! Let’s just ask him what he prefers then?”
“Fine!”
“Yeah! Theo?”

Hermione watched Malfoy storm away with not-so-quiet satisfaction, only just stopping herself from patting Theo on the back and saying, “Good choice.” But Theo didn’t stop staring at the door
Malfoy had just disappeared behind. His brow was furrowed and he was chewing his tongue, and alarm bells went off in Hermione’s head.

“Is everything all right?”
“He likes to fly when he’s upset.”
“Okay?”

Theo sighed and shot her a helpless glance. “It’s how he stems a meltdown. He flies. If he was being so insistent, it probably means things must be quite... quite bad.”

She let that sink in, biting down on her lip as she felt a pang of sympathy, followed by irritation at that pang for popping up.

“Just go,” she sighed, and turned back to her book.

“Wha – But – I’m here, I–”

“Theo. Just go. He obviously needs you right now.”

She could sense him watching her, so she subtly shook her hair forward.

“Will you be alright?”
“I’ll be fine,” she rolled her eyes, “I have my runes. I’ll be just perfect.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind? Are you absolu-u-u-u-tely sure you aren’t angry?”

“Oh, for god’s sake –”
“I mean... you were so furious before.”

She shrugged. “He brings out the worst in me.”

“Hm.”

Theo continued to watch her; seconds went by and he didn’t stop.

“Why won’t you leave?” she moaned, rubbing her face wearily.

“I’m going,” he mumbled.

He stood up, ruffled her hair, and left.

It happened again four days later.

Hermione’s temper was the kind of storm that Shakespeare would’ve interpreted as an omen of doom. She stomped her feet against the ground as she marched towards the common room. Electricity crackled through her hair and buzzed in her ears.

She threw open the common room door hard enough for it to slam against the wall, and growled like a feral jungle cat:

“THEODORE!”

He was playing chess with Malfoy and fell off his chair at her call.

“Fucking Salazar!” he clutched at his chest, “Hermione? What the – oh! Oh shit!”

“Remembered me, have you?” she fumed.

“Damn it, I’m so sorry! I –”

“An hour and a half! I waited for you for an hour and a half in the library, and you’re here faffing about with this idiot!”

“Hold on a second! How dare –”

“I am so, so sorry!” he approached her with desperate contrition smeared all over his face, “I genuinely lost track of the time! Please believe me, I fully intended to show up!”

“An hour and a half –”

“Let me make it up to you!” he pleaded, “We won’t leave the library until we’ve finished the whole project, alright?”

“Excuse me,” Malfoy piped up indignantly, “We’re in the middle of a game!”

“We’ll finish it later, Draco,” Theo replied quickly, “Shall we, Hermione?”
She took a calming breath and nodded, but Malfoy shot all her calm to hell.
“We won’t be able to finish it later! Someone or the other will grab the board soon enough –”
“Keep an eye on it then!”
“You want me to sit here like a bloody chump while you take Merlin knows how long finishing up your project?”
“Don’t be difficult, Draco!” Theo beseeched.
“If anyone’s difficult here, it’s that deranged fucking cow you insist on keeping around –”
“Shut up –”
“What did you just call me?”
“I called you a deranged cow, Granger.” Malfoy eyed her derisively. “When will you realise that you were a mere substitute while I had – er – other things to deal with?”
Hermione’s storm burst forth again, more dangerous than ever. “Other things? Ha! Is that what you call your little assassination plot?”
“Fuck off. No, seriously, fuck off. Theo’s a soft-hearted chap, so he’s still letting you hang around. But its better you realise that he prefers spending time with his real friend who isn’t a dreadful wet blanket –”

She knew he was just running his mouth. She knew that Theo was shouting at him for doing so. She knew that she should spare him no more than a rude gesture and walk away. But her storm had reached its pinnacle. It swelled and howled and suffused her soul... and suddenly she was fourteen years old again, charging towards that same smirking face with her hand raised –

Theo caught her around the waist with one arm, lifted her off the ground and carried her away. She thrashed and flailed and ordered him to put her down but of course he didn’t listen. All the while, Malfoy’s acerbic laughter coiled around her constrictingly. He carried her till they were at the staircase, and when he did put her down, he kept a firm hold on her as though worried that she’d bolt right back.
“Breathe.”
She glowered instead.
“I’m so sorry,” he sighed.
“I’m sorry. How are you friends with someone so horrible? How do you stand to be around him?”
Theo ran a hand across his brow dejectedly. “It seems that... you bring out the worst in him, too.”
“His worst his worse than my worst!” she burst out furiously.
A surprised chuckle bubbled out of him. “My, that’s quite a tongue-twister.”
“Gah,” she spat, “He’s an absolute shit. I wish you’d let me –”
“Absolutely not. The last time you slapped him, I had to hear about it for months.” Keeping his arm around her, he began leading her downstairs. “So I had to stop you, for the sake of my sanity. Not because I don’t think he deserve it.”

They didn’t talk the rest of the way, until they were seated on their table in the corner of the library. Hermione’s anger hadn’t faded yet, but she could feel something else simmering underneath it. Something that lodged a pre-emptive lump in her throat.
“I really shouldn’t have any need to say this,” Theo said, interrupting her chaotic feelings, “But you know that he was talking utter bullshit, right? I don’t want you to have another... episode... where you decide to run off and not talk to me, and I have to hunt you down, and then there’s such a fuss, and I have to get seriously angry, and you end up crying, and –”
“Shut it.”
“I just need to make sure –”
“Theo. I know.”
“Okay, good.”

She did know, but that didn’t mean she didn’t resent the fact that she had to compete for Theo’s time. Time that was scarce; schoolwork and Luna took up most of it. God help her, but for a second
– just a second, mind you – she thought things were better when Malfoy was busy with other things.

“I’ll get him to apologise to you.”
“Ah, please don’t. If I have to be a part of one more apology scene with Malfoy, I’ll explode. Then you’ll have to gather all the little fragments of my brilliant brain spattered about.”
“Brilliant brain?” he laughed.
“You know it’s true,” she shrugged, “No more apologies, okay? Just live with the hand you’ve been dealt. You’re doomed to be best friends with two people who will forever snipe at each other.”
“Hm.”

And again, eight days later.

Up until that day, Malfoy had gone back to stonily ignoring Hermione, while Theo treated him with icy aloofness. She’d spent most of her time researching for a potion’s assignment with Padma, Tracy, and Michael, but the time had come for her to put that research into practice.
She skipped down the stairs from the dorms as she wrapped a scarf around her neck. In the common room, Theo was standing rather vacantly with his bag on his back.
“Hello!” she sang, and he smiled. “Would you like to accompany me to forage for asphodel in the forest?”
Out from behind the sofa, Malfoy popped. “Theo and I are going to the library.”
Hermione huffed while she tried to recover from the mild heart-attack he’d given her. “Were you actually hiding there, waiting for an opportune moment to –”
“Don’t be daft,” he frowned, “I’d dropped my quill-case.” He made quite a show of shoving the case into his bag.
Theo turned to Hermione. “Would you like to join–”
“No!” Hermione and Malfoy yelped.
“It’s okay,” she continued tightly, “I really need to collect ingredients for my potion. I’ll... I’ll see you later.”
She forced herself to smile reassuringly, for Theo looked dreadfully uncomfortable.

It took her half an hour to collect the required number of asphodel blooms, after which, with a basket full of pretty white flowers, she sat on a rock by the lake to watch Buckbeak make wide circuits high in the sky. Hagrid stood close by and chattered on about the hippogriff’s moulting habits. He was very cheerful and very sweet, but Hermione was bored to death.
On Halloween morning, rows of pumpkins lined the walls of the entrance hall. All around, people were chattering excitedly about what the evening’s feast would be like. Hermione scoffed to herself as she walked into the Great Hall; she’d be happy as long as there wasn’t a troll mucking about in a bathroom.
Or a basilisk roaming around in a secret chamber.
Or an escaped convict slashing portraits.

She’d only just helped herself to some fruit when an owl dropped an envelope before her. Her vague melancholia turned to proper gloom as she read the letter within.

...needn’t bother asking for a portkey to Australia – your father and I are coming to England for Christmas. Your aunt is unspeakably angry with us for disappearing for an entire year, and has “requested” that we visit so that she may make her displeasure abundantly clear to us. Seeing as this whole thing is basically your doing, it’s only fair that you join us for this painful, dismal, uncomfortable occasion. Don’t even think about remaining at school – I am not above writing to your headmistress.

Love you, and miss you terribly my girl...

“Well, what’s brought on the bloody strawberry massacre of 1998?”

Hermione blinked at her bowl of desecrated fruit, and then at Ginny.
“Er... I just found out that my sunny Australian holiday has been called off.”
“Brilliant!” Ginny beamed.
“Excuse me?”
“Well I’m sorry for you and all,” she paused to take a flippant sip of coffee, “But this means you can come to the Burrow!”
“I’m going to be at my aunt’s, in bloody Cornwall,” Hermione grumbled.
“Close enough for you to apparate!”
“Yes... I suppose...”
“Like I said,” Ginny joyously dumped a fried egg on her plate, “Brilliant!”
“What’s brilliant?” Dean asked as he and Neville plopped down on the bench opposite them.
“Hermione’s going to be in town for the hols!”
“But that is brilliant!” Dean grinned, “You can come for Finnigan’s grand opening. It’s on new year’s eve – Shay’s got a huge party planned –”
Neville groaned. “I’m still not over the last party Seamus had planned.”
“Lightweight!”

But even as she smiled and chatted through breakfast, Hermione’s mind was far away, stewing in panic. Aunt Malorie was a dear, but she possessed a fiery temper that was a family trait on her mother’s side. The holidays were going to be full of bitterness and, heaven help her, she’d had enough of that. All she’d wanted was a proper break – was it really too much to ask for?
As the day dragged on, her mood worsened. Dread, dread, and more dread – while the rest of the students admired the spooky decorations spread around the castle. She moped while everyone in the common room passed around sweets. She moped while cordially turning down an invitation to Nearly Headless Nick’s deathday party. She moped through the evening feast and later while she brushed her teeth. She moped in her sleep.

The next day, she moped while she considered the possibility that her aunt’s hostility would undo the progress she’d made with her parents over the summer. But that thought came tied up with a possible solution: Well, not quite a solution per say – a temporary reprieve. She knew someone around whom it was quite impossible to be sullen, for he simply wouldn’t allow it. She knew someone who was overwhelmingly likable and talked unabashedly through uncomfortable moments.

The idea came to her late in the afternoon while she’d been in the library looking for spells that could fake illness well enough to fool McGonagall. She took off for the common room at once, praying that Theo hadn’t already made plans for the entirety of the holidays. Surely, Luna and Malfoy hadn’t usurped all his time –

Lady luck really had it in for her.

In the common room, Theo was lying upside down on the sofa... deep in conversation with Malfoy. And she’d only noticed the latter when she’d covered a fair bit of her purposeful march towards her target. So the scene was as such: Theo’s upside-down face watching her curiously and Malfoy’s angry face eyeing her threateningly, while she stood panting and frazzled before them.

“What is it, Hermi—” Theo began.

“Go away.”

She huffed, ignored Malfoy, and said, “May I have a word with you, Theo?”

“No, you may not.”

“Sure,” Theo murmured and he straightened.

“Theo,” Malfoy growled.

“I’ll only take a minute,” Hermione said, still addressing Theo alone.

“It can wait!” Malfoy barked decisively.

“No, it can’t!” Hermione snapped. For all she knew, Malfoy could’ve been cementing Theo’s holiday plans the moment before she’d interrupted them.

Theo stood up. “Um?”

“Over there,” Hermione gestured to the opposite corner of the room.

“Alri—”

“Sit back down, Theo.”

Incensed, Hermione rounded on Malfoy. “What is your problem?”

“You know very well what my problem is, you –”

“SHUT UP!” Theo howled. “Shut up, shut up! Fuck you – both of you. I’ve had enough of your sodding pointless belligerence, pissing on me like a pair of territorial crups. I am so sick of both of you... I... I can’t even look at you right now. Argh!”

As he furiously swiped at his bag and shouldered it, Hermione asked in a timid voice: “Where are you going?”

“To Luna,” he snapped, “My sweet, wonderful, amiable Luna, who’s honestly the only person in the world who makes sense to me anymore.”
Malfy muttered, “She’s got potions for the next –”
“SO WHAT? I’d rather sit outside the lab, on the frozen dungeon floor for forty-five minutes than be around either of you for even a second longer. Fare-fucking-well.”

The entire room was witness to her disgrace. When Theo had stormed off, a dozen pair of eyes stared at her standing and blinking down at her feet in shame. She began a slow and contrite shuffle towards her room, not daring to look up.

“This is your fault.”
Ooooh, she was going to hex him till he was nothing but primordial ooze.
“My fault?!” She wheeled around and spat, “My fault?”
“YES!” Malfy stood up and glared daggers at her. “You’re the one who barged into the room and demanded he do as you say. And he always fucking does as you say. I don’t know what sort of hold you have on him, but –”
“I do not –”
“It’s not right!” Malfy thundered, “You take advantage of him! We were just fine, sitting over here before you stuck your oar in. Everything was fine before you –”
“What absolute rot –”

“Would you give it a rest?!”
It was Neville of all people, shouting at them to cut it out. She looked at him, and the sea of unimpressed faces behind him: Dean, Hannah, Padma, Tracy, Anthony, Justin...
“Sorry,” she mumbled and walked away, not sparing Malfoy another glance.

She really hated it when Theo was upset with her.
Just like the other times it’d happened, she shot him frequent repentant peeks and racked her brains to figure out how to set things right.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to him during the walk from Greenhouse one to the Transfiguration classroom.
“Hmph,” he grunted and then kept determinedly silent as she rambled on about how quirky she found the dung beetles that hid in manure sacks.

Over dinner, she observed Malfoy employing a similar tactic. He was waving his fork about as he talked and talked and talked, and Theo kept his eyes on his plate and chewed disinterestedly.

Clearly, things could not go on that way.

Two days of torment passed. Hermione had forgotten about her aunt...... and all her previous
predicaments. She stopped wondering what excuses her parents had made up for their year-long absence, or whether her last charms assignment was truly, completely perfect.

That night, she sat at her desk in her room, wearing her dad’s old uni jumper, tapping a pen against a blank parchment. Grids and schedules hovered around her, and she examined them all carefully, many times over, before she began to write.

*

It was three in the morning when her work was finally complete. She fell back into bed, but the nerdy energy that filled her wouldn’t let her so much as close her eyes.

Time crawled.
She plaited and undid her hair.
She read poetry.

My hands are stone, and my voice a groan,
And the worst of death is past.
I am but a little maiden still,
My little white feet are sore.
Oh, lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door!

When the first hint of dawn arrived, she slithered out for her run, using the time to screw her patience to the sticking-place (so she’ll not fail.)

One shower, three pep-talks, and six anxious gulps later, she was walking across the common room to the boys’ dorms. Seven-thirty according to her watch. It was a crisp November morning with a perfect square of sunlight spreading across one side of the room. Warm light kissed the tops of furniture and caressed the drapes on the walls – a metaphor for hope, she dared to believe.

I have confidence in sunshine, she thought as she climbed upstairs and marched down a dim, door-lined corridor. When she stood before the door that read Draco Malfoy, she thought, I have confidence in confidence alone!

So why don’t you knock?
Besides, which you see, I have confidence in me!

Hermione tapped her knuckles against the door, quickly, 1-2-3-4-5 times, then wrapped her hands tightly around the strap of her satchel and waited.

At first, a loud thump sounded through the wood, followed by a muffled oath. Then footsteps, getting louder by the second –

The door was pulled open with some aggression, and Malfoy with disarmingly tousled hair and a wonkily buttoned shirt stood before her, wearing a sneer – a sneer that promptly morphed into a very thorough scowl.

“What the bloody fuck are you doing here?”
Hermione straightened her spine and lifted her chin. “We have to figure out this whole situation with Theo.”

His scowl — impossibly — deepened. “We?”

“Yes. We don’t agree on many, many things, Malfoy, but I’m sure you’re as averse to upsetting Theo as I am.”

“I’m sure I – huh.” He cut himself off and considered her through narrowed eyes. “I suppose you have a plan?”

She ignored how sarcastic and sceptical he sounded, and simply replied, “Yes.”

“Well let’s hear it,” he drawled.

“Can I come inside?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Then where do you suggest we have this conversation?” Hermione’s grip on her satchel strap tightened.

“Right here.”

“Are you serious?!” She looked pointedly at the closed doors around them. People would be emerging for breakfast any time now...

His intense scowl re-emerged as he appeared to struggle with himself for a moment or two, after which he growled, “Wait here,” and slammed the door in her face.

It didn’t take her long to get over the shock of that move, and she was soon fighting the urge to blast his bloody door down. He was far too odious and pugnacious for this to work. She ought to just walk away... what had she been think—

The door reopened and Malfoy walked out, dressed in proper school robes with relatively tidier hair.

“Come on,” he muttered, and led the way back to the common room and towards –

“We’re going to the snogging room?!” she blurted.

Malfoy’s face twisted with horror. “To talk. Don’t get any ideas, Granger.”

“Ugh,” she spat, “I wasn’t even think—”

“I’m warning you, if you try anything, I’ll –”

“Stop that right now!” she yelped, “What if it’s already, er, occupied?”

“Then obviously we’ll have to go somewhere else. Idiot.”

He began climbing faster, and she trotted along to keep up. “Why can’t you just talk normally? You said – you said you’d be civil –”

“You irritate the fuck out of me, Granger. I can’t help it. Not that you’ve been very civil either –”

“Well, that’s because you –”

“Oh, look we’re here,” he declared loudly over her, “And see, not a soul in sight. Now out with it. Tell me what your supposedly brilliant mind has come up with.”

The snog –– The room was awash with light that poured in through its large circular window. Standing in that bright little cone Hermione shot Malfoy a look of pure poison as she pulled a parchment out of her bag.

“I’ve made us a schedule,” she said through her teeth, “Divided the week – equally – between the two of us, so that we each get time with Theo without ever stepping on each other’s toes. As you can see, the weekends are a bit open –”

“You’re joking.”

Malfoy was looking at the parchment contemptuously. Hermione took a moment to bite the insides of her cheeks before she ground out, “I am not.”

“You think you can decide what I want to do with my time?”

“I assume you want to spend it with Theo!” she hissed.

“Yes,” he spat, “I want to spend time with Theo when I want to spend time with Theo. Not when...
you’ve decided it’s okay.”

That’s it.

“I didn’t decide – gah. I looked over all our timetables very carefully, alright? Yours, Theo’s, and mine. I’ve taken into consideration when the best time for flying is, and when –”

“Oh, so you’ve even decided when I’d like to go flying, is it?”

“For fuck’s sake, Malfoy!” Hermione exclaimed. And she stamped her foot. Like a bloody child.

His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Would you prefer that we keep going this way then? Playing tug-of-war with that poor boy until he decides we’re not worth the trouble anymore? Look, I get it. You – you resent me. But the fact is, I’m not going anywhere, he doesn’t want me going anywhere, and you’re just going to have to deal with it. This –” she flapped her parchment roughly, “This is a way out of this mess. Would you at least look at it?”

Oh, he was furious. His eyes were mere slits and his cheeks were flaming. But Hermione felt her face burning too – she knew she looked no better.

“Why even bother showing it to me?” he rasped, “If it’s such a great plan, you should go straight to Theo and save the day. As is your wont, right?”

She sucked in a breath and looked towards the peaked ceiling. “I believe it will go down much better if we put up a united front.”

That drew a laugh out of him; a strained, humourless laugh. She levelled her gaze back onto him and saw that his face had gone utterly blank, and he was staring at her parchment again. A slight disturbance caught her eye, and she looked down to see him tapping non-existent piano keys against the side of his leg. His hand twitched... clenched... and lifted.

“Show it here.”

Hermione counted the rafters hanging above as Malfoy took his time going over her hard work. She was strung so tight, waiting for him to tear it apart; literally even. But eventually, all he said was, “I’m not free on Thursday evenings.”

“Okay,” she breathed, “Is Wednes –”

“Yeah.”

“So shall we go to Theo now?”

“Fuck no,” Malfoy groaned dramatically, “I need a barrel of strong tea and a solid breakfast after dealing with so much of... you.”

Hermione sniffed. “So after Arithmancy? We all have a free –”

“Nope. I have plans.” He turned away and continued to talk as he strutted obnoxiously towards the exit. “I’ll be in the common room around six. Make sure you add that to your schedule.”

At 5:56pm, sharp, she stood at the base of the stairs leading to the boys’ dormitories, parchment in hand, tapping her foot as each second passed. Malfoy wandered into the common room at 6:07pm, greeted her with a weary sigh, and proceeded to stomp up the steps wordlessly.

“You’re late,” she grumbled as she followed.

He ignored her.
When they arrived at Theo’s room, they both, simultaneously raised their hands to knock, and the resulting, unnecessarily cacophonous rap had Theo pulling his door open with an alarmed, “What the hell?”

And when he saw the two of them standing there, he said, “What... the... hell?”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Hi.”
He gaped between her and Malfoy. “Hi?”
“Could we come in? We’d like to talk to you.”
“Yeah,” Malfoy replied, “We’re presenting a united front.”
Hermione could hear the smirk in his voice. Her hand (the one that wasn’t holding her precious schedule,) curled into a fist.
“I’m scared,” Theo blurted. But he moved aside to let them through.

Theo’s room was exactly like hers... but terribly messy. His chair was piled high with clothes, his desk was littered with open books and quills and parchment. His bed was rumpled.

“Bugger that,” Theo snapped with impatience. “What’s going on?”
He perched himself on the arm of his over-burdened chair and looked at his unexpected guests with frank curiosity.

Hermione sighed. “Well, first, I want to say I’m really sorry... again... for putting you in such an uncomfortable situation... again.”
She waited for Malfoy to echo her sentiment, but (of course) he didn’t. So she went on. “Here. I think this should make life easier for you.”

It was difficult to stop herself from wringing her hands while Theo scanned the schedule. It was equally difficult to keep from checking if Malfoy’s expression was as disdainful as she thought it might be.

The suspense ended when Theo looked up, lips twitching bemusedly, and said, “You’ve made us a timetable.”
“Yes,” she mumbled, “I just thought that it’s a fair and practical way to manage this situation. Do you, er, disapprove?”
“Of course not!” He grinned. “It’s such a perfectly Hermione thing to do – and hence, perfectly perfect.”
“So you don’t mind that she’s dictating how you spend your day?” Malfoy asked incredulously.
“No,” he shrugged, “This is basically how I want to spend my day anyway.”
Hermione beamed.
“Seriously?” Malfoy spat, “You don’t find it at all obnoxious?”
“I think this is great. And it’s a whole lot more than you’ve done.”

Hermione simply had to look at Malfoy then. His affronted expression did not disappoint.
“Just because I’m not presumptuous enough to—”
“HA HA HA,” said Hermione.
His head snapped towards her with a dangerous glare, but before he could retort, Theo jumped to his feet.
“Oh look. I have an hour of Hermione-time now. Jolly good. Spiffy. Come on, buddy.”

He grabbed her arm and dragged her out the room, past stony-faced Malfoy. He pulled her downstairs, right across the common room... and out... and didn’t stop till they’d left the eighth
year tower far behind.

Malfoy could stick his condescension somewhere unpleasant and painful, because Hermione’s schedule worked wonderfully. In the weeks that followed, she spent many tranquil hours with her best friend, without any aggravating interruptions. She even got to ask him to visit her at her aunts over the hols, and he’d agreed with his usual aplomb.

And in the hours when she knew Theo was with Malfoy, she made sure she stayed far away from all the places they might be, lest the mere sight of her may instigate Malfoy’s chronic irritability. Studying with Padma... sitting with Neville at the quidditch stands, watching Dean, Ginny and the rest of the quidditch team practice... or just curling up peacefully in her favourite corner of the library.

Life would have been good, lovely even, save for the fact that Bellatrix’s wand was suddenly being ever, ever, ever so slightly resistant to her commands. She felt twitchy when she held it, and her magic didn’t flow as smoothly and effortlessly as it should. A new, sickening ordeal set up shop in her life.

It was a horrible helpless compulsion that kept her going back and back and back again to that wand, while a simultaneous revulsion built up inside, tossing and turning till she was forced to hide the wand away from her sight.

One night she woke up shaking, sweating, teeth clenched – emerging from a nightmare that hadn’t visited her in quite some time. She sat back against the headboard with her arms drawn tightly around her knees, trying to calm herself down as moonbeams glanced off the wand at her bedside. She used her wandless abilities to send it flying inside the drawer of her dresser.

And for the rest of the long night, she sat in that same position trying not to stare at the drawer. She focused on the photographs that she’d stuck above her desk: One of her with her parents, with Harry and Ron, with Ginny, with Theo...

Moonlight and laughter.

She hid behind her hands.

Harry, Ron, and George visited again on Saturday, for the first quidditch match of the season. Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff. They ate breakfast at the Great Hall, causing quite a stir among the student body.


“Oh shit. Shit. Shit. We have to leave.” Harry exclaimed suddenly, “Slughorn’s coming – shit – we have to leave.”

He shot out of the hall like a rocket, and cackling, the rest of them followed.

“Good weather for a game,” George commented, tilting his head heavenwards.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed wistfully.

Harry slung his arm around Ginny and kissed the top of her head. “Best of luck. And don’t let the
fact that you’re just the girlfriend of the greatest seeker Hogwarts has ever seen stress you out.”
“Just the girlfriend?” Ginny shoved him away. “Just the girlfriend?!”

Theo and Luna were waiting for them by the stands, him looking half-embarrassed, half-amused by Luna’s outrageous lion hat. Whether it was by design, or shrewd planning on Harry’s part, (Hermione suspected the latter,) she ended up next to Ron. She sat stiff as a board, giggling perfunctorily as George asked Luna if she could make more hats like that for him to sell at his shop.

“Does it do anything besides roaring?”
“Try tickling his nose.”
“Tickling his – ARGH! Fucking thing bit me!”
“See, it does that too.”

“Heh,” Ron whispered to her, “Always liked Luna.”
“Oh sure,” she replied wryly, “Me too.”
He gave her that silly awkward smile of his and –

– And the crowd roared as both teams soared in.

The match didn’t last very long, with Gryffindor dominating the entire time. And when Ginny caught the snitch after performing a rather spectacular dive, she swooped close to the stands to present Harry with a gloating v-sign.
He blew her a kiss in return.

It appeared to be getting colder and colder by the day.

Hermione’s morning runs had to be pushed as the sun got terribly sluggish about rising. She barely had time to squeeze in a hasty shower and a quick breakfast before racing off for her lessons. Lessons during which she could do nothing but endure the malevolence thrumming through Bellatrix’s wand.
No book on wandlore could explain why a wand would start acting up for no reason. Although, it wasn’t actually malfunctioning in anyway; it was just unbearably repellent to her.

It led her to believe that perhaps, it was all purely psychological.

She watched, with hollow and sunken eyes, as November turned into December. Right as the hour passed and another wave of nausea bled into her through the wand in her hand, she knew what she was going to gift herself that Christmas.

Fucking release.
Sat by the window with their legs, like sunflower stalks, reaching towards the warmth of the sun, Hermione and Theo were busy with Ancient Runes. Well, Hermione was certainly busy, and she decided to give Theo the benefit of the doubt. Her quill and mind were racing at too fast a pace for her to actually pay him close enough attention. An anecdote from the life of Brân the Blessed was slowly taking shape on her parchment.

“Why are you all done up like a dog’s dinner?”

Hermione glanced at Theo in confusion... but he wasn’t talking to her. Malfoy was wearing black robes that fitted his frame like a dinner jacket. His hair was slicked back – not plastered to his skull like it used to be, but loosely. “I’m going out,” he said. Then he smirked at Hermione, “So don’t worry, Granger. You can wipe that constipated look off your face.”

She scowled. “Not much better.”

“Hold on,” Theo interjected, “What do you mean you’re going out?”

“To Hogsmeade.” Malfoy arched his brow. “I have a date.”

“You have a date?! Since when are you dating?”

“It’s been known to happen,” Malfoy replied snootily. “No – but –” Theo’s mouth opened and closed soundlessly a few times. “With whom?”

“Mandy Brocklehurst.”

“Who in the living fuck is Mandy Brocklehurst?”

“As if you don’t know.”

“I don–”


“Since when have you been seeing Mandy Broccoli-whazzit?!” Theo demanded.

Malfoy’s smile slipped and he narrowed his eyes. “Been a week or so.”

“A week!” (Theo’s voice squeaked alarmingly at ‘weeks’.) “And you’re telling me now?”

“How long did it take you to tell me about Luna?”

“That’s not the same thing!”

“Isn’t it?”

“No!”

Malfoy shrugged and walked away, waving over his shoulder as Theo called him to OI STOP! “I don’t believe this!” he fumed as he glared at the door Malfoy had just disappeared behind. “I don’t fucking believe this.”

Torn between the desire to be sensitive and the desperate urge to laugh, Hermione bit the insides of her lips and asked, “Hmm?”

“Honestly!” he thundered as he spun back around to face her, “Who the hell is Mandy Bowtruckle?”

“Brocklehurst. She’s in four of your classes, Theo.”

“Gah,” he choked, “Draco isn’t supposed to be with a sodding Bowtruckle!”

“I DON’T CARE!”

Bless him, he looked so peeved. She really mustn’t laugh. “Who’s he supposed to be with then?”

Theo muttered under his breath. “Huh?”

“Have you figured out page thirteen yet? What’s this bloody rune that looks like a ruptured bollock?”
“Ahem. Let me have a look...”

They only worked after that. He remained grouchy as hell, and she was completely nonplussed.
Fifty-One

Chapter Notes

Filler filler, short and not sweet

Hermione smiled down at the small red ‘O’ glistening above her Runes assignment.

“How did you do?” she turned to Theo and asked.
He was grimacing as he looked at something above her head. “That’s her, isn’t it? The Bowtruckle?”
She glanced over her shoulder and sighed. “That’s Mandy, yes.”
“Pff.” He sneered and looked away. “Nothing special, is she? You know, she actually does look a bit like a Bowtruckle.”
“Theodore.”
“What? Look at her, all long and twiggy.”
“You’re being a prat,” Hermione snapped.
He stuck his tongue out at her. “I got an A.”
“An A?!” She stared at him, appalled. “How is that possible?”
“I was distracted,” he sniffed.
She frowned and began putting her books back into her bag. “N.E.W.T.s are just a few months away, you know?”
“Five months, Hermione. Five.”
“Still!” she cried, “You can’t let yourself get distracted so easily...”

She spent the entire journey to the dungeons telling him about how he must start to get serious about his studies. Perhaps she overdid it... perhaps she overdid it a lot. It just felt so damn good to sound like an obnoxious swot that she kept breaking into giggles in the middle of her tirade.

“You’re so absurd,” he observed as he laughed with... at... her.

Theo could say all he wanted about Mandy, swayed by the inexplicable bitterness that had taken him over, but there was no denying that she was quite a looker.

At dinner, she and Malfoy walked into the Great Hall like they were the guests of honour. She was nearly as tall as him – slender and modelesque – and she kissed his cheek before they parted for their respective tables. Malfoy loped over to where Theo was sat, brushing his hair to the side and smirking as the latter made a face. He pointed towards the dish of leek soup, and Theo, without missing a beat, pushed the dish further down the table.
“Arsehole!”

Ginny threw down her bag onto the floor with unnecessary force, and she fell onto the bench next to Hermione.

“Fucking Potter,” she snarled as she piled food onto her plate – an amount that would’ve made Ron proud to call her his sister.

“Something on your mind, Ginny?” Hermione asked cautiously.

“That – that moron – that complete tosspot – isn’t going to be here for Christmas!” Her exclamation was shrill with righteous anger.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s going to bloody China!”

“China?” Hermione sputtered.

“That’s what I said, didn’t I? Both him and Ron, as a part of their training program.”

“But – but – China?”

“Yeah! To learn some secret combat techniques.” Gin put on a ridiculous deep voice and continued: “That’s all I can tell you about it, Gin. Once in a lifetime opportunity, Gin. I’m sure you understand, Gin. Bloody sodding wretched–”

“But during Christmas? Can’t they go any other time?”

“No. Apparently that’s the only time Shifu is willing to give.”

“Tch,” Hermione made a sympathetic face, “I’m sorry, Ginny.”

“Bah,” she grumbled. “I thought we’d finally get some time together again! And mum was so looking forward to having a full house! Stupid, stupid, ah!”

She ate in thunderous silence while Hermione shook her head madly in warning to anyone who tried to ask what the matter was.

“I can only come by after the twenty-eighth,” Theo said, “I’ll be in Brittany for Christmas.”

Hermione frowned. “What on earth will you be doing in Brittany?”

“Visiting Narcissa. The Malfoy’s have a lovely little place on the coast.”

“I... see.”

“Yeah. She’s not been keeping very well; a bit down in the dumps.” Theo – surprisingly – grinned.

“Draco seems to think that having me around makes things less uncomfortable. Isn’t that simply mad?”

“Ho hum,” she drawled.

It was a cold Sunday evening, and they were thawing in the library after returning from Hogsmeade. He’d stretched himself across three chairs, with his soggy boots propped up on the arm of the last one, despite Hermione’s overt disapproval.

“Anyway, so let’s see if I have this right: Your Aunt Malorie is married to Jack, and they have a nine year old son named Jeremy, who’s the sweetest little boy you know.”

“Sounds like a grand old time.”

Hermione groaned, and Theo tugged at a lock of her hair and laughed.

“By the end of my visit,” he declared, “I promise she’ll love you simply because you brought me into her life.”
“Oh, bugger off!”

He laughed again as she stood up. She tapped his head with her notebook and disappeared behind the bookshelves, in search of a book about incarceration spells for her Defence Against the Dark Arts essay. She skimmed her fingers across leather-bound spines, as a monotonous *thump thump thump* commenced on the other side of the shelf. That infuriating twit was obviously knocking his boots together in an attempt to draw her away from the books. Well, she wasn’t going to oblige him.

*Thump thump thump*

She wasn’t going to think about how flecks of damp dirt might be falling onto the chair.

*Thump thump thump*

*Thump thump thump thump thump thump*

“Draco?”

She froze, with a book half pulled out in her hand.

*Thud! –* The sound of boots hitting the ground. Then there was a noise of a chair being pulled back, the swish of a cloak being removed, and a heavy sigh. Followed by silence.

“You alright there?” Theo asked, concern evident in his tone.

“No,” Malfoy replied, crisply. Coldly.

Theo sighed. “Look, don’t pitch a fit, but you should know that Her–”

“They cut his hair off.”

Another short silence befell them. *One a penny, two a penny* – Hermione gently pushed the book back into place.

“What?” Theo breathed.

Malfoy’s voice was gritty with emotion. “Those Azkaban arsewipes cut Lucius Malfoy’s hair off. Can you even picture it?”

“Draco...”

“He was standing there in that hideous, filthy grey uniform, his hair shorn... and he – he smiled. You know what he said? Guess, Theo. Just guess what he said to me!”

“D-Draco...”

“He said, ‘oh you turned out to be the most Slytherin of us Malfoy men.’ Ha!” Malfoy’s laugh was like the sound of glass getting crushed under your shoe. “The first thing he’s said to me since – since he found out that I’d deflected.”

Another stretch of quite.

“He asked about mother, of course. And he asked about you. Told me to give you his regards, worthless as they are. Here you go then, Theo. Have his regards. Do what you will with his bloody regards–”

*SLAM!* It sounded like a fist hitting wood.

“Then he asked me how my lessons are going. My fucking lessons. That hollow husk of the man I used to know asked – asked about –”

Malfoy broke off with a choking gasp, and Hermione’s blood turned to ice. She needed to leave. She ought to have left ages ago.

Slowly and delicately, she peeked around the side of the shelf. Just as she’d hoped, both boys had their back to her. Theo’s spine was so straight with tension it looked painful. And Malfoy’s was
completely stooped, with his face buried in his hands. She cast a muffling charm on her feet, and quickly darted out from her hiding place and streaked across them, charging down the aisle in a jog.

But of course, because she was trying to be as careful and stealthy as possible, her foot hit a chair just as she was a few metres away from turning the corner. The subsequent noise was like nails against a blackboard.

She stopped dead, filled with unimaginable horror. There was absolute silence behind her... but she knew – oh, she just knew – that they had to be staring at her.

Hermione broke into a run. She ran like she was being chased out of the Ministry of Magic by a mass of angry Death Eaters. She ran without stopping until she was clutching at her ribs and panting outside the common room door. She walked in, her limbs feeling like jelly, and climbed up to her room.

Only then did she unfreeze her mind to reflect; to fully realise what a terrible thing she’d done by eavesdropping on such a private conversation. Malfoy’s gasp kept ringing in her ears, and she sat down heavily on her chair.

Early on Monday morning, Theo was waiting for her in the common room. She approached him with shame and apprehension, but all he said as he handed her her bag was, “You’d left this in the library.”

“Thanks,” she muttered.

He looked down at her with tired eyes; she bit her lip and looked away.

She didn’t get to say anything to him as they walked down to breakfast, since Luna had been waiting for him outside the common room. She saw Malfoy in potions, way on the other side of the classroom. She couldn’t stop herself from glancing at him over and over again – as he chopped dandelion roots, as he stirred his potion, as he measured pickled slugs. She waited for him to glower, sneer, or throw a hex at her. But nothing came her way.

At the end of the day, when the whole batch was in the common room, she waited for him to charge over to her and scream. The anticipation had her making all sorts of ridiculous mistakes in her homework. And yet, midnight struck and nothing happened. He remained ensconced in his room... or wherever he was.

The next day, while she and Theo were walking by the lake, she asked, “How angry is he?”

The sun was blazing behind them and their misshapen shadows stretched long and sharp on the ground before.

“Honestly?” His sigh was a physical thing: A murky cloud of mist on that cold, cold day. “I don’t think he has any energy left to be angry with you.”
Hermione pulled at the ends of her muffler until they were at exactly the same length. A slip of mist escaped her lips, too: Aureate and wispy. She wrapped her fingers around Theo’s elbow, giving it a subtle squeeze. The corners of his mouth pulled up in the saddest smile she’d ever seen.

The topaz yellow sky diffused as it touched the ground; the evening’s haze curled and coiled around Hogwarts like tidal waves. Like angry smoke. Like tendrils of fiendfyre. She could imagine the heads of serpents and dragons and frenzied beasts howling and roaring amid the fog, their gaping, gnashing mouths reaching towards her as she whizzed across on the back of a broom, holding tightly onto Malfoy...

(...Three hundred and sixty five days ago, Hermione and Harry had been practicing seamless apparation while under his cloak. Cold, scared, miserable, broken after Ron’s apparent desertion...)

Now: She was standing outside the owlery, and a thick stare of owls flew over her head.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread.

Their shadows slid across her one by one, each tearing off a piece of her. They ripped and ripped and ripped away at her until she was left bare before the world... until she was nothing but a wilted weed of a girl who’d been tormented all night by visions of a giant snake bursting out of the skin of a dead woman.

Flitwick introduced them to Protean charms in the last week before the hols, and Hermione was utterly bored. She’d completed the day’s task within seconds, obviously, and tried helping Neville with his... in vain. She left him in Ginny’s reasonably capable hands, and got herself completely immersed in doodling an elaborate pattern made out of runes. By the end of the lesson, her rune-mandala was the size of a cantaloupe.

Walking out of the classroom, she smiled idly as Neville grumbled about her having the audacity to master the charm back in fifth year. Ginny countered by asking him why he hadn’t come to terms with the fact that Hermione was a bloody genius yet. Theo was only a few steps ahead, flanked by the blond heads of Luna and Malfoy. They appeared to be having a pleasant exchange, if the grins she saw every time they turned to look at each other were anything to go by.

Terry Boot jumped in, remarking that Ravenclaw had been robbed by the sorting hat. Ginny
I belong in bed, she wanted to say. In bed with a book and a mug of spiked hot chocolate.

How was the term over? How had four entire months gone by? How was she sitting in a carriage, racing towards the Hogsmeade station? Hermione felt like she was a tiny, flea-sized creature sitting inside a vast automaton, screaming and screaming at it to slow down, but this body – this independent thing – kept moving, jumping out of the coach, walking along the platform, climbing onto the train...

Had she really lived through everything that had happened since that spatula-portkey had brought her back from Australia?

Theo’s hand was warm and steady on her shoulder as he gently pushed her into a compartment. She sat by a window, staring at the turrets and towers that rose out of a thicket of trees in the distance. Her friends poured in one by one: There was Ginny, looking as lost as Hermione felt, and Luna happy in the circle of Theo’s arms. There was Neville, leafing through the latest edition of The New Journal of Herbology, and Hannah by his side.

“How’s Draco?” Theo asked Dean, who was the last to enter.

“Dunno,” he replied as he pulled his black woollen hat off his head, “I think I saw him with Mandy Brockle—”

“Oh sodding Salazar,” Theo groused.

The train’s whistle sounded, accompanied by the long drawn hiss of steam... and then they were off, with the dull chug-chug gradually gaining speed. Hermione turned away from the window, dizzy with motion sickness.

“Exploding snap, Hermione... you in?” Dean asked.

She shrugged. “Sure.”

“I thought we could play gobstones again,” Luna chimed in hopefully.

“You mean your barmy version? No thanks!”
There was a two-storey house in Truro, surrounded by pine trees and spindly undergrowth. Its slanted roof was dusted with snow like powdered sugar. Colours had lost their potency, as though they’d been overlaid by grey, white, and black films – the sludge on the surrounding road, the tall street lamps, the house’s rough walls, the grim sky, the fake poinsettia flowers on the windows, the wreath hung on the front door...

A winter’s day
In a deep and dark
December

Hermione was not allowed the luxury of being a rock or an island. She was sitting at the kitchen table in that two-storey house, picking at a hangnail while Uncle Jack stood by the stove scrambling eggs and whistling an egregiously lively tune. It sounded like *Shake, Rattle, and Roll*, but she couldn’t be sure. Aunt Malorie and mum were at two ends of the table not looking at each other, and dad was boring holes into the sports section of the paper. Young Jeremy was glued to the telly in the other room. The blaring clamour of Christmas themed cartoons wafted into the kitchen and wrapped around Uncle Jack’s whistling in a very distressing way.

Her thumb was bleeding.

“More eggs, Hermione?”
She smiled thinly and shook her head. “No, thank you.”
Uncle Jack resumed his whistling as he scraped the entire lot of eggs onto her plate. She poked at them listlessly with her fork – she wasn’t hungry at all.

“A YEAR!” Aunt Malorie burst out, “A WHOLE YEAR, EVIE!”
Mum groaned. “I’m sorry! I’ve said I was sorry a hundred times! The whole move was very spontaneous and—”
“THAT’S NOT THE POINT! You moved away, packed up your house and disappeared without a word! Not one call, or email, or letter—”
“We’d just been so busy!”
“Too busy to send one line?” Aunt Malorie shrieked, “I mean besides the stupid *Oh, we’re moving to Australia for good* thing you left me with! A whole year! You could have been dead for all I knew!”

Mum’s expression betrayed her anguish. Hermione wished so badly that she could own up; that she could just admit that it had all been her doing... to avoid exactly that possibility that her aunt had feared.

“I’m your sister! Did you stop caring about that? And I’ve been a jolly good sister to you, haven’t I? Not like Jack’s useless little—”
“Hey, hey!” Uncle Jack spluttered, “Why are you dragging Pat into this?”
“Why shouldn’t I? She’s been mooching off us for years now!”
“Mooching? You told her to move in!”
“YES! Three years ago, right after she’d been laid off! I was being nice! I didn’t expect her to make it a permanent—”
“She’s my baby sister!”
“She’s an unemployed, thirty-two year old wastrel!”

Well, fantastic. It was Christmas Eve and Hermione was caught in the middle of a raging domestic. Fan-friggin-tastic. She looked at mum, who was massaging her temples, and dad who –

Oh dear god.

Dad was barely holding in his laughter.
Hermione looked away at once. His laughter seldom remained just his own...

“Hulloooodddddddddddddddddd!”

A pitchy voice perforated through the argument in the kitchen as the front door slammed shut. Consequently, there was pin-drop silence in the kitchen when Pat made her entrance. As she shuffled in, dragging her chunky high-heeled boots she droned, “Oh, you lot’re here.” She offered Hermione and her parents a reluctant half smile before helping herself to some toast. Her hair was tightly permed, her makeup was smeared, and her dark blue dress was horribly crushed.

“Where have you been the past two days?” Aunt Malorie demanded.

“Nick’s place,” she replied indolently.

“Who’s Nick? You’ve never mentioned him before?”

“Nick’s the bloke from the pub, in’he? And ya won’t hear me mentioning him again.” Pat began shuffling back towards the kitchen door. “Bloody mediocre shag, he was.”

“Patricia! Watch yourself!”

“Why?” she shrugged uncaringly, “Just ’coz weenie little Hermione Granger’s here? Not so little anymore, is she? I’m going to bed, ta. Don’t wake me unless the house is, like, burning down.”

She left, and Aunt Malorie turned her fury back onto Uncle Jack. “You see! You see that! How are you okay with having her here, having her around our young, impressionable son! You tell her, Jack. You bloody well tell her to clean her act up or I’m kicking her out!”

And that’s when dad’s self-control caved, and he burst out laughing.

She woke to a suitably white Christmas, getting a fragmented view of the world outside from her cot by the frost covered window. It was barely light outside – a cold blue hue – and everything was so quiet. But that was owing to the silencing charm she’d cast on Pat, who was asleep on the next bed, sprawled like her arms and legs were trying to touch all four corners of it. Her snores reminded Hermione of Fluffy, the three-headed dog.

She got out from under the covers, jammed her feet into her warm, downy slippers, and softly trod downstairs. The silence trailed behind her; heavier than her shadow, colder than the air.

In the living room, the medium sized, haphazardly decorated tree was planted in an enormous pile of presents. Hermione felt herself smile involuntarily as she sat down beside them and began pulling out those that came from her friends, undoubtedly delivered by owls overnight.

There was quite an assortment: A Weasley jumper, a hamper from George, earrings from Ginny
(dangling silver quills), a mug from Luna featuring a red and blue whatsit, a gorgeous (and indisputably expensive) bejewelled strap for her watch from Theo, a sprig of dittany from Neville, firewhiskey (but of course) from Seamus, (and wrapped around it, a flyer: FINNIGAN’S PUB GRAND OPENING ON NEW YEAR’S EVE! COME ONE, COME ALL!)

Her hand paused over two gifts wrapped in red paper dotted with animated golden Chinese dragons and, without a warning, she felt teary. Harry and Ron. She missed them with a sudden fierceness. Ron had sent her a big box of mooncakes shaped like curled up cats. And Harry... She gasped. Harry had sent her a jade pendant. A little cluster of Hellebores, just like the ones that comprised the wreath she’d placed on his parents’ graves last year.

When the rest of the house awoke, they went through the paces. The hugs, the wishes, (Aunt Malorie stood stonily at the side, Pat sniffed grouchily into her coffee,) and the gift exchanging. After that, Hermione sat on the floor with Jeremy, helping him set up his brand new race car track. Behind her was a towering stack of books that her parents had carefully picked for her. She smiled as the young boy ooh’ed and aah’ed over the series of loop-the-loops they’d set up, and her fingers floated up and gently touched the pendant she’d strung around her neck. She even ate breakfast with her cousin right there on the floor, foregoing the awful icy atmosphere surrounding the grownups in the kitchen.

In the afternoon, Pat went back upstairs for a kip, and Uncle Jack took Jeremy out to build a snowman. Hermione made to join them but mum stopped her.

“Come here for a minute, will you?”
She suppressed a weary sigh and went to join her mother on the living room sofa. Dad sat himself down on the coffee table in front of him, with an envelope in his hand.

“Hermione,” he said with strange seriousness, “We sold the house.”
She blinked rapidly as his words sunk in... and a lump formed in her throat. “What?”
“The house... The Hampstead house. We sold it.”
“You...” she whispered, “You sold... Oh god, you really aren’t coming back, are you?”
“No, dear,” mum replied kindly, and took her hand. “And obviously, you aren’t going to live there...” she stopped and eyed Aunt Malorie who was watching them closely, “We got a tidy package for it, see. Prime property and all that.”
“That’s... nice,” Hermione croaked.
“So here,” Dad said, “For you.” He held out the envelope.
Her hands were trembling as she flipped open the flap and pulled out a –
“Holy shit!”
“I told you we got a good deal,” mum grinned.
“Why – are you – you’re giving this to me?” She gaped down at the cheque in horror.
“Yes.”
“I can’t accept this!” she cried, “It’s too much!”
Dad frowned. “What do you mean you can’t accept it?”
“It’s too much! How can I – How – I can’t –”
“Can’t accept money from your parents? Are you serious?” Dad asked incredulously, “You’re still our child, not even out of school yet... what on earth do you mean you can’t accept it?”
“I just...” She couldn’t breathe. It truly was a monstrous sum. “It’s...”
“Look my darling,” mum placed her hand on Hermione’s hair, “You’re going to start living out in
the real world now. You’ll need to get yourself a place to stay, set things up... I want you to want for nothing while you’re figuring things out. And I know you’ll figure things out, little genius that you are. Let this be your safety net. Let me take care of you—"

Like I wasn’t able to before. It was unsaid, but Hermione heard it clear as day. She looked from one parent to the other, welling up and breathless, and they smiled at her. Kindly, like they always had. Like she hadn’t derailed their lives completely. Like it wasn’t entirely her fault that there was a bitter woman sneering at them right then.

She didn’t deserve them. They were – they were so –

Like always, mum knew right away that she needed to be held. She let a few tears seep into her mother’s shoulder... drew in a long breath... and said, “Thank you.”


That night her DA Galleon carried a message – will b back on 29 afternoon.


Don’t ask her how the following two days passed. She’d freeze into a corny Roy Lichtenstein painting with a speech bubble that said ‘It’s been hell!’ Books and endless games of ‘Guess Who?’ with Jeremy. Uncomfortable meals and suffering through hours spent in Pat’s company while the woman kept asking her why she didn’t have a boyfriend. Was she truly thirty-two? Hermione hadn’t met such an irredeemable airhead since she’d shared a dorm with Parvati and Lav–

She snuck into her parents room on the night of the twenty-sixth, (after a particularly grating supper during which her aunt and uncle had gotten into a row over whose turn it was to do the dishes,) and they’d opened Seamus’ wine and she’d told them about her past few months at Hogwarts. Academic stuff, mostly.

On the twenty-seventh she pulled dad aside while mum and aunt Malorie were busy with their sniffany posturing.

“I’m going to Diagon Alley. Come with?”

His fine brown eyes turned round. “Jesus. Yeah. Absolutely.”

She’d been thinking a lot about what he’d said about hating himself for not getting more involved in the magical part of her life, and it killed her that he’d been hurting. But his delight (following complete horror after his first experience of side-along apparition,) at standing in the middle of the busy, riotous, colourful shopping area cheered her up immediately. She took him to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes and introduced him to George, (who gave him a Reusable Hangman, gratis,) and to Flourish and Blotts, and Fortescue’s. They went to Gringotts where she got all sorts of ugly sneers from the Goblins, and opened her very first magical bank account.

Then she slipped her arm through his, and led him to the southern end of the alley, to the narrow shop, once shabby, but now spruced up and tidy. The freshly painted gold lettering atop the door –
A little bell tinkled as they entered. The interior looked just as she remembered: cramped, dark, with floor to ceiling shelves piled with slim boxes.

“Ah, Ms. Granger. Took you long enough.”

He materialised from the shadows like a spectre, fragile and wizened in overlarge navy robes.

“Mr. Ollivander,” Hermione nodded, “How are you?”

“Alive, my dear,” he rasped, “I consider that a great accomplishment as each day passes. And I see you’ve brought your father along! Lovely to meet you again, sir.”

They shook hands – his looking more skeletal and paper-thin than ever against dad’s large, sturdy, leather glove encased one.

“Now then, Ms. Granger... I suppose you’re finally here to replace that wand you’ve been carrying?”

“I don’t understand, Mr. Ollivander. It was working just fine, until recently. Obviously, it’s no longer loyal to – to –”

“It isn’t. Of course not. But it will not answer readily to you either; not when it knows your history and the part it’s played.” He held up his hand as Hermione made to interrupt. “Let me amend that – not when you know the part it’s played. I suppose, up until recently, you haven’t let yourself think about it, have you? Wands are highly sensitive, Ms. Granger. They know where your heart is. The wand is not rejecting you. You are rejecting the wand.”

Her stomach twisted with an overwhelming sickness. “I thought,” she mumbled, “I thought I had gotten past that. That I was strong enough to –”

“Let me stop you right there. This isn’t about mettle, dear girl. It’s far more visceral than that. The Crucius curse leaves deep, deep scars. I would know.”

He held out his frail hand expectantly. Hermione reached for her pocket... paused... dipped her fingers in... paused...

(Dad was leaning against a shelf and watching her vigilantly.)

...she placed Bellatrix’s wand in Ollivander’s grasp; he immediately shuffled away and put it inside a small cabinet, and – and –

And.

It was gone from her sight, and her life. Her shoulders caved. She closed her eyes for a brief moment. And when she opened them once more, Ollivander was back in front of her, wearing a small smile.

“How do you feel, Ms. Granger?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do you want to feel?”

“Like myself.”

His smile widened, and something in his eyes, shrouded behind a layer of cataract, sparkled.

“Then I suggest we go back to the moment that started it all: Vine wood – from the same tree as your original wand – dragon heartstring core...”

The moment the slim stick of wood touched her fingers, that murky little shop lit up with the light of a billion stars.
Since Theo didn’t know exactly where Aunt Malorie’s house was, Hermione had to go to his flat to fetch him. As instructed, she apparated straight into the sitting room of his and Malfoy’s place. “Theo,” she called, though the room was empty, and waited.

Some time passed, and he didn’t show.

She slowly made her way across the room, feeling strangely nervous. Her hand dragged along the velvety top of the sofa as she passed it, and she dawdled by the small shelf that was full of antique ornaments. The hallway outside was similarly deserted, and as she crept down its length, the discomfort in her gut expanded.

Both doors at the end of the hall were closed, but through the one on the left, the sweet sound of piano music spilled out. It wasn’t any piece she could recognise; rather, it sounded like a random sequence of chords, as though the player was performing practice exercises. The tempo increased with each round, so smoothly and expertly, that it infiltrated her heart rate and began pulling it along.

It was hypnotic.

Again – faster – again – faster – again – faster –

She placed the tips of her fingers on the door in the hope of absorbing some of those incredible vibrations.

“Hermione?”

She jumped back and spun around, squeaking a “Yes, hi,” to Theo who’d just stepped out of his room.

He looked between her and Malfoy’s door a couple of times, brows raised, and said, “That’s not my room.”


Theo gave her such a look as the piano music continued to spin around them, faster and faster and faster.

“Riiiiight,” he drawled, “Your confusion is completely understandable.”

“Come on,” she muttered holding her hand out for him to take, “We should get going. Dad’s made something special for dinner, just for you.”

He grinned widely, and with one last glance towards Malfoy’s door, took her hand.

“Simply superlative, Dr. Mr. Granger. I am in awe... in deep awe... of your culinary gift. Why, I am just coming from France, where the best of the Malfoy family House-Elv–”

(Hermione coughed loudly.)

“–meals every day, but nothing came close to the sumptuous food you have blessed me with this evening. I’ll remember these potatoes for years. And this gravy... Oh, this gravy! Mr... Dr. Granger... sir... I will dream about this gravy!”

“Please call be Robert,” dad deadpanned. But he was grinning from ear to ear.

Mum shook her head, laughing. “You are the most supremely ridiculous young man I have ever met.”
“Why thank you.”
“Supremely ridiculously fit, I’ll say,” Pat added.
“Er...”
“So you’re saying he isn’t ya boyfriend, yeah, Hermione?”
“He is not,” she replied tiredly.
“Mint.”
“I do have a girlfriend though,” Theo supplied hurriedly.

Pat leaned forward (her hair fell into her plate). “Well she ain’t here now, is she, dah-ling.”

A low groan went around the table, quickly followed by a fresh bottle of wine, (The previous one had been monopolised by Pat.) The kitchen was warm, the table was full, and Hermione’s parents looked like their old happy selves again. She turned to smile at Theo, lovely wonderful Theo, for bringing his unique élan into her life.

After pudding had been demolished, they sat together around the living room fire.
“So what are we in the mood for?” Uncle Jack asked, standing by his fancy new cassette player. I have the latest Madonna album.”

Dad baulked. “Well, shove it up your –ahem – don’t you have any decent music?”

They went on arguing for a long time before good old Blur was playing softly in the room.

“I miss France,” mum sighed, “We should go again.”

Jeremy was asleep on her lap, and she ran a tender finger down his cheek.

“Take him to bed, Jack,” Aunt Malorie ordered.

“I just sat down!” he bit back.

“Well he’s too big for me to carry now, isn’t he?”

Grumbling mutinously, Uncle Jack gathered his son from mum’s lap and stomped upstairs.

Mum and dad tumbled down memory lane, remembering their holidays from years ago, but Hermione was distracted by what was going on on her right –

“So Theo...” Pat settled on the arm of the chair he was sitting on, “Tell me more about yourself.”

“Um.”

“Such nice hair. I love long hair on a bloke, ya know. You look like a Beatle.”

“What? A beetle?!”

She twirled a strand of his hair around her finger. “Mhmmmm. Yeah.”

“For heaven’s sake, Malorie!” I’ve had enough of your bleeding sulking!”

Mum’s unexpected explosion sucked all the air out of the room.

Come on, come on, come on
Get through it
Come on, come on, come on
Love's the greatest thing
Come on, come on, come on

“Yes?”

“I’ve had enough!” Mum jumped to her feet. “You’re angry with me, yes, fine. Rightfully so. But I’ve apologised countless times, and I’m here now. Just let it go, will you?”

“I will not let it go! You’ve always been this way, haven’t you?” Aunt Malorie’s voice shook with emotion. “You live your life, you do what you want, and you don’t give me a second thought!”

“That’s not--”

“You didn’t tell me when you moved away, you didn’t tell me when you were pregnant for the
longest time, you – you won’t even tell me where your daughter’s going to school!”
“I told you, it’s a –”
“Boarding school for gifted kids! Sure! What’s it called, where is it? What –”
“Oh, alright calm down, Malorie,” dad interjected with a forced smile, “Truth is, Hermione here is a witch. She goes to a secret school to learn magic.”
Theo laughed extra loudly.
But all that accomplished was setting Aunt Malorie’s temper on fire. “YOU KEEP QUIET, stupid, preposterous arse!”
“Don’t you talk to him like that!” mum barked.
“I will do as I –”
“No! He’s my husband! And just because your marriage has gone to the dogs –”
Aunt Malorie burst into tears.

Hermione stood up, grabbed Theo’s arm and dragged him outside, to the back garden. They settled on the small bench under a fir tree, and Hermione cast a quick, wandless warming charm around them. For a fairly long while, they sat in silence. The evening was so still that the voices from inside had nothing to block them from blearing out to where they were sitting.

“Wow,” Theo breathed, by and by.
“I’m so sorry,” Hermione murmured.
“Nah, I’m sorry. I was supposed to make this less uncomfortable.”
“Oh, god, this wasn’t on you!”
“I know,” he sighed, “And it was far too... explosive... for me to dissipate.”
“Yeah,” Hermione rubbed her eyes tiredly, “It’s been building up all week. Yeesh. Families.”
He laughed. “Honestly. Your mum and aunt won’t stop fighting. My dad’s a sadistic psychopath locked up in prison...”
“Show off,” she grinned.
He poked her with his elbow, and then slid lower on the bench so he could rest his head lightly against her shoulder.
“I wish Draco was here,” he said.
She stiffened at once. “Am I not good enough company?”
“You goose. He’d keep Pat busy. What a fucking nightmare she is.”
“She really is. But you’re saying that Malfoy would go for her?”
“No,” Theo snorted, “She would go for him. I mean, he is much better looking than I am.”
“Not a chance,” Hermione scoffed.
“You know I can always tell when you’re lying.”
“Oh, shut up.” She was glad he couldn’t see her face.
“I bet your cheeks are cherry red right now.”
Stupid Theo. She jostled his head.
“Ow!”

“Are you okay?” she whispered to mum the next morning over tea.
They were sitting out on the back porch steps watching dad and Uncle Jack play cricket with Jeremy and a few of his friends.
Mum shrugged dolefully, her face scrunched up in a sad grimace. “She’s been stewing in resentment for years... I had no idea...”
“HOWZAT!” yelled Uncle Jack.  
“No ball!” Dad intoned crisply.  
“What?!?”  
“No. Ball.”  
“The fuck it was!”  
All the young boys burst into a mad cackle.

Hermione and mum took delicate sips from their respective cups.  
“She’s refusing to leave her room. I knocked for ages, and... nothing.” Mum sighed.  
“Oh.”  
“If it wasn’t for Jeremy – he really adores your father, doesn’t he – and the fact that I really want to see you off, I’d be at the airport right now.”  
Hermione swallowed, and set her cup down. She hated her aunt then, so much. Mum took her hand in hers and squeezed it.  
“Some of dad’s mates from school are having a get-together tomorrow. Will you come with us?”  
“I’ve promised my friend Seamus I’ll go for his party tomorrow night. And I’ve to stop by the Burrow first – Ginny’s orders.”  
“I see.” Mum exhaled heavily.  

“LBW! Clear as day!”  
“No, sorry. Not out.”  
“Rubbish!”  

Ginny squealed and hugged her tightly the moment she stepped through the front door of the burrow, early in the evening on the last day of the year.  
“Finally!” she exclaimed, and she proceeded to follow Hermione around the room as she greeted the rest of the Weasley family. Charlie was home as well, lounging by the fire.  

“Tell me,” George asked as he pulled her into a loose, one-armed hug, “Did Ron, by any chance, give you a box of mooncakes for Christmas?”  
“He did...”  
“Ha!” he barked, “That’s nine so far! Useless twatbiscuit. We’re drowning in the stuff here!”

Hermione was dragged upstairs soon after by Ginny, who pulled her into her room and slammed the door shut.  
“My family is driving me barmy,” she claimed, “They’re being so—”  
“Oh, please,” Hermione cut in, “You have no idea what I’ve had to deal with—”  
“Pshaw,” Ginny jeered, “I’m so looking forward to getting shit-faced tonight.”  
“Now that we can agree on.”

She threw herself on Ginny’s bed and groaned. The past week’s stress had wreaked havoc on her back muscles.
“I have nothing to wear,” Ginny lamented.
“There’s a small black suitcase in here,” Hermione said, pushing her beaded bag across the bed, “My uncle’s sister Pat is an absolute cow, who gifted me a pile of her old dresses for Christmas...”

She drifted off to the sound of Ginny’s low murmurs of “hmm... not bad,” and “ugh... who would wear something like that?” It was that disquieting sort of sleep where she knew she was dreaming: There was a washed out quality to the world around her. Voices echoed. She dreamt about being back in Australia, sat on the beach at dawn...

Mum jogged past her – “Hello, sweetheart,” she called – and Hermione watched her till she was nothing but a spot in the distance. Then she leant back on her arms, tipping her head back and closing her eyes against the harsh light of the sun.

“Hmm... not bad.”
She smiled as she heard Ginny settling down beside her. She opened her eyes when a similar noise came from her other side, to see Theo plopping down on the sand with a grin.

“It’s good to be back,” he said.
“Is,” she agreed.
For a while, nobody spoke. They listened to the wind and the sea and the endless birdcalls: The sound of pure tranquillity. People came and went like shimmering ghosts – Neville informed them that he’d buried his Remberall here years ago and had come to collect it. Harry went by on a broom.
Dad brought them lemonade, but a blink later, both he and the glasses had disappeared.

“Oh no,” Theo groaned, and Hermione jumped when she saw Malfoy and Mandy in their midst.

“Fucking Bowtruckle,” Theo grumbled... Hermione blinked again, and...
Mandy was gone.
Theo and Ginny were gone.
It was just her and Malfoy. He was standing tall in front of her and she was swallowed up by his shadow. Inexplicably, the sun was setting, and he was a pillar of paleness against its warm, russet hues.

“Don’t you have better things to do than listening in on other people’s conversations?”
“I– I–”
She floated into a standing position and backed away. Back back back back back at a dizzying speed until Malfoy had been replaced by the ruins of Ozymendias.

“Hermione, we have to go,” said Ginny.
But where was she? There was only sand and sea and ‘two vast and trunkless legs of stone’....

“Hermione, come on.”

“Hey, wake up. We’ve to be there in half an hour.”
She sat up, rubbing her eyes. It was completely dark outside, and Ginny had lit all the lamps in her room. She was standing in front of her mirror, holding Pat’s slinky, wine red dress with a feathery trim against herself.
“I don’t need half an hour to get ready,” Hermione muttered grumpily.
“Your hair sure does.”
Hermione wailed, “Can’t we just leave it like this?”
Ginny gave her a highly imperious look. “Nope!”
Half an hour later, her hair was pin-straight and falling down her shoulders and back in an entirely unfamiliar but extremely pleasing way. She’d put on Pat’s halter dress, black and floral... short... and she couldn’t deny she felt a kick of joy that it was her looking like that.

George let out a wolf whistle when she walked into the sitting room, and she rolled her eyes, even as she felt her face turn hot. He was wearing a purple Dragon-skin coat and a gold scarf that matched his ear perfectly.

“You’re an eyesore,” Ginny told him.
“And you look like you belong on Muriel’s head.”

They continued to bicker as Hermione and Ginny put on their cloaks. Just as the three of them stood poised before the front door, Hermione pulled out her wand – her wand – HER wand – from her bag to cast a snow-repelling charm on herself. They stepped out into the icy night, walked three steps down the garden path, and spun into non-existence.

Finnigin’s pub was located between a grimy pawn shop and a menagerie. From the outside, it looked quite innocuous; a simple wooden door on a brick facade, but the interior was a whole other story.

It seemed that they were the first to arrive. Warmth enveloped Hermione the moment she stepped in, and she quickly removed her cloak and handed it over to the large coat rack that extended an arm out for her. It was fashioned after the old taverns of yore: A low ceiling, rough stone walls, and chunky wooden chairs around large tables. The shelves behind the bar were filled to their limit with bottles, flanked by two enormous casks. There were candles on every table, and strings of lights with real fairies criss-crossed around the ramparts. It looked seedy in a deliberately exotic way.

On the largest wall, framed by two half-pillars, was Dean’s masterpiece. Hermione excused herself from Ginny and went over to take a closer look. It was exactly how he’d envisioned it: the pastel extravagance of Toulouse-Lautrec... but with leprechauns. They danced across the length of the wall; frenzied, profligate...

The artist himself sauntered over with his hands in his pockets.

“What d’you think?”

“It’s magnificent,” Hermione replied with a grin.

“Thanks!” he beamed, “I think it’s turned out well. And it’s got me drinks on the house for life.”

“Wouldn’t you get that anyway?”

“Alright,” he revised, “Guilt free drinks on the house.”

George joined them, murmuring a suitably amazed, “Not bad, Thomas.” He examined the mural intently for a moment, and declared, “I want one in my shop.”

“Sure,” Dean agreed, “Not Leprechauns, surely?”

“No. Pygmy puffs. And garden gnomes. Pulling confetti out of their arses.”

“George!”

“Come on, Hermione! Picture it. It’ll be a thing of beauty. Incidentally, Dean... what did Ron send you for Christmas?”

“Um...” Dean scratched his head, “A box of some Chinese cake things–”
“Unbelievable! That half-sprung todger! Un-fucking-believable!”

Hermione broke away from them to walk along the wall, drinking in the rapt expressions of the mad dancers. They were so lost in their drunken delirium and jubilance... she wondered what that felt like. How freeing it must be...

“Hermione!”

His voice had her spinning around with a big smile. Looking quite smart in a blue shirt and black trousers, Theo waved her over from the bar. The pub had filled up while she’d been lost in her musings, flooded with faces she knew well, and not so well, some that she didn’t know at all, and some that she vaguely recognised.

She rushed over and said “Hello,” to him and Luna, (in floor length cherry red tasselled dress robes,) and offered what she hoped was a polite nod to Malfoy and Mandy.

“You look beautiful, Hermione!” Luna sang.

“Absolutely.” Theo seconded brightly.

Hermione was just about to reciprocate with something equally complimentary, when suddenly, all the lights dimmed. A spotlight fell on the shelves behind the bar, which slid to the side to reveal the man of the hour, their host and sole proprietor of the establishment, Seamus Finnigan, decked in dazzling emerald green robes.

“Failte friends! Welcome to the grand opening of Finnigan’s pub, the best fecking place for a pint in all of England. Make merry. Go wild. LET’S GET LEGLESS!”

The crowd roared, cheered, clapped, stomped their feet...

Cries of “Yeah!” ‘Brilliant!”’, and “Woooh!”, (and one “You glorious bastard!” – Dean, possibly,) bounced off the walls.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a glass was pushed into Hermione’s hand, full of some pungent and dark liquid...

She shrugged, clinked her glass against Theo’s, and downed the lot in one go.

There was something white hot and piercing assaulting her eyelids. The throbbing in her ears – she couldn’t tell if it was the reverberation of drum beats or pulsating nerves in her temples.

Her head was a block of cement, and her body was a thin plastic bag filled with churning fluid.

It was awful.

She squeezed her eyes before peeling them open.

A white coffered ceiling hung above her; she appeared to be lying on a sinfully soft sofa, with a fleece blanket draped over her.

Where was she?

She sat up – oh shit, bad idea – and slumped, pressing the heels of her palms against her aching eyes. Burning hot bile climbed up to the back of her throat.

She groaned and dragged her hands down her face until they were cupping her throat. Swallowing made her realise how terribly dry it was.
Where was she?

Once again, she made an attempt to open her eyes. There was barely any light in the room; thick drapes hung over the windows, the fireplace was unlit, all the lamps where doused... but she could see enough to realise that she was in Theo’s sitting room. The confusion that that recognition brought did nothing to help the state of her head. Because how on earth had she landed up here? Again, she closed her eyes and tried to think back... Finnigan’s pub... the diverse array of drinks... music, loud thumping music... she remembered dancing with George, Ginny, Neville, and Hannah... practically inhaling a round of shots with Theo and... and?

All thoughts ceased when the scent of luscious, aromatic tea curled around her quite... quite... sensuously. She groaned again and opened her eyes. Tea. She could really use some tea. She cringed as she pulled the blanket off herself: Her dress had ridden up to her waist. Then, keeping a bracing hand on an arm of the sofa, she stood up. Death, she thought, death to Seamus Finnigan. Her legs shook and ached, but she shuffled her way out of the room, one hand on her stomach, and the other grabbing onto the nearest bit of furniture at hand.

She staggered down the hallway, keeping close to the wall, moaning and groaning at odd intervals.

And her eyes narrowed into slits the second she arrived at the kitchen. Hell, it was bright in there. “Ugh,” she gurgled.

Mandy and Malfoy looked up at her from the kitchen table. The table upon which was a pot of holy, life-giving tea. Hermione practically threw herself upon it – she fell gawkily into a chair and pulled the pot into an embrace.

“Are you planning on pouring it straight into your mouth?” Malfoy asked mordantly. His voice made her hurt, and honestly, she wasn’t above doing exactly that. Thankfully, Mandy was magnanimous enough to hand her a cup.

The first gulp was the best thing that had ever happened to her in her entire life. Wow. She went in for a second. And a third.

And a –

“How are you feeling?” Mandy enquired softly.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione looked up. She was able to keep her eyes properly open now, and saw that Mandy was wearing the shirt that Malfoy had on last night. He was in a plain black jumper, and looking down his nose at her. “Like hell,” she rasped.

Mandy giggled, albeit apologetically. “Yes... that is to be expected.” Hermione took a fifth, sixth, and seventh sip. She pushed her hair away from her face, too scared to think about what it must look like. Keeping her gaze on the rim of her cup she ventured – “What... what happened last night?”

“You don’t remember?” Malfoy sounded vaguely amused. Despairingly and warily, she peeked up at him through her eyelashes, (he even looked amused,) and shook her head.
He cocked an eyebrow as he studied her for a moment. “Well then,” he drawled slowly. He stood up, turned his back to her, and busied himself with the French press on the shiny kitchen counter. “You really don’t remember climbing onto the bar and flashing your knickers at the crowd?”

Hermione nearly spat out a mouthful of tea.

*WHAT.*

*Holy fuck, what??*

She was going to kill herself. She was going to kill herself that very second. She was going to –

“Don’t be mean, Draco,” Mandy chastised, “Don’t worry, Hermione. Nothing like that happened.” “Gah,” she gasped, slapping her hand against her chest. Her heart – that had been thrashing around like a trapped animal – gradually began to calm down. She glared at Malfoy’s back with all the fury her weary, beaten body could muster, but he didn’t even have the decency to turn around.

Before she could snarl at him, however, Theo stumbled into the kitchen, looking like he’d travelled a hundred miles through a storm.

“Oh,” he said to Hermione, “You’re up.”

“Yes, I –”

He was scowling at her. What the hell?

“All right,” she demanded angrily, “Will someone tell me what happened?”

Theo huffed. “You don’t remember?”

“Oh, I’m asking, aren’t I?”

He rolled his eyes moodily, but perked up when Malfoy returned to the table and set a steaming mug of coffee before him. “Ah, bless your soul, Draco.”

“Where’s Luna?” Malfoy asked as he pulled the teapot away from Hermione, (the fiend!)

“Still asleep.”

“How far do you remember?” Theo presented the question baldly, roughly... a tone she didn’t care for one bit.

“I don’t know!” she bemoaned, “I can’t seem to–”

Blurry, zipping images flickered across her mind’s eye... disconnected and strange. Yet, one particular notion lingered, and it made her feel sick again.

She cleared her throat. “Tell me. Was... I mean, did... Is there any chance that... that... Terry Boot was involved?”

Mandy squealed. “So you do remember!”

“How far do you remember?” Theo presented the question baldly, roughly... a tone she didn’t care for one bit.

“I don’t know!” she bemoaned, “I can’t seem to–”

“Look,” Hermione croaked, filled with dread, “You’re going to have to elaborate.”

“At midnight,” Theo began irritably, “That pillock stood on a chair, silenced the music and everything, and shouted in that thin, peaky voice of his, ‘Ladies and gents – my new year’s resolution!’ Then he ran over to you, dipped you over his arm, and kissed you. And you, my dear one, did not stop him. Quite the opposite in fact.”

“He refused to let you leave with him.”

“Thank you,” Hermione whispered, staring down at her lap.
She felt a blazing need to smack her head against the table. Instead, she buried her face in her hands.

“Noooo,” she keened into her palms.

Maybe she could stay like that forever. They could bathe her in molten bronze and make a sculpture out of her. *The Non-Thinker. The Drinker. The What-The-Hell-Were-You-Thinking-er.* Yep, she was never moving.

“Hermione,” Theo sighed. He sounded kind again and he laid a hand on her shoulder, so she braved a glance at him, and –

“JESUS CHRIST!” she shrieked.

He nearly fell off his chair, but honestly, how else is one supposed to react when one’s friend appears to have spontaneously sprouted a spectacular set of antlers?

“What–?!” Theo yelped.

Hermione couldn’t form any words; she just pointed above his head as her jaw hung down to the floor.

She gaped as Theo’s hands flew upwards and encountered the bony growth on top of his head. He let out a panicked howl as he jumped up – his chair fell back with a loud *thud.*

“What the fuck?? What the fuck?!” He looked this way and that wildly. “What is this – what – I need a mirror!”

After he’d fled from the room, Hermione turned her wide eyes to the other two: Mandy looked bewildered... Malfoy was smirking behind his cup.

“DRACO MALFOY!”

With a roar like a thunderclap, Theo burst into the kitchen once more, blistering, fuming, seething...

“You absolute dick. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?”

“What are you talking about?” Malfoy rejoined airily, “I just made you coffee.”

“YOU!” Theo bellowed, with his finger pointing back and forth between Malfoy and his empty coffee mug, “YOU!”

“Yes...?”

“YOU!”

“I don’t have all day, Theo. You’re going to have to... buck up.”

Theo collapsed against the counter, letting out a strangled sigh. “I fucking hate you.”

“Sure.”

“How... fuck... how long are these going to stay?”

“How long did I have to suffer that singing fountain?”

“Three wee – YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS!”

“Oh, yes,” Malfoy affirmed coolly, “And I wouldn’t try vanishing them, or disintegrating them, or... well, using any kind of spell on them.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Theo gritted out, “You’re an arsehole.”

“Such stag-ering wit.”

Hermione made... a sound... and Theo rounded on her with fiery eyes. “Have something to say?”

Her mouth twisted to the side contemplatively. Apparently, hangovers decimated her intelligence and tact, because this is what she came up with:

“Oh... dear?”

A shocked laugh erupted out of Malfoy. His head turned towards her suddenly, with his eyebrows raised high and his lips pulled up in a crooked grin.

“I can’t believe you did that!” Mandy chuckled and leaned into his side.

“I hate you as well, Hermione,” Theo grumbled. He set his chair right again and sat down sulkily.
He was a sulky young man in a bedraggled blue shirt, with wildly tousled hair and a pair of antlers on his head. The time that followed was edgy. Hermione wanted to laugh, but with the shock having worn off, she was once again thinking about the things she’d done while utterly sozzled... and she wanted to cry.

Five minutes passed. Somebody had to say something or her head would explode.

As luck would have it, Luna strolled in. “Hello all,” she chimed, looking fresh as a daisy and aggravatingly untouched by the night before. Her eyes landed on Theo and she froze. She looked at his antlers speculatively, then at his entirely disgruntled expression.

She smiled. “I always suspected you were some kind of satyr.”

Oh dea – Oh no. If he had looked angry before...

“That’s not funny,” he snapped.

Luna made a great show of bending to look under the table. “Do you also have hooves?”

“Luna...” he rumbled warningly.

“And a tail? Please tell me you have a tail!”

“THAT'S IT!”

Theo charged towards her and grabbed her. He picked her up and carried her away, as she giggled and squealed...

A door slammed, and then there was silence.

Hermione rested her throbbing, fuzzy, overwrought head on the table and burst into laughter. Loud, full, cathartic laughter that made her whole frame shake. She could hear Malfoy and Mandy chortling along as well, through the wood against which her ear was pressed and in the air around her.

Welcome to the new year.
It was just like old times: Dad pushing her trunk-laden trolley, mum keeping her tightly by her side, making Hermione feel as though she’d need a prying bar to free herself.

King’s Cross was packed with the post-holiday crowd.

“Look, there’s Theo,” Hermione exclaimed on spotting his signature tousled hair... and newly acquired head gear. She was almost sure the antlers looked larger. She waved him over, standing on the tips of her toes and stretching her arm as high as it would go. He spotted her promptly enough, and made his way through the swarm.

(“Christmas is over, wanker!” someone yelled.

“Why is he–”
“Don’t ask, mum.”)

“Hullo, Granger gang!”
“Aren’t you festive,” dad chipped teasingly.
“Please don’t start, Robert.”
“I’m sorry,” mum added, “But you’re going to have to explain.”
“Thing is, Evelyn–”
“I don’t think I said you could call me that.”
“Evelyn, the thing is... my flatmate is a foul prat.”
“He did this to you?”
“Yes.”
“Are they bigger than before?” Hermione asked.
“I... er... I tried to vanish them away.” Theo grumbled shamefacedly.
“Why? He told you not to!”
“I thought he was bluffing!”
“Ha!” dad barked, “And why exactly did he give you antlers?”
“Well–” Theo paused to jeer at a group that was pointing and laughing at him. “It’s like I told you, Robert. He’s a foul prat.”
Hermione interjected, “It’s because Theo installed an obnoxious singing fountain in his room.”
“Because he put sparkly death-vines in my room!”
“Because you put a billion butterflies in his!”
“Because he papered my room with pink glittering snakeskin!”
“Because you bought that ghastly lamp!”
“Because he... I mean I...” Theo stopped in his tracks and glared at her. “Are you taking his side?”
“I am taking the side of Justice,” she sniffed.
“Justice my arse –”
“Well, this flatmate fellow sounds like a hoot,” dad said, “You should bring him with you the next time you visit.”
Theo’s indignation disappeared like that, and he began to snigger. “Oh, sure. I’ll do that. Won’t that be brilliant, Hermione?”

She huffed, pushed past him, and threw herself through the barrier and into platform nine and three
quarters...

...Nearly barrelling straight into Luna.

“Gosh!” she gasped, arms flailing at her sides to keep herself from tipping over, “Why are you standing so close to the entrance, Luna?!”
“I was waiting for Theo,” she shrugged, “Why are you looking so distressed?”
“Because we both quite nearly cracked our heads open on the platform!”
“Hm” Luna mused, “But that didn’t happen, did it?”
Hermione gave up, and steered Luna some distance away, so that when mum, dad, and Theo stepped in, their path was unimpeded.
“Buckie!” Luna sang.
“I told you to stop calling me that!”

Barely containing her laughter, Hermione introduced her parents to the dotty girl.
...The dotty girl who said, “A pleasure to meet your acquaintance, sir, madam,” and curtseyed.

“What – is she –?” Hermione sputtered in a whisper to Theo.
“I told her dentists are muggle royalty.”
“Why on earth would you do that?”
He scowled. “She gave me a giant bottle of antler polish.”

Mum and dad kept walking along her window as the Hogwarts Express leisurely rolled into motion. Hermione wished they wouldn’t, so that she could wipe her eyes before the moisture that had built up in them could spill over.
Bye, she mouthed as she waved. And waved and waved –

“No, you may not touch them, Thomas!” Theo raged next to her.

The train was running now; her parents fell behind. Hermione twisted away from the window with a lump in her throat.

“Daddy’s wedding is on the twenty-fifth, next month,” Luna announced, and began handing out large brown envelopes, “The gorse field will be in full bloom by then. Everybody must wear yellow...”

“Stop trying to touch them!”
“Cor! They’re actually, honest to god, real antlers!”

Within the envelope was a golden disk, which when held in the palm of her hand, blossomed into a stalk of gorse, that sang the contents of the invite.

“....cordially inviiii-iiited tooooo...”
The compartment door slid open and Malfoy and Mandy stepped in.

“Brilliant job with the antlers, mate!” Dean cheered, and Malfoy smirked as he settled right opposite Theo.

“Here, Draco,” Luna said, “For daddy’s wedding. Sorry, Mandy, but we aren’t really friends. Come with me, Theo... I want to give Neville his card.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Can’t you give it to him later?”

“I’d like to give it to him now.”

“I’m not going any –”

“Plan on hiding away for the next three weeks, Theo?” Malfoy drawled with sadistic glee.

“Get bent!”

“Are you worried about what people will say?” Dean asked, “Are you worried that they’ll laugh and call you names?”

“Sod of–”

“Worried that they won’t let you join in any reindeer games?”

Luna dragged Theo away before he could disembowel Dean.

*

When they returned, they brought Neville and Hannah along with them. The compartment was filled to its capacity... and it was loud. Dean was in high spirits, and took it upon himself to drench everyone in joy. There was much laughter, teasing, chattering –

Hermione pressed herself as deeply into her corner as she could, pulled her legs up, and dived into a book. She didn’t want to bother with them, and they didn’t bother her.

*At nine o’clock in the evening, the body of the house at the Théâtre des Variétés was still all but empty...*

...

A steady pain behind her eyes: She blinked and looked up.

Night had fallen, and the train’s lamps weren’t bright enough to read by. She slipped her wand out of her pocket and swiftly conjured a tiny bluebell flame to hover over her book.

The group in the compartment hadn’t mellowed in the least. They’d decorated Theo’s antlers with gorse flowers, while he looked like he’d finally achieved the level of Zen necessary to endure such behaviour without suffering a stroke. She cast a zippy glance across their faces, but froze dead when she found Malfoy staring intently at her wand.

She stowed it away quickly, feeling slightly panicked, and his eyes lifted. He was utterly expressionless as they exchanged one fleeting look... and then he turned away.

She felt angry – angry – as she glared down at the paperback on her lap. He’d think it was because
of what he had said. He was probably feeling triumphant, smug, and vindicated. There was a
prickling need to look his way one more time... and she resolutely clamped down on it.

Vandeuvres smiled his thin smile, and made a little movement to signify he did not care. Assuredly,
‘twas not he who would ever have prevented poor, dear Blanche scoring a success. He was more
interested by the spectacle which Steiner was presenting to the table at large.

Hermione loved books, yes... but sometimes she was sure that they bloody hated her.

She hopped off the train and onto the platform of Hogsmeade station, and the steam fizzing out
from under the train mingled with the night’s fog.

*The burnt out ends of smokey days...*

Little flecks of snow swirled like flies around lamps. There was an indistinguishable figure
standing atop the bridge that arched over the tracks: a dark lump and the glowing end of a
cigarette.

Hermione kept behind her friends, still not ready to engage, still not feeling solid enough to coax
her facial muscles into a smile. She kept looking at the strange bridge-top figure... was it looking
back? Were they connected, the two of them, in their moment of loneliness?

“...And remember how Goldstein thought he could juggle six beer bottles, and...”

Ah, they were talking about the infamous New Year’s party. Hermione slowed her pace even
more. She studied her shoes as she walked – so dark against the snow, so dark that they seemed to
blend into her shadow. It was like she was melting; melting into absolute blackness... melting into
an abyss –

Someone was walking over her grave. There was an unsettling tremor going on in her stomach that
was sure to explode out of her as some sort of madness.

“Coming, Hermione?” Ginny called with one foot inside a thestral carriage, and she nodded in
response and followed.

Dean, Neville, and Hannah were already inside, still nauseatingly merry, so she focused intensely
outside the window, at the fog and the darkness.

“Are you okay?” Ginny murmured close to her ear.

“Yeah,” she whispered back, without turning.

*That evening, the common room was alit with mirth as people wittered over Theo’s antlers and he
continued to accept their mockery with a kind of resigned, self-effacing grace. Malfoy stood to one*
side, arms crossed and lightly smirking, like an artist observing the observers of his great masterpiece. The gramophone was blasting awful metal nonsense.

Hermione slipped away into her room. She wanted to escape the racket and she absolutely needed to escape Terry’s persevering stare.

Her room. Her generic, warm, comfortable room.

She undressed and pulled the curtains aside so that moonlight spread across the space, eliminating the need for any other source of illumination. She lay in bed, counting her breaths and thought....

*Tomorrow.*

Tomorrow she’d stow away the looming disquietude that was choking her soul, and tomorrow she’d get up and be good.

*You tossed a blanket from the bed,*
*You lay upon your back, and waited;*
*You dozed, and watched the night revealing*
*The thousand sordid images*
*Of which your soul was constituted;*
*They flickered against the ceiling.*

The narrow concrete road curved in a smooth path around the lake, and her footsteps fell upon it with rhythmic uniformity.

Thud, thud, and thud, thud.

It was so cold, that the sweat that had built up around the back of her neck made her shiver.

Just twenty minutes into her run, it began to snow, thick and fast.

She vanished her conjured road with a flick of her wand, and trudged back towards the castle, trembling all the way.

A hot shower later, with her hair in a bun and books in her bag, she descended the stairs swaddled in stony determination to take whatever the day had to offer with unflappable optimism.

But that was all well until she saw Terry waiting for her by the common room door.

“Hi,” he said cautiously, with his hands deep in his pockets.

“Oh. Hello.”

“I... I think we should talk.”

“I’m terribly hungry,” she blurted out with desperation.

“Well, alright. Later then? In the evening, after supper?”

She envisioned pulling her fortitude closer around herself like a cloak and replied, “Yes, okay.”
She barely ate that evening; all she could think about was what she’d felt waking up on the first day of the new year – nausea, amnesia, and regret.

He was standing expectantly outside the Great Hall, and she nodded bracingly as she approached him. He suggested that they walk and she agreed, crossing her arms across her torso.

“So,” he began, once they were in a secluded part of a fifth-floor corridor. Hermione waited for him to continue, but he seemed to be measuring his words with great apprehension. He bit his lip, cast his eyes around the space, drawing out the awful awkward silence until Hermione couldn’t stop herself from –

“I’m sorry!” he rushed out the moment her mouth opened. “I shouldn’t have – I don’t know what I was thinking! I was... shit, I was so plastered!”

“So was I,” Hermione mumbled, “Honestly, I don’t remember much of... anything.”

“Brilliant,” he muttered bitterly, “Just... brilliant. This was so not how I’d hoped to do this.”

She blinked, taking in his unhappy expression. He still wasn’t looking at her. “What do you mean?” she hedged.

“I’m sure you know well enough by now that I...” He fumbled with his sleeves and finally glanced at her with a puckered brow. “That I fancy you. And now I’ve gone and bollocksed it up, haven’t I?”

“Terry...” What if she just ran?

“Give me another chance?” he begged... so earnestly that it was her turn to look away. “PLEASE. I think you’re brilliant and very pretty, and I’m so sorry for acting like an idiot.”

“It wasn’t just you,” she whispered, wondering if her guts really were lying in a pile by her feet, “I was completely out of it, and – um –”

“Give me another chance,” he repeated, and took a step closer.

(Oh dear.)

“Go to Hogsmeade with me on Saturday? Like a – a proper date, yeah?”

“Okay,” she said softly. And when she looked back up at him, he was grinning so widely. “Good. Good. Excellent. There will be no alcohol, alright? I won’t even drink butterbeer.”

She emitted a little laugh, and squeezed her folded arms against her body. “We should head back.”

“Yeah.”

She let him talk most of the way. He graciously (over) compensated for her reticence by retelling every second of their shared lessons that day, she ‘hmm’ed and ‘haha yes’ed wherever necessary.

Once inside the common room, he gawkily half-lifted his arms as though he was going to hug her, but then thought better of it, and made do with a stiff wave. Hermione still wasn’t able to unstick her tightly crossed arms.

“I’ll see you around,” he smiled.

She nodded and wheeled around, swaying uncertainly on the spot for a moment or two... until she saw a pair of antlers by the window and dashed towards them gratefully.

“Hi, Buckie,” she sighed as she sank down beside him.

“What did he want?” Theo asked a bit roughly.

“To apologise. For the whole...” She waved her hand about. “Thingy.”

“Ah. And?”

“And nothing?”

“Hermione. And?”

“Fine,” she huffed, and fell limply against the back of the sofa, “We’re going to Hogsmeade this weekend.”
“Together?”
“Together.”

He leaned back as well, eyeing her carefully – and a little circumspectly. “Congratulations.”

“Heh.”

She pushed stray curls away from her face and rubbed her eyes so hard that she was briefly blinded by little blooms of white hot light. In that interim, Neville and Hannah made their way over to the armchairs in front of her and Theo.

“You look tired, Hermione,” Neville remarked kindly.

“Hmm.”

“I have just the thing; hold on.” He fished a box out of his bag and held it out to her. “Mooncake?”

On Saturday morning, she let the conditioner sit in her hair for a full five minutes.

Anaemic sunlight withered into her room and slithered along her side as she stood before her mirror and twisted the top half of her hair into a bun. The remaining strands drizzled down her back, dark against the cream lambswool of her decidedly un-baggy jumper. She put on the quill earrings Ginny had given her for Christmas.

Pretty. He thought she was very pretty.

She swiped some colour across her mouth and wound a grey chequered scarf around her neck... the moment was so unlike moments it ought to have been exactly like.

Take for instance, her feelings before the Yule Ball. Jittery in the best possible way, nervous but practically floating into the air with excitement. It had, (she rolled her eyes as she pulled on her boots,) been a childish fantasy come to life.

Then there had been that time she’d gone to Pete’s house, long after her parents had fallen asleep, with a heart full of fire and a mind full of intent. Nervousness had been prevalent then as well... but overruled by determination... curiosity... desire...

It had been all blissful anticipation for the short period of time when she’d thought she was going to Slughorn’s party with Ron...

What was this feeling she was stuck with now? The door closed behind her with a snap.

But Terry was charming.

In The Three Broomsticks they sat, across from each other at a table close to the fireplace, sipping on hot chocolate. He laughed a lot – and smiled even more – as they discussed the week’s Charms assignment. He didn’t glance at Rosmerta’s behind when she passed by. He didn’t tap his fingers against the table, or grimace, or sigh, or betray any such signs of impatience and boredom.

And though he didn’t quite bring anything new to the table, (all his notions and opinions were things she’d already considered,) it was gratifying to be able to discuss such matters outside the
purview of her own head. He’d make a great study-mate... like Padma. The fact that he wanted to be more than that didn’t have to be a problem. Hell, she’d kissed Padma too. Maybe that was how Hermione Granger finalised deals; how she established intellectual partnerships.

Sealed with a kiss.

_I’ll see you in the sunlight_
_I’ll hear your voice everywhere_
_I’ll run to tenderly –_

“Hermione? You still there?”
She cleared her throat and mumbled, “Yes, sorry. You were saying?”
“I asked if you’d read anything about volume or density effecting the efficacy of Protean charms,” Terry said.
And Terry smiled.

By the time she’d polished off her cocoa, Hermione was more or less at ease. They walked out into a brighter day. The sun was stronger at noon – though its warmth was heavily diluted by icy, restless winds. They engaged in the kind of casual small talk that didn’t require more than half your mind to participate in. (No more than an hour after they’d part, Hermione would forget everything that was said.)
Yet, she was not bored or discontented. In fact, she cherished every laugh she drew out of him, and smiled to herself every time his arm brushed against hers – which was quite frequently, as they were strolling quite close to one another.
They made a stop at the book shop, browsed for an hour and came out empty handed. They re-entered the pub and shared a beef hotpot.

Bypassing the carriages, they chose to walk their way back to Hogwarts. He told her about his family, (his American ancestors, his muggle ancestors, his parents, and his sister,) and she reciprocated.
Then, secreted behind a pillar just a few feet from their common room, he took her hand and said, “I had a wonderful time today, Hermione.”
She stared at his thumb as he stroked it along her knuckles and replied, “I did, too.”
He kissed her cheek for much longer than the average duration of a standard cheek-kiss.

The next day she had to endure two interrogations.

1. Ginny:

“Soooo, how was it?”
“Nice.”
“What a depressingly tepid word.”
“Oh god, all right. It was lovely.”
Ginny smirked. “Better. What did you do?”
“We talked. Walked. Went to the bookstore.”
“Merlin. He’s perfect for you, isn’t he?”
“I don’t know about that,” Hermione mumbled.
“When are you seeing him again?”
“At three... in the potion’s lab.”
“Oh, you know that’s not what I meant!”
“Ha. Yes. We’re going out again next week.”
“That’s great!”

2. Theo:

“Well, how’d it go then?”
“It was ni – lovely.”
“What did you do?”
“Ate at The Three Broomsticks, walked about, went to the bookstore...”
“And? What did you talk about?”
“This and that.”
“What and what?”
“Stuff.”
“Yes.”
“Are you going out again?”
“Yes. Next weekend.”

He pursed his lips and made to drag a hand through his hair... but was impeded by his antlers. So he swore and scowled and huffed and grumbled.

“Why the hell have both my best friends decided to go out with random Ravenclaws with weird last names?”
“Um... seriously?” Hermione levelled a pointed look at him.
“What?”
She raised her eyebrows.

“Excuse me? Luna’s not – she doesn’t have a – Luna isn’t random!”
“Sure,” Hermione grinned, “Not now, but –”
“Shut it. Boot is a sap and the Bowtruckle is a bore. Luna is a glorious, divine creature and I am stalking away from you now – stalking the fuck away in a righteous strop – for suggesting that those three are similar in any way.”

Terry was waiting for her in the morning, and he walked with her down to the Great Hall for breakfast. It happened again the next two days, and Hermione realised that he intended to make a... thing... out of it. He even chaperoned her between lessons, which would have been pleasant since they mostly talked about the things they’d learned... but for the fact that on the fourth day, he seized her hand.

And then that became a regular.

Hermione loathed the way people stared. He had a bounce in his step as he rabbitted on about the
merits of black soil, and she shambled along uneasily, begging her palm to become sweaty and clammy and generally unpleasant to hold. They were going to the library to meet with Padma, Tracy, Anthony, and Ernie, to make a diligent revision plan for the upcoming N.E.W.T.s.

“We probably should put aside the maximum amount of time for Arithmancy, Potions, and Defence Against the Dark Arts,” Terry bloviated.

“That’s right,” she agreed, “Wait, I need to show you something—”

She wrenched her hand free and stuck it into her bag, pretending to fish around for a piece of parchment that was sitting right on top.

“Here,” she declared, “I’ve made a rough schedule – what do you think?”

Owing to the dismal paucity of things to do at Hogsmeade, their second date ended up being more or less identical to the first. The weather was blustery and their steps were slow; they traced a path encircling the entire village.

Not many people were out and about. Eventually, they wandered a bit away from the main street, to the barren grove that crowded around the Shrieking Shack.

There were plenty of silent stretches as they ambulated amid the ashen trunks. At times she revelled at the arm around her waist and at the young man it was attached to; the young man who thought she was brilliant, who smiled when she smiled, simply because she had smiled. At other times she thought about all the studying she could have been doing instead.

“Ah! Sunlight. Finally!”

It was barely anything: A weak puddle of light between two heaps of bramble, but Hermione helplessly chuckled at Terry’s enthusiasm.

“Not nearly enough to thaw me, I’m afraid.”

“You’re right,” he agreed, “Shall we head back then?”

She looked over her shoulder, at the seemingly endless frozen road they had to trudge back through. “Yes, we—”

He ran his hand along her arm, and when she turned back, she found him standing very, very close.

All of a sudden, the stillness around them deepened tenfold.

He was hesitant, timid. His eyes were round, his face was red, and he put his gloved fingers under her chin and tilted her face up. When he kissed her, she closed her eyes and laid her palms against his chest. She focused on the warmth, the softness, and the gentle caresses of his lips against hers. It was nice... really nice. She’d forgotten how good kissing felt.

He didn’t push her too far, didn’t try to deepen their tentative buss. They traded smiles after they broke apart; he pressed his thumbs against her cheeks that were undoubtedly blazing.

As they tramped back to the castle, she kept her hands in her pockets.

He kissed her again, at the foot of the eighth year tower.
The arrival of the second half of January marked the official implementation of *Hermione Granger’s Vanquishment of Newts Plan*, (No animals were harmed during the making and/or execution of this plan.)

With her new wand and her unquenchable drive, she would absorb every last word in her books and master every single spell and grasp, support, *and* counter every supposition and –

And she would trip over absolutely nothing and knock her knee against the corner of a table.

*Argh.*

She stood in the middle of the common room, rubbing her painful kneecap, and she cursed divine intervention or whatever it was that had deemed it necessary to humble her mushrooming bravado.

“Hermione – *calm down, good man* – Oi, Hermione!”

Theo beckoned from one of the armchairs by the fireplace, and in the one across from him sat a seething Malfoy. She approached them cautiously, eyes darting between Malfoy and the glinting silver bells – *yes, bells* – hanging off Theo’s antlers. She came to a halt behind a third chair, resting her still ringing leg against the back of it.

“Hurt yourself, did you?” Theo grinned.

She scowled. “You wearing bells.”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “The antlers will be gone in two days time... I’m letting Luna have her fun till then. At least it’s only bells now. Up until an hour ago I –”

“Did you need something?” she interrupted brusquely. He was eating into her Transfiguration hour. And dear god, HER KNEE.

Theo eyed her tartly for her tone, drawing out his pause vindictively. “Not me. Draco here needs your help.”

“I,” Malfoy snarled slowly, “*Do not need* –”

“Can it!” Theo ordered, “You need help. I’m bored to tears watching you whimper over that parchment.”

“Then you should just bugger off!”

“We were supposed to go flying!”

“Oh, *now* you want to –”


Malfoy turned to her, eyes flashing. “Not necessary.”

She craned her neck to catch a glimpse of what he was working on.

“Arithmancy homework?” she ventured.

He opened his mouth – to rebuke her, no doubt – but then closed it on a huff. Firelight swirled in his eyes of cinder; shadows pooled along his cheekbones and under his jaw.

“The *Chytroi* prophesy,” he muttered lowly, “There’s something off with the calculations – I’ve gone over it a hundred times, but end up with a seven digit decimal each time.”

“May I see?”

She stretched out her arm, and he, with a great big long suffering heave, deposited his work in her hand.

There it was, his tidy slanting cursive, just like it was on those slips of paper that remained between the pages of her books.
“You’re missing something,” she announced as she handed his parchment back to him.
“No, really?” he scoffed.
“Or, rather... nothing.”
His lip curled.
“Actually, it’s what you aren’t missing.”
“What?”
“You aren’t missing nothing. You need to remove nothing.”
“Are you ins–” He frowned down at his parchment “–OH.”

“What just happened?” Theo asked as Malfoy vanished his calculations and started over.
“Modern Arithmency has embraced zero as an integer, but the Ancient Greeks hadn’t. To estimate the probability of predictions made in that context, you have to accommodate their number system.”
“Righto. Of course.” Theo stretched and sat back with his arms behind his head.

Hermione watched Malfoy work for a beat. His head was bent and his hair hung over his brow. His parchment rested on the arm of his chair, and his quill moved quickly across it. The veins in his hand were underscored by shadows.
And before she could stop herself she blurted out: “Well, Malfoy. Aren’t you going to thank me?”
If she hadn’t been looking at him so closely, she might have missed the infinitesimal twitch his wrist performed. But he didn’t sneer or scowl or glare. He didn’t even look up.
“Not a chance, Granger.”
Grinning widely, she pushed away from the chair and went on her way.

There was no hand holding happening that morning. Rather, Hermione and Terry were unwittingly part of a parade while going down for breakfast: A swarm led by Theo, who was jubilantly singing about his unadorned head to the tune of the William Tell Overture.

(“I am – I am – I’m antler-free – I am – I am – I’m antler-free – I am – I am – I’m antler-free–”)
Her hands were pressed to her sides as she nearly doubled over with laughter.

(“I AAAAAAM – I’M ANTLER FREE–”)

She ate in a hurry, eager to talk to Theo before class because being around him when he was in one of his silly moods was much too fun to miss out on.

He beamed and slung his arm around her shoulder as they walked across the bright white snow-carpet in the central courtyard.
“I feel lighter,” he crooned, “I feel free! I can finally sleep the right way again!”
“What do you mean?”
“I could hardly put my head in its rightful place on my bed, could I? Haven’t you noticed that horned creatures never put headboards on their beds?”
“Right.” She giggled. “So can we expect some sort of retribution soon? Will Malfoy develop a pair of yellow bat wings tomorrow?”
“Nah. Tempting… but nah. We have an unspoken deal – no pranks outside the flat.”
Hermione shot him an incredulous look. “And you’re abiding by that? I mean, it wasn’t like you only suffered those antlers inside your flat...”
“I know,” he exhaled dramatically, “Damned bastard found a loophole. But I’m not going to exploit it. Thing is, darling, with someone as competitive as Draco, it’s always better to err to the side of caution. For the sake of my general well-being I’m going to let him have this victory. For now.”
“That’s jolly sensible of you,” she grinned.
“Jolly sensible, that’s me. It’s also why I’d never make any sort of wager with you. You’re even worse than him.”
“How dare you!” she glared, but it was in jest. His cheerfulness was far too contagious.
“And in conclusion I’d like to say this: With or without antlers, I am tremendously handsome.”
“Oh yes. So bucking handsome – Eep!”

She jumped away as he lunged towards her, and sped into the DADA classroom. Hestia was already there, standing readily by the blackboard; Theo could do nought but make a funny face at her.

Days replaced days in which she spent much time with Terry, sequestered in nooks and alcoves, engaged in exchanges of incremental intimacy: Gentle tame kisses to deeper bolder kisses to touching over clothes then under clothes...
It was all very systematic, like they were following some sanctioned manual that gave step by step instructions for being in a romantic relationship.

That isn’t to say that she felt like she was simply going through the motions. She liked arching into him when they snogged, his fingers digging into her back and hers tangled in his hair. She liked his hands on her bum and his mouth on her neck.
He had winsome eyes, she thought. Kind. Hazel.
His exuberance was untiring. She’d often pull away, to breathe, to check the time, to get her head straight, but he’d draw her close again. He’d touch her face and say, “You’re so beautiful, Hermione,” or “I’m mad about you, Hermione,” and she’d laugh nervously and kiss him again.

Fee-fi-fo-fum,
The world is full of thoughtless scum.

Hermione and her wrath were a searing desert wind. She swept from the library to the common room like a hot flurry, sandblasting the walls and leaving a trail of smoke in her wake. The door opened on its own, and she flinched; Theo stood at the threshold.
“Well, look at that face like thunder,” he remarked gaily.
“Shut up.”
“What’s wrong?”
“This stupid school is what’s wrong. Having a billion people sit for the N.E.W.T.s at once is what’s wrong. There isn’t a single copy of Early Numerology left in the library! And I don’t know where in god’s name Padma is, so I can’t even ask to borrow hers, and – Why are you laughing?!”
“You’re just so furious!”
“And you find that funny?” she hissed.
“Yes! I mean – NO – I – I – I think Draco has that book.”
“Bully for him!”
“C’mere.”

He grasped her by the elbow and dragged her inside, and kept dragging her across the room making a steady beeline towards —

No.
She desperately tried to wrench herself free from his hold but he did not relent. He did not relent until they were standing right in front of the table Malfoy was sat at. It was crowded with parchments and open books and spare quills. He looked up at them and blinked disorientedly for a second, before donning his typical expression of unimpressed, single-brow-arched, nose-in-the-air condescension.

“What?”
“That book there,” Theo began while gesturing vaguely towards all the tomes scattered about, “Is it Numero-whatsit?”
“No,” Malfoy replied shortly.
“Yes, it is!” Hermione exclaimed haplessly, “Early Numerology! It’s right there!”
Malfoy turned his stony gaze onto her. “And what of it?” he drawled.
“I need it.”
“Too bad. As you can clearly see, I’m currently using it.”
She glowered. “Yes, well... the library has run out. Will you be finished with it any time soon?”
“No.”

He was such an arse. She prepared to flounce away, but Theo yanked her back in place.

“Well there’s no reason you can’t share the book.”
Hermione and Malfoy, as one, cried, “Absolutely not!”
With a smarmy grin, Theo dragged her to the chair on the other end of the table and forced her down into it.
“Stop manhandling me!” she growled, and he ignored her, placing his hands firmly on her shoulders to keep her from springing up and away.
“Now, kids... daddy has to go meet mummy for an intensely hot broom cupboard shag. Do you think you can behave?”
Malfoy grimaced. “Go away before I’m forced to reacquaint you with your antlers.”
Theo kissed the top of Hermione’s head and left.

The silence after his departure was absolute. She didn’t really know what to do, and she didn’t know what her face was conveying. But whatever it was, it sure as hell irritated Malfoy. His appearance suggested as much, with mild undertones of disgust.
She sighed, suddenly so tired of talking, second guessing, and playing along with the nuanced attributes of all her different associations. Fuck it.
“Could we just share the book?” she muttered, and added a “Please,” when Malfoy’s nose wrinkled.

His face smoothened out in slow motion; a rather fascinating metamorphosis. Eventually, impassively, he pushed Early Numerology to the centre of the table with his index finger. Her shoulders relaxed with relief, and the circumstances didn’t matter anymore. She could get her assignment done. After she’d taken quills and parchment from her bag, she set it on the floor by her feet.
They would stay that way for over an hour; quiet, unremitting, barely ever looking away from their respective work. The angle of the sun would change; their shadows would swell and shrink.

But before that, when Hermione’s ink-loaded quill was poised an inch above her parchment, she said, “Malfoy?”
He looked back questioningly.
“Thank you.”
One side of his mouth pulled up, high up. It wasn’t a smirk, and it wasn’t a grin... It was something in between.
“Fuck off,” he said.
Leafless branches on pitch black tree-silhouettes swayed to a divine beat like the swinging pendulum of a metronome. The moon was a perfect semicircle; a half disc made of prime marble on a velvety sky. Hermione’s room was a dark extension of the winter night.

She pulled her chair up to the window and sat with her knees pressed against her chest. She was flustered, mortified, and sore between her legs. Staring outside, she drew in a deep breath and thought back to the evening that had led to this wretched moment.

Supper. Warm chicken casserole. Cabinet pudding. Neville accidentally tipping his tumbler...

Terry drew her to his side as she was exiting the great hall, and instead of holding her hand, he slipped his inside her robe and laid it against the small of her back. His fingers trailed up and down her spine in the most distracting way. When he whisperingly asked her if she’d like to come up to his room for a bit, she gladly agreed.

What followed was to be expected. They kissed, touched, and clothes were shed piece by piece. He looked into her eyes with a question, and she nodded affirmatively.

Then they were on his bed. He lay on top of her – so much bulkier than she’d realised – progressing with purpose towards the inevitable –

But then she – (“Oh, god,” she groaned and buried her face between her knees,) – she wasn’t able to... to... unclench.

Terry stroked, coaxed, and gently cajoled. He even tried to pull away but she insisted, no please I want this, bringing them back to the same humiliating cross point. Eventually, he used a spell on her. Do you trust me, and he laid his wand against her folds and – (she whimpered and cringed so hard that her joints creaked,) – and they went through with... whatever. There was no question of her enjoying a second of it.

At least Terry got off, and after, he held her close and cooed reassuringly in her ear. It’s never smooth sailing the first time.

She didn’t correct him. She didn’t asked why on earth he knew a spell like that. She stayed absolutely quiet with nausea churning at the back of her throat, and she waited for him to fall asleep.

Thankfully, it didn’t take long. She slipped out of his bed, got dressed, and tumbled over to her room, where she swiftly undressed again, and aimed a series of spells at her womb. A hot shower followed. Under that scorching cascade, she slathered body wash all over herself to eradicate the pungent smell that lingered around her from Terry’s room. She scrubbed around her neck, down her chest, her ribs...

Her hand iced over as it got to the base of her stomach. When she finally got going again, her eyes were squeezed shut.

Then she put on fresh knickers and her dad’s old jumper.
She pulled her chair up to the window and sat with her knees pressed against her chest. She was flustered, mortified, and sore between her legs.
So flustered, so very mortified, shit, she didn’t know what to do anymore.

She didn’t want to live anymore.

Well, that was dramatic.

Ugh. This hadn’t happened with Pete; not even close. Perhaps it was because she’d been out of her mind and so desperately wanting a distraction? But what went wrong? Why did that have to happen? How was she ever going to look Terry in the eye again?

She straightened her legs and they exploded with pins and needles from being constricted for so long. Like Mr. Wobblyman, she rocked her way to bed, where she curled into a foetal position. It goes without saying that she barely slept that night.

She was pressed against the wall by the door between the girls’ dorms and the common room. There were just fifteen minutes left before breakfast ended; she’d spent most of the hour cowering in her room, hoping that Terry would give up waiting for her and leave. And yet, there she stood by the door jamb, too scared to peek and see if he was still around or not. Perhaps she could conjure a mirror? Why oh why hadn’t she asked Harry for his cloak? Surely her need was greater than whatever Auror business he’d use it for.

The sound of feet tripping down the stairs paused her planning, and she looked over, smiling wanly at Padma and Tracey. They both looked puzzled by the picture she made.
“What are you doing?” Padma asked.
“Nothing,” she answered in a fairly sullen manner.
“Really? Because to me, it looks like you’re hiding.”
Hermione could only purse her lips and sniff.
A very evil grin spread across Padma’s face. “Are you hiding from Terry?”
“No.”
“You are!” she laughed, “What did he do to warrant this?”
“He didn’t do anything!”
“Well then. What did you do?”
“Nothing!”
“Stop being a cow, Padma,” Tracey chided, “Hermione, would you like me to check and see if he’s there?”
“Yes, please,” Hermione mumbled in a small voice.
Tracey’s demeanour cracked; she was fighting a smile as she peeped around the door.
“All clear,” she assured, and smirked when Padma let out a giggle.
“Thanks.”

Bypassing the Great Hall, she headed straight towards the greenhouses. She inhaled great big gulps
of clean, cold air and listened to the sound of snow crunching beneath her boots. *Boots.* *Boot.* Just like that she was back to square one.

She hurried out after the lesson was over. She had felt his eyes on her the whole bloody time. “Hermione!” she heard him call out from behind, but Ginny, Demelza, and Dean were up ahead and she rushed to them.

Even quidditch talk was better than facing Terry at the moment.

But by the end of the day, she felt childish and guilty over the crestfallen look she’d seen on his face every time she dodged him. And so, that evening, she dragged herself to the library, where she knew he was studying with a few of his mates. A “few” turned out to be a few too many – and when she asked Terry if she could have a word in private, she saw Padma struggle to stifle a smile.

“So now you want to talk?” he responded coolly and crossed his arms. “Yes, please,” she croaked.

He got up with a heavy roll of his eyes and led her to a vacant corner. Hermione, for good measure, cast a quick *muffliato* around them. “Well?” he stated, eyes narrowed with ill-temper. “I’m sorry I’ve been so difficult—”

“Difficult?” he echoed with disbelief, “You’ve been a nightmare.” She flushed and wrung her hands. “I was just so embarrassed, you see!”

“What for?” he cried. “Seriously, what the hell for? Sure, it was awkward initially, but it happens, alright? Specially the first time—”

Again, she said nothing. “– besides... it got so bloody good after that, yeah?” He stepped right up to her and tucked her hair behind her ear. “Right,” she whispered, blinking rapidly.

“You see?” he lowered his voice to match, “Nothing to be embarrassed about.” He kissed her and she forsook all her hang-ups and simply fell into it. Her tired brain appreciated his affection like never before.

“Are you planning to follow a career in Magical Law, Ms. Granger?” asked Scrimgeour.

“No, I’m not,” retorted Hermione. “I’m hoping to do some good in the world!”

Over a year ago, a combat-ready, idealistic version of her had scoffed at a career in law. The slightly older, world-weary version of her scoffed at *that.* On a Saturday morning, she sat in Headmistress McGonagall’s highly organised office, seeking some clarity. It jarred and disturbed her to be like this – to only have a fuzzy plan for the future...
based on a throwaway comment by not one, but two Ministers of Magic. How had this become her life?
In her youthful zeal, she had rejected the thought of becoming a cog in the shambling bureaucratic machinery. She had so many plans, most of which led to her piloting a revolution, setting off great change...
Then she learned that after you’ve fought a war and skirted around dystopia, all you really want is to find the peaceful way to do things.

And yet, how entirely mad was it that she was going straight from school into the business of law making, without spending any time actually studying law?

“You learn on the job,” McGonagall reassured her, “The first year, you will mostly be tailing an official, sitting for meetings, attending seminars, researching…”
“But is that enough?” she questioned fretfully, “Shouldn’t there be some sort of test to gauge whether candidates understands the law well enough?”
“I’m sure the department does not take this lightly, Ms. Granger. If they do not believe you to be up for the job, the will make it abundantly clear.”
“O-Of course,” she stammered.
From his gilded frame, the portrait of Phineas Nigellus tsked loudly. “I for one wouldn’t consider this young lady capable of any—”
“Yes, thank you, Phineas,” McGonagall snapped.

Hermione left forty minutes later, with a comprehensive list of reference books, a contact, (one Madam Gemma Mandrake, head of the Wizengamot Administration Services,) and not even a smidgen of confidence. The only thing she was glad about was the fact that Dumbledore’s portrait had remained empty.

It was noon, and they slinked into his room after indulging in a couple of boozy hot toddies at Hog’s Head. The air was buttery golden like the steaming beverage in her mug had been... like Terry’s eyes in that light... like the ends of her hair when it spilled over her face as she bent to pull off her socks...

*“Does this make up for the last time then?” he asked slyly as he buttoned up his trousers.
Her answering smile was genuine. “More than.”
“Gods, look at you,” he murmured, and she flushed, standing there in just her t-shirt and knickers.

He took her hand (well, of course he did,) as they returned downstairs... but she pulled them apart the moment they did, for downstairs there was quite a scene.
At the centre of it was Malfoy. His hair was all over the place, his shirt was half tucked out and wrinkled, and he was positively flaming with anger. Theo and Neville were close behind – the former looking equally furious, the latter a bit terrified. Facing off against him, scowling feverishly – Ginny. Everybody else had formed a ring around them.

“What’s going on?” Hermione whispered to Dean who was sat on an armchair at the fringe. He pulled a face. “Some fifth year tried to deck Malfoy because his Dark Mark was showing.”

“So according to you, Weasley,” Malfoy growled, “I deserve to get the shit beaten out of me?”

“That’s not what I’m saying, you pillock! You just need to have the decency to keep that Mark covered out of –”

“I shouldn’t have to do any such –”

“OUT OF RESPECT for the people to whom it means the death of a loved one!”

“Oh, you think it’s a symbol of happiness to me? You think it’s something I like seeing? But there’s nothing I can do about it, and I’m not going to fucking hide it because some wimpy little twat can’t handle –”

“That kid – Alex – his mother was killed! She was decapitated and left under a Dark Mark! How dare you call him wimpy? How dare you go around flashing that hideous thing –”

“I am NOT ashamed of it!” Malfoy roared. He was leaning forward like he was ready to spring; his tiger-footed rage was making him visibly quiver. “I did what I had to do! And if you have a problem with –”

“This is not about you!” Ginny spat, “This is far bigger than you and your feelings, and –”

Something that felt a lot like delirium took over Hermione. She didn’t know where it came from, but it carried her into the thick of the commotion, and it made her reach out and touch Ginny’s shoulder.

“Leave it,” she told her firmly, “Malfoy’s right. People will just have to deal with his Mark.”

“What?!” Ginny hissed, aghast, but Hermione ignored her. She was too focused on Malfoy, the way hints of confusion began to seep into his posture and the angle at which his eyebrows slanted. When his eyes where fixed on her, she lifted her chin defiantly.

“Isn’t that right, Malfoy? It’s just the emblem of the darkest and vilest wizard of our age. Nothing to make a fuss about. Nothing seriously distressing, like say... a wand.”

Oof, the way his face fell slack with shock was exquisite. Then he sucked in a deep breath, and he seemed to swell. Fury bloomed high on his cheeks and across the bridge of his nose. She held her breath.

Surely she was in for it now.

His eyes were round; opened wide. His pupils had constricted into two tiny specks floating in whirlpool storm clouds. She’d had it.

Except... not.

Malfoy turned around and marched away. He tore through the huddle of spectators, kicked a ripple on the carpet, and thudded his way up to the boys’ dorms. Everybody turned to watch him go, and when he’d disappeared from sight, they all turned to stare at her. She wanted to crumble.

“Was that really necessary?”

Theo now stood right before her and his look, voice, tone, everything seared his disappointment into her very soul.

It wasn’t really necessary. But no. Actually – “Yes, it was!” she replied hotly, suppressing the discomfort that was bubbling away somewhere inside her.

He seemed to be on the cusp of retorting, when he suddenly snapped his head to the right and
barked, “Where are you going?”
Alarmed at having been put on the spot in such a manner, Mandy blinked vulnerably. “I – erm – I’m going to check up on Dra–”
“No!” Theo growled, “Now is not the time for you to show him your compassion, or your tits, or whatever it is you’re good f–”
“THEODORE!” Hermione reached out and shoved him. He grit his teeth insolently and she glared back in horrified disbelief. She hadn’t ever seen him like this. It was like... any second now... he’d burst apart...

“Theo. Stop it.”
Luna appeared at his side and took one of his clenched fists in both her hands. He sighed heavily and swayed on his feet; his eyes fell to his and Luna’s hands, Luna’s face, then Hermione’s... and finally he looked a bit like himself again.
“I’m sorry,” he mumbled at Mandy’s feet, “That was an... atrocious thing to say. I am truly, very sorry. But trust me, Draco needs to be left alone right now.”

He let Luna lead him out of the room, and left behind such astonishment, so many shuddering exhales, so many scandalised looks. Hermione saw Terry making purposeful strides towards her, so with superhuman immediacy, she scurried away into her own room.

Sunlight had lost its allure – she closed her curtains with a careless wave of her hand. She sank to the floor by the foot of her bed with her legs stretched out before her. There was a loose thread hanging out from the hem of her jeans. Her wand was on her lap and she felt, most patently, the subtle alchemy of shifting conceptions.
It wasn’t like he could go out and purchase a new arm. And... He shouldn’t have to. She ran a finger across the delicate, twining pattern that twisted around her wand and imagined what it might have been like if she hadn’t been able to free herself from the physical reminder of her most traumatic moment.
*I’m not ashamed of this*, he’d said, but Hermione thought he really was. She had been wretchedly ashamed of Bellatrix’s wand, and nothing about its hold on her had been directly caused by a choice she’d made herself. He’d seen terrible things too, hadn’t he? Every time he looked at his arm he must be reminded...

Blast it all, she felt terrible.

She thought people putting the Mark above all that Malfoy had done right. She thought about Theo’s meltdown, about Malfoy breaking down over his dad in the library, and about Harry talking about the moment of Dumbledore’s death.

That room in Malfoy manor with the mirrors and the chandelier: Moments before Bellatrix arrived, Malfoy had stared into her face and grudgingly confirmed her identity...

She pressed cold fingertips against burning eyes and swallowed.

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She finally found Theo again long after dark, gazing pensively out of a window a short distance away from the entrance to their common room. He turned when he heard her approaching
footsteps, and bound her way at once. Before she could so much as open her mouth, he’d pulled her into a tight hug. Her cheek was pressed against his chest, his rested on the top of her head, and they held on for a long time. “I was an arse,” he rasped when they broke apart. She wiped the corner of her eyes with her thumbs and replied, “I suppose I was too.” “A bit,” he agreed, laughing humourlessly, “Are you up for a walk? I don’t want to go back in there for a while. People keep staring, and fucking Zabini has been shooting awful, smug smiles at me...” “What has he got to be smug about?” she demanded with bewilderment. “He believes this is comeuppance, Draco getting roughed up, and all. That’s what he gets for turning his back on his real friends.” Theo’s mouth was one thin line. With his head bowed, the top half of his face was completely concealed by his dishevelled fringe and its considerable shadow. She reached out and swept it to the side. “In that case, he’s the arse.” He bestowed the smallest of smiles upon her, though it was obviously something he struggled with. Then they took a long walk, from one end of the castle to the other. He didn’t want to talk, and she didn’t want to force him to.

Hermione’s schedule was running away from her. At times she panicked. Her hair would be a fuzzy ball of static, and with ink on all fingers she’d be flapping about amid a pile of books, convinced that she was going to fail all her N.E.W.T.s. She’d have no choice but to move to Australia to become the receptionist at her parents’ clinic. Olivia would hate her for getting her fired. She’d have no friends. Mum and dad would be so let down. Whatever became of Hermione Granger? I hear she was last spotted living in a tree in the Gondwana Rainforest...

At other times, she was. That’s it; she just was.

Like the afternoon she sat with Luna and Theo, happily arranging her notes on legislative reforms while they discussed the details of the wedding they were all soon to attend. Or the time she helped Neville in the greenhouses, or the hours she spent with Terry – studying silently, chatting idly, having sex... That nightmarish instance of their first time provoked no more than the smallest spike of shame. Sex, she quickly came to realise, was just as good for her mood as running was.

The present moment was one of panic. Hermione had been so lost in revising and preparing that she forgot – she actually forgot – about homework. She forgot about homework. Don’t even try telling her she wasn’t the biggest dunderhead in the world.

Ancient runes was due the next day. Arithmancy, the day after that. It was six in the evening.
Twenty four inches of parchment and two broken quills later, she was just about halfway through her first task.
“What are you up to?” Theo’s voice floated over from... somewhere.
“Go away,” she snapped.

Fifty inches of parchment and one minor ink-blotting incident later, she was through.
“Oh goooooooood,” she moaned and hunched over so that her forehead rested against the tops of her knees.
“Yes, God is here, not to worry.”
She turned her head to look at him without bothering to sit up again. “Hi.”
Clearly fighting a smile Theo asked, “What was this all about then?”
“Rune’s homework.”
“The assignment we got three days ago?”
“Yes.”
“And you only just completed it?”
“Yes.”
“Who are you?”
“Ugh.”
She turned her face back into her knees. He chuckled, and she felt him fiddle with something on her head... the next second, her bun came undone, and her hair tumbled all around.
“You know, when you sit like this, your hair covers every last inch of you... except for half your legs. You look like a haystack with stumpy legs.”
“How nice.”
“You’re being a bore, Hermione.”
“Ho hum.”
He clicked his tongue and poked her shoulder, and she veered to the side like the rag doll she was. Still didn’t sit up though. No thanks, I’ll pass.
“Did you know,” he maundered on, “Ginny and Draco seemed to have buried the hatchet.”
“Lov-er-ly,” she drawled, like Oh, wouldn’t it be lov-er-ly.
Oh, so lov-er-ly sittin’
Abso-bloomin’-luteley still
I would never budge till spring
Crept over me window sill.

“They all played quiddich together... her and him, Thomas, Corner...”
“Hm.”
“Not that she understands a dot of what he’s been through or going through. I wouldn’t expect her to. There’s only one other person I know who understands what it means to do something difficult and morally questionable to ensure the safety of one’s parents—”

She shot up. She tossed her head back, and her wild, unencumbered hair flew back in a huge arc.
He tracked it with his eyes and grinned.
“Impressive.”
“What I did to my parents is not the same as pledging allegiance to Voldemort, plotting murder, and putting a castle full of children in peril!” she argued hotly.
Theo rolled his eyes. “So if Voldemort had his wand pointed at Robert and Evelyn, and said you must kill Dumbledore or they die, you’d have...? What? Thumbed your nose at him?”
She glared. He looked back, unimpressed.
He lowered his head to say *go on*. She growled and looked away.

“I know what you’re trying to do.”
“What am I trying to do, Hermione?”
“You,” she fumed, “Know full well. Constantly pointing out how similar we are, pushing us to study together... you think you can trick me into... into...” oh, it felt ridiculous to say out loud, “becoming his friend.”
“And why can’t you be?” he retorted glibly.
“Are you serious?” she spluttered.
“Yes! I’m hardly reaching when I’m talking about your similarities!”
“All right. Okay. We share some vague character traits—”
“Not vague!”
“— that’s all anybody needs right? Wonderful! We’ll be great buddies—”
“Oh, you said *buddies*!”
“And it’ll all be dandy until one day he calls me a mudblood and that’ll be on *you*. Are you fine with that?”
He fell silent.

He was silent for quite some time. She realised that there was no one else around – what time was it – well shit – one-thirty AM.

“He isn’t like that anymore.”
“Huh?”
“His beliefs have changed in the most remarkable way.”
“Right,” she scoffed, “Just like that.”
“Not *just like that*,” he snapped, “Nobody goes through hell and comes out unchanged.”
“Have you talked about it? With him?”
“Obviously. At length.”
“And?”
“That’s between him and me, sorry. If you want to know, you’ll have to speak to him yourself. I can assure you, your doubts will all float away. And, from an *intellectual* point of view, his perspective is fascinating. Really, truly, captivating. Intellectually.”
Hermione narrowed her eyes witheringly. “Is that your idea of clever manipulation? You’re such a lousy Slytherin.”
“No, *buddy*, that was mockery. I was mocking you.”
Grrrr. “I’m going to bed,” she announced with irritated finality, and quickly began chucking her things into her bag.

“Do you really think I’d put up with him if he still thought you were inferior? Do you think so little of me? And by the way... the Bowtruckle’s a half-blood.”
“And who’s to say he isn’t using her to make a point? A... statement, if you will. Like you, when you first befriended me to—”
“Don’t you *dare* bring that up.”
“Hmm. Fine.”
Her bag was packed and she was getting out of there.

But Theo had one final play.

“Oh, your fucking *schedule*,” he said with a dismissive laugh, “It’s anything but *fine*. Do you really
think I enjoy running between the two of you like the child of a broken marriage? Remember all that time ago, I told you he’s my family, and you’re my family, and bleeding hell, Hermione, is it so bad to want to be able to sit in one room with my family and have a reasonably pleasant time? Is it wrong for me to want the most important people in my life to just be nice to one-another? Merlin, the world would be a better place if everybody was more like Luna.”

She couldn’t find the right words to say. He appeared to sense her struggle and laughed ruefully. Sadly. “How’s that for manipulation?” he murmured, and let go of her wrist.

“I’ll try,” she whispered.

“Oh. Thank you.”

He got to his feet and stood before her with solemn dark blue eyes – this incredible person who deserved to have some semblance of a happy family after everything he’d been through.

“If I don’t wake up on time tomorrow, I’m going to blame you.”

She laughed breathily, and bid him goodnight.

Hermione wandered listlessly into the library, hoping against all odds that Padma had decided to skip care of magical creatures in favour of being available with her copy of *Early Numerology*.

But alas, she scoured the place from corner to corner, and found no Padmas hanging around. Time to give up, she supposed. Slumped defeatedly, she shambled down aisles, she went past bookcase after bookcase...

A strange glow from between a miniscule crack between two shelves stopped her in her tracks. Pressing an eye against the gap, she recognised it to be a head of platinum blond hair. Malfoy was sitting alone at a small table and, Jesus Christ, she was having the worst bout of bad luck. She really did need to get that assignment done, though – it had to be submitted the next day, after all. And that decided the matter.

She bounced on the balls of her feet... once... and again... biting into her lower lip till it hurt. A sloping shaft of sunshine fell right upon him, lighting him up like the cruelest salvation there ever was.

Suddenly, she practically pounced, launching out of her hiding place and bounding over to the seat opposite his.

She busied herself with setting up her workstation – spent a silly amount of time placing her inkpot and parchment exactly so – trying to take no notice of what her peripheral vision was telling her: He’d frozen, and he was watching her.

Still without meeting his gaze, she reached out towards *Early Numerology* and pulled it closer so it was equidistant to them both. Then, promptly, she began to write. Six uneasily printed numbers later, she heard the scratching of his quill.

She breathed out. Heavily.

Many minutes went by. She stopped for a spell, to rotate her wrist and stretch her shoulders. Malfoy was still scribbling away, his posture straight and so unlike her own. The sun had sunk a notch; its beams now engulfing his form like a halo. His hair looked pure white, gleaming as his shirt was.

His left hand was resting on the table, with the index finger marking a spot on his reference notes,
and the other four curled inwards. His skin was milky and smooth, warmed subtly by the sun’s light that bounced off his knuckles and made the sparse smattering of pale hair on his arm glitter. Long, straight, slender fingers radiating out of a large palm, which led to a lean but strong wrist: It was a beautiful hand. Hermione thought about Myron’s Discobolus and the way his hand elegantly hovered by his knee as he –

“What?”

She jerked her head up and he was glaring at her with flinty eyes and downturned lips. “No!” she cried in panicked haste, “No! I wasn’t looking for your mark! Honestly, Malfoy, I was just... just...”

...Admiring your hand?

Her mouth closed with a click of her teeth and she dropped back into her work feeling unbelievably hot under the collar. She didn’t dare look up again.

On the plus side, she finally completed her assignment.

Quite suddenly, it was February. The weather began a teasing game of sending down random suggestions of warmth that never fully manifested or lingered. After a particularly distressing lesson during which Hestia hurled iron balls at them for Blasting curse practice, Hermione lay naked beside Terry – also naked – finally getting a chance to catch her breath.

“Let’s do something different tomorrow,” he suggested softly, running his fingers along her clavicle, “How d’you feel about a picnic by the lake?”

“I can’t.”

His hand stopped moving. “Why not?”

“Harry and Ron are visiting.”

“I see,” he muttered stiffly, “Will you be with them the whole day though?”

“More or less. I haven’t seen them in months.”

He looked very carefully and very pointedly at her for a long moment, like he was waiting for her to invite him to join them.

Which simply was not going to happen.

They left together some time later, for Arithmancy. He was abnormally quiet, and made no attempts to touch her in any way. Hermione only felt a little bad – there was no chance she was going to risk bringing him along, not until she knew where she stood with Ron. And besides... he would just mess up their dynamic.

All she wanted was to spend a few peaceful hours with her oldest friends.

* 

He didn’t wait for her after Professor Vector had dismissed the class; having a proper sulk and what not. Well, fine.
She wasn’t going to let it bother her, not when she was going to see Harry and Ron again in less than twenty-four hours, and in her hand she held her assignment that was topped with a shining green ‘O’.

Just as she was turning the corner to climb up the stairs for Ancient Runes, she spotted Malfoy standing by a floral tapestry, peering down at his assignment. She faltered momentarily, but gathered herself swiftly enough. She squared her shoulders and strode over to him.

“How’d you fare?”

He blinked at her with a funny look on his face, and it was hard to tell whether it was stupefaction or outrage because she’d had the audacity to speak to him. However, he didn’t immediately bite her head off, which caused her to wonder if Theo had upended a bucket full of guilt on him as well.

He turned his parchment over to reveal a familiar green ‘O’.

“Me as well,” she mumbled, a bit sheepishly as it was painfully obvious that he didn’t care a hoot.

“Well, of course you got an O!”

They both jumped as Mandy joined them, wearing a perfectly cheerful grin.

“In fact,” she continued, “You getting anything less than a perfect score would probably be a sign of the apocalypse. How are you not in Ravenclaw?”

Oh, not that again. Hermione sighed and tiredly eyed the two in front of her, all tall and imposing; smiley and frowny.

“But then again,” Mandy went on, “A lot of the Sorting Hat’s calls make no sense. I mean, why is Michael in Ravenclaw? Not the sharpest quill around is he? And don’t even get me started on Loony Lovegood.”

Hermione bristled – prepared to attack – but Malfoy beat her to the punch.

“Don’t call her that,” he barked angrily.

Mandy was chagrined. “Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it. I know she’s your best friend’s girlfriend—”

“She’s my friend.”

“Right. Sorry.”

Hermione’s ears were full of a strange squeaky-buzzing sound as she frantically thought of an acceptable way to remove herself from the situation.

“Were you headed for Runes, Hermione?” Mandy inquired uncomfortably.

“Um. Yes.”

“Shall we?”

Bloody hell, no. But there was no way out of it now. She wordlessly fell into step alongside Mandy, leaving Malfoy and his churlishness behind. And naturally, they weren’t going to walk along in silence.

“I really wasn’t having a go at Luna, honestly!”

“No,” Hermione ground out, “You were just suggesting that she’s too stupid for your esteemed house.”

“Give me a break, Hermione!” Mandy exclaimed, “You have to admit she lacks all the necessary qualities—”

“I will admit to no such thing. Luna is one of the most sharp and insightful people I’ve ever met.”

(She’d almost qualified that with an unconventionally. Thank god she’d held it back.)

“Perhaps,” Mandy muttered softly, “I suppose I don’t really know her that well. As for the whole... ‘Loony’ thing – well – we’ve always called her that. It isn’t even an insult really –”

“It is an insult, though.” Hermione was fast losing her patience. “People have bullied her for years. It’s not right.”
They’d arrived at the classroom by then, and Hermione stomped off to sit next to Theo. “What’s got into you?” he asked, taking in her annoyed countenance. “Oh, you know,” she repined, “Damn Bowtruckle.” A delighted little chuckle tore out of him. “At last, my stars have aligned.”

Arm in arm, Hermione and Ginny bravely fought back against the force of cold winds. Together, they slogged their way across shops, searching for black and red. Ginny spotted them first. She let out a shriek, tore away from Hermione and ran. Harry stumbled back when she crashed into him, but wasted little time before lifting her up and spinning her.

When Hermione got to them, it was evident that the reunited lovers weren’t going to separate anytime soon. She looked at Ron – oh, there he was, lanky, blue-eyed, freckled, grinning – and...

What the hell – she threw her arms around him. He hugged her back just as tightly, and laughed when they parted. “Hello, Ron.” She beamed.

“Hi there – oh, bloody hell.”

She looked over and shoulder and saw Harry and Ginny snogging like it was the only chance they’d ever get. It, along with Ron’s nauseated expression, made her beam even harder. “Let’s give them some time alone, shall we?” she suggested. Ron grumbled, but agreed.

As they strolled towards The Three Broomsticks, their shadows knocking together with every step, Hermione said, “Well. How are you?”

“Good. Brilliant. China was incredible, Hermione. I – um.”

He stopped speaking quite abruptly. A bright flush crept up his neck. “What is it?” she pressed anxiously.

“Um. See... the thing is. Fuck. Okay.”

He stopped and she stopped, and they faced each other under a lamppost at the side of the road. “I suppose I should get this over with,” he sighed, “Hermione. I’m sorry.” She was not expecting that.

“I’m sorry for the stuff I said to you, and the way I behaved. I was out of line.” “I understood,” she whispered, taken aback by his intensity, “Everything was so awful and I’d – I’d...”

“Broken my heart? Ha. Yeah. It was pretty shite, to be honest. But it’s no excuse. Look, I know I’ve done it a lot – got all shirty and lashed out at you. But you should know it won’t happen again. I’ve become one with the unplanned rhythms of the universe.”

She blinked. Many times. “...What?”

“It’s Taoism. Shifu got me into it, and... by Godric, Hermione, it’s changed my life. Non-action. Non-forcing. Spontaneity. I know how to deal with the world now. I know how to be.”

Hermione didn’t know what to say. She floundered like a fish out of water and –

“Please tell me he isn’t nattering on about his Taoist bullshit already!”

She spun around with a squeal and flew to hug Harry, who grinned when he saw the jade pendant hanging from her neck. He squeezed her so tightly, she teared up – it was so so so so so good to see him again. “Harry,” she breathed, utterly overwhelmed.
“It’s not bullshit!” Ron spewed indignantly. “I’m enlightened.”

“Bah,” Harry gibed, “Enlightened. You’re deluded. And that’s not surprising, considering the amount of Maotai you put away.”

“Taoism doesn’t say you can’t have a good time!”


“You know what? I’ll take it.”

Laughing, they spilled into the pub and sat down to an afternoon of butterbeer, chips, and endless conversation.

By evening, a sizeable crowd had flocked around them: Most of Dumbledore’s Army, (not including Terry,) and at least a dozen starry-eyed people who really had no business being there. (Ginny moved from her chair onto Harry’s lap when Romilda Vane and her lackeys showed up.) Luna brought Theo and wedding invitations for Harry and Ron. Seamus burst in with a raucous “‘OWAYA!’... and ale. George handed Ron an enormous box that contained a mooncake the size of a truck tyre.

Hermione sat between her partners in multiple crimes (and heroics,) and she didn’t stop grinning for a second as they regaled the gathering with tales of their adventures in China.

Chapter End Notes

You have no idea how badly I want to write a spin-off fic: 'Harry and Ron Go To China.'
This chapter is dedicated to The Salty Sisters Drama Club. I hope it isn't too disappointing!

Valentine’s day.

Sunday.

Such a fortuitous coincidence.

Terry had his fingers wrapped around Hermione’s wrist as he led her down corridors and stairs, taking her to some wonderful surprise that she was absolutely going to love. He was sure.
He kept singing of his surety with a big grin, an expression she did her best to mimic in spite of her nerves.
Yes, she was awfully nervous: Surprises made her instinctively wary.

On the fifth floor, while he was telling her something about weather vanes, a figure – a veritable blur of black and white – rushed by, only narrowly missing crashing right into them.
Hermione dug her heels into the ground and spun around, just in time to see the figure skid to a halt.

“Granger!” Malfoy exclaimed wildly, “Theo – he’s in the hospital wing!”
“What?!” she shrieked, pulling away from Terry, “What happened?!”
But he’d already taken off; was already turning the corner...

And she sped off after him.

With a roar in her ears – a thunderous mix of whistling air and thumping pulses and echoes of Pan screaming – she ran, chasing Malfoy’s billowing cloak.
When she got to the hospital wing the doors were closing behind him, and she burst through before they could complete their venture. She ran to the bed at the far end of the room where Malfoy had stopped with his hands gripping the footboard.
“Oh, Salazar,” Theo groaned when he saw her, “You as well?!”

Semi-recumbent and surrounded by many fluffy pillows, his head wrapped up in gauze, he was scowling petulantly. One leg was under the covers and one out, the latter encased in a heavy cast.

“What happened to you?” Hermione panted. Her hands flew to the base of her throat in alarm.
“How did—”
“Who told you I’m here?” Theo interrupted with a snappy huff.
Her eyes darted towards Malfoy, who was still catching his breath and staring dumbly at the injured party.
“He did.”
“And who told you?” Theo addressed Malfoy.
It snapped him out of his daze. “What the fuck happened?”
“Nothing.”
“Clearly something did!” Hermione cried shrilly, “Do you not remember? How hard did you hit your head?”
“I’m fine,” he ground out.
She took a step back. “I’m going to get Madam Pomf—”
“No!” Theo sat up immediately, “Don’t! I fell, alright? It was a silly accident, and I’ll be fine. Just fine.” When he was sure that Hermione was staying put, he fell back against his pillows. “You both can go now.”
“I’m not budging until you explain,” Malfoy retorted firmly.
Hermione nodded in earnest agreement.
Theo’s mouth was dramatically turned down and twitching. His eyes were narrowed, and brow was furrowed. If it wasn’t for the fact that he was obviously quite hurt, Hermione might’ve laughed at such childish sulking.
“It’s like I told you. I fell.”
“How?” Malfoy demanded, leaning forward impatiently, “Down the stairs? Off a broom? Tripped over something?”
Theo crossed his arms and turned his face away. “Out of a tree.”
It was the kind of unexpected revelation that was bound to be succeeded by a spell of flabbergasted silence.
“You fell out of a tree,” Hermione parroted – just to make sure.
He grunted.
“And what, pray tell, were you doing up a tree?” Malfoy asked with perfect dryness.
Theo didn’t respond. Hermione had to repeat his name four times, in four different tones of escalating desperation, before he snapped his face back towards her with barefaced fury.
“It’s Valentine’s day, yeah?” he all but shouted, “I wanted to do something romantic for Luna!”
She bit her lips between her teeth as she considered him for a moment. “Something romantic... up in a tree.”
Her inflection made him unnecessarily indignant. “It – it – it means something to us, damn it. I’m not insane. That tree is special! I was conjuring a few odds and ends on the upper branches when Luna suddenly showed up early, and... and it startled me, so... so... uh, I—”
“You decided to give a very literal demonstration of how you fell for her,” Malfoy drawled.
“Naff. Off.”

Don’t laugh, don’t laugh, don’t laugh, don’t laugh –

Malfoy had shed his strained stance entirely. He was now standing upright, shoulders relaxed, hands in his pockets. Amusement danced in his eyes as he brazenly faced Theo’s ire.

“Break your leg, did you?” he asked with only the faintest hint of a laugh.
“And sliced open my head,” Theo grumbled.
“So romantic.”
“Do not push me right now, Draco.”

As an ill-fated spectator to this clash of smirk and glare, Hermione stood silently to the side with her nails digging into her palms to keep her amusement contained. After what seemed like several hours, she was rescued from that bizarre impasse by the arrival of Luna.
“Oh, good,” she said as she daintily settled on the side of Theo’s bed, “You’re both here.”
Theo glowered. “Did you tell them?”
“Only Draco,” she smiled. “Couldn’t find Hermione anywhere.”
She had a small glass jar in her hand that was full of a pale grey paste.
“What’s that, Luna?” Hermione asked.
“It’s a heal-all salve,” she replied as she began unscrewing the lid, “Really works wonders.”

The second the lid came off, a most intolerably ghastly stench exploded across the room. With various howls of distress, Hermione, Theo, and Malfoy recoiled.
“What’s in there?” Hermione yelped, slapping her hands across her nose and mouth.
“Stink sap, mostly. It’s loaded with remedial properties.”
“No, it isn’t!” Malfoy balked.
“Get that shit away from me!” Theo bayed. Tut-tutting, Luna shifted closer to him. “Don’t be a child, Theo. This will have you feeling better in no time.”
“No!” he wailed, “NO! Luna – no – help me – OI! DRACO! Where are you going?!?” (Malfoy was already halfway to the door.) “Hermione!” he gasped, “Hermione! Tell her – Hermione – please–” Hermoine’s eyes had begun to water. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry!” she mumbled, and backed away. And away. And away...

The twin doors slammed shut behind her and she finally allowed herself to draw in a huge breath. “My god,” she choked. A little ahead, Malfoy had stuck his head out of an open window, which seemed like an excellent idea.
She rushed over to his side to fill her lungs with fresh, cool air.
“Oh, I hope Pomfrey comes out before Luna can actually slather that stuff on him,” she muttered breathlessly.
Outside, the forest with all its evergreens formed a woolly carpet, and she wondered which one of them was Theo’s special tree.
“I hope she doesn’t.”
She turned to look at him and observed his profile, faintly lit by the misty morning light.
“You’re terrible,” she told him.
He rolled his eyes and pushed away from the window. Hermione watched him saunter off, his cloak fluttering around his ankles...

When, all of a sudden, she remembered. Terry. Oh shit, Terry. Terry and his wonderful surprise.

She barrelled ahead. He’d probably... maybe... hopefully... be in the common room. She knew he was going to be upset and difficult – although why he hadn’t come along when he’d heard that Theo was in the hospital wing was beyond her.

Unfortunately, her brisk march and Malfoy’s long-stepped saunter appeared to have the exact same velocity. And so, they were walking side by side down the passageway. If she moved any faster, she’d be jogging. If she slowed down, she’d be wasting time. Why the hell couldn’t he adjust his pace?
Hermione snuck him a look from the corner of her eye. He didn’t even seem to have registered her presence, despite the fact that there couldn’t be more than four feet between them. He was staring ahead in an abstracted sort of way, moving along mechanically...
She turned away.
(There were still four floors to go.)
She glanced back.
He was looking at the large landscape painting on the wall.

“I’m really looking forward to the next section of Delphi’s diary,” she blurted out, far too loudly. Malfoy faltered, and looked down at her with a jerk. His eyebrows drew together in a soft frown. He blinked.

“What?”

“It’s bound to be so interesting, you know?” she babbled, and her pitch went all over the place. “Particularly the bits about Apollo.”

He cleared his throat. His mouth was thinned and his posture stiff – the general appearance of someone who wished to be elsewhere – but he squared his shoulders and said, slowly, in his usual clipped manner: “The alchemist?”

“Ah, yes,” Hermione answered, still too fast and high, “According to muggle mythology, he’s the sun god, and the place where she was located was his temple. Where he’d slain a serpent... a drako... incidentally.”

“Fascinating.”

“Isn’t it? Muggle mythology has deified the entire ancient Greek magical community.”

“Is that so?”

Once again, she stole a peek. His expression hadn’t changed; it was like he was only playing along to keep from being overtly rude. Well, that just wasn’t on.

With her eyes fixed steadily on him, she said, “The whole saga is compiled in an epic poem, *Theogony*, by Hesiod. I don’t have the original, but I do have a book about it. I can lend it to you if you want.”

Success! He turned her way with brows raised high, mouth pursed to the side with... surprise? Bemusement? Consideration? She arched a single brow in retaliation. If he dared to utter even a lone impolite word, she’d remind him that he’d had no problem reading her books before. In fact, she sort of wanted him to refuse, just to get a chance to decimate him.

“Yeah,” he said, “All right.”

“Oh,” she breathed. She wasn’t sure how her face had reacted, but it triggered a tiny smile on his. A tiny *victorious* smile.

The slimy bugger had been in on the game all along.

“Brilliant,” she declared through gritted teeth. She let her hair fall around her face as she rooted around in the beaded pouch that she’d pulled out of her pocket.

And through it all they hadn’t stopped walking, maintaining a consistent distance-time ratio.

“Here.”

She barked like she was giving an order. He accepted the book with grace... Grace that was negated by the smugness that the curve of his mouth conveyed.

“Thank you, Granger,” he pronounced slowly.

“You’re welcome.”

“Do you generally carry this book around with you?”

“I carry all my books around with me.”

“Really?”

She glared up at him; he was watching her doubtfully... sardonically. She shook her pouch and it made a racket like a giant, loaded trunk would.

“Undetectable Extension charm.”

He pushed the inside of his cheek with his tongue, eyeing her little bag closely. “Is that legal?”

*Infinitely more so than a Dark Mark.*

“Yes,” she snapped.

“Right.”
Finally, they arrived at their common room. The door opened and they parted ways wordlessly. Hermione shook her head to set it back on track.

She scanned the room from corner to corner, but Terry was nowhere to be found. She repeated the search twice – just in case – but the only people around were Justin, Susan, and Michael, conversing by the fireplace. She inhaled deeply and made her way up the stairs to the boys’ dormitories.

“Terry?” she called through his door when her first two knocks proved to be fruitless. “Terry?” He opened the door after her fifth knock, and stood before her all dour and stony faced. “What is it?”

And though his disposition was exactly what she’d expected, it riled her up. “Theo’s fine, by the way. Thanks for asking.” He sneered. “What happened to him?” “He had a bit of an accident. Broke his leg.” “Hmm. Well I’m glad he’s going to be alright.”

There was a long bout of awful silence as they stared each other down, after which, in a show of exemplary inner-strength, Hermione forced herself to smile. “So shall we go see about that surprise now?” “No. I’m not in the mood.” “I see. May I come in then?” “Why?” “I think we should talk.”

He laughed bitterly as he stepped aside to let her pass. She slipped in and stood by his bed – the bed she’d rolled around in just the night before – and he slammed the door shut. He settled way on the other side of the room, on a chair by his desk. “Look,” she began, “I’m sorry your plans got derailed. But you have to understand... Theo was hurt. Of course I had to go to him.”

“You didn’t just go to him, Hermione,” Terry growled, “You ran off without a bloody word!” “I thought you’d come along as well!” “Sure, because that’s all I’m supposed to do, yeah? Wag my tail and follow you around?” “What?!” You’re being ridiculous!” “Oh, am I?” “YES! Theo’s my best friend! I would’ve—” “I thought Potter and Weasley were your best friends.”

She slowly closed and opened her eyes. “They are.” “Ha!” Terry snarled, “They’re all your best friends, eh? And they’re all blokes.” “What’s that got to do with anything?” she demanded disbelievingly. “You don’t see why I would find the whole thing dodgy? These blokes for whom you’re constantly ditching me—” “Ditching?” she shrieked, “He was in the hospital wing! Did you expect me to ignore that?”

He jumped to his feet and took four furious steps towards her. “What about the time you told me to fuck off and went to meet Potter and Weasley in Hogsmeade?” “That is not how it happened!” “That is exactly how it happened. Do you really expect me to believe that there’s nothing going on between you and all the many blokes you put before me?” “Are you mad?” she sputtered, “Are you absolutely insane? Harry’s with Ginny. Theo’s utterly besotted with Luna. And – and – um.” “Yes,” he rumbled lowly, “Go on. What about Weasley then? Everybody knows you both have been dancing around each other for years.”

She felt her fists tighten and her eyes narrowed into slits as she hissed, “There is nothing between
“I saw you, you know. That day in Hogsmeade. The way you jumped into his arms...”
“I was seeing him after ages! Am I not allowed to hug my be – my friend?”
“That wasn’t a hug, Hermione.” He spat her name out like it was a slur. “You threw yourself at him.”
“What absolute rubbish. You’re making a fool out of yourself.”

He wilted. It happened in a flash: All traces of truculence dissipated out of his frame, and he slumped.
“You don’t even listen to me when I talk,” he whispered hoarsely. She flinched. “That’s not true.”
“Please don’t deny it. I’m not an idiot... you certainly aren’t... and... I know it. You know it. I talk and you smile and nod along like you’re indulging me, but it’s clear as day that you aren’t paying attention. Do you have any idea how shitty that makes me feel?”

Something with an unforgiving grip caught hold of Hermione’s heart. She tried to swallow but it was impossible. “I – I didn’t mean to–”
“I know.” His face crumpled. “I’ve seen you with your... friends. You’re considerate... attentive... engaging. I wanted to be with that person so badly. But now I know... it’s me. I just don’t interest you.”
“Terry...” she croaked. What should she say? What could she say? “Please leave,” he murmured, and turned right around.

She stared with glassy eyes at his back for five beats of her racing heart. Then she left.

It wasn’t long before everybody knew that Hermione Granger and Terry Boot had broken up. The result of that juicy bit of gossip was the usual, robust supply of whispers and stares.
But that wasn’t what bothered Hermione the most. It was the fact that she didn’t feel like she’d been in a relationship at all. The whole thing felt like a far-off, fuzzy fragment of life that she could only vaguely remember living; and all the conversations, the walks and kisses and lying naked and spent were things she could easily bundle up and add to her metaphorical cabinet of experiences.

Terry avoided her at all costs, and she responded in kind. In the week that followed, she saw him in and outside class, and when their eyes would meet, he’d look away quickly... crestfallen... and she’d let out a shaky breath.

She knew that look. Terry, Ron, Padma.
Hermione Granger, leaving a trail of broken hearts in her wake. Ugh. Who’d have ever thought...?

Ginny tried to talk to her about it. Hermione took to steering clear of her as well. Theo, bless him, never did. He sat with her, easy and companionable, accepting her reserve for what it was.

(The one time she’d broken and rasped, “I feel like I’m an awful person,” he’d nudged her shoulder and told her that she knew that wasn’t true.
“I can collect signatures if you’d like. There isn’t enough parchment in the world.”)

\*
She got O’s in all her homework assignments.

(Three days after the ‘break up’, Padma – with seemingly authentic regret – “suggested” that she stay away from their study group.  
“Just for some time? He’s not quite in a state to be around you right now.”)

She pushed herself every morning, to run faster... for longer...

And on Friday, she overdid it. It was already ten minutes into breakfast when she burst into the common room, a frazzled mess with shaking legs, one shoelace undone, hair half tumbling out of its ponytail...
“Granger.”
She stopped and spun around. “Malfoy?”
Well of course it had to be him when she looked so terribly frightful.
He loped over leisurely, as though he knew she was in a hurry. Then, with a look of inquisitive distaste, (like she was some sort of strange specimen,) he handed her a book with a picture of a black-figure amphora on the cover.
She held the book against her chest and asked, “Did you read it?”
“Of course I bloody read it.”
“What did you think?”
While he appeared to mull over her question, she rocked back and forth on her feet. It was true that she was running dreadfully late, but she was simply too curious...
“I think,” he said slowly, “That it’s fucking hilarious that they made that sleazy old lush Dionysus the god of wine. Years from now, future generations will be reading about Horace Slughorn, god of crystallised pineapple.”
Hermione nearly dropped the book, surprised by the loudness of her own laugh. “They will read about how our lives were thrown asunder by the prophesies of the oracle in the North Tower attic.”
His lips curled up microscopically. “And about the king of the gods, with his long white beard and dubious morals.”
“And about the demi-god who was the hero of the age–”
She bit her tongue. Perhaps she was veering towards dangerous territory?
His expression was utterly blank.

Gesturing awkwardly towards the girls’ dorms with her thumb, she mumbled, “I have to... erm...”
He shrugged one shoulder.
She scarpered.

As she zipped through her mundane morning tasks, she couldn’t stop dithering between relief and annoyance. On the one hand, she was glad she’d stopped when she had. Yet, she was equally irritated that she hadn’t pressed on and initiated a conversation about how happily the gods mixed and mated with mortals.
She should have done it. She should have asked whether he’d consider her to be a goddess or a mortal. She pictured his disgust and dismissal. She pictured brandishing her wand and showing him where she truly belonged.
She imagined him rolling his eyes and calling her the goddess of musty books and horrid hair. She imagined calling him the god of asinine smirks and posturing.
The overgrown path circling the Shrieking Shack looked very different when stripped of snow. Tufts of yellow grass and clumps of weeds knotted around thorny bushes. The trees were as chalky and dry as ever.

Hermione strolled along in a mawkish mood. This is where Terry had kissed her for the first time. This is where she’d been so captivated by the joy of physical intimacy that she’d let things get too out of hand.

Her life had become a never-ending sequence of putting unpleasantries to rest. Of little rituals and ceremonies, funerals and shopping expeditions to bury things and move on. Move on, move on, move on.
Get tortured, move on.
Devastate your parents, move on.
Lose a friend, move on.
Break a heart, move on.

Keep Calm and Carry On.
Wartime propaganda as a motto for life after war.

Forward March!

“I don’t think our friendship will last very long if we study together,” Ginny groused.
“Pshaw, hush.”

Hermione’s hand was pressed against the space between Ginny’s shoulder blades. She pushed the reluctant girl across the library, to a corner far away from where her old group gathered. Except that the corner table that was nearly always unoccupied, wasn’t unoccupied at all.

“About time you showed up!” Dean hollered.
“Shh!” Susan reprimanded hotly.
“Oh, I’m so sorry, head girl—”

Hermione gaped at them all – Dean, Susan, Neville, Hannah, Luna, Theo, Mandy, and Malfoy.
“What is this?”
Theo stood up neatly and drew her to an empty chair.
“We’ve formed a study group,” he explained, “But the thing is, we’re pants at studying. And being in a group. And studying in a group. Help us, won’t you?”
“What—”
“Don’t listen to her, Hermione,” Theo decreed while gripping her chin and twisting her face away from Ginny, “Everyone here would love it if you’d teach us your ways.”
“THEO’S PUT A STICKING CHARM ON ME!” Malfoy yelled.
“SHH!” Susan hissed.
“He’s a liar,” Theo averred.
Hermione aimed a venomous, wide-eyed look at Theo. “You’re being deliberately patronising to
anger me. You think I’ll be so affronted that I’ll make you study as punishment, to call your ‘bluff’ as it were, and thus realise your purpose of distracting me. But honestly, sod it. As much as I want to storm away in a strop, the N.E.W.T.s are a mere hundred and thirteen days away. Let’s begin with Transfiguration.”

There were a couple of sniggers nestled amid the flurry that followed as everybody pulled out books and parchment. Theo was beaming.

“All right,” Hermione announced, “Theory of Human Transfiguration and its Limitations, page–”

“Theo, you better let me go RIGHT NOW, or else I’ll–”

“PAGE SIXTY-FO–”

“SHHHH!”

“...Sorry, Susan.”

On the morning of Xenophilius Lovegood’s wedding, Hermione changed the colour of a russet sundress to pale Naples yellow. She gathered her curls into a low bun, pulled on a short cream coat, and went down to the common room.

“You look lovely,” Theo told her warmly. He was in bright yellow dress robes, with the scarf she’d given him worn around his neck like a cravat.

“You as well,” she smiled, “Hufflepuff colours suit you.”

He scoffed, pinching her upper arm lightly before leading her out.

The corridor was flush with yellow fabric. Luna, charming in a simple, flowing tunic reached up to kiss Theo’s cheek. Dean was in mustard, Neville in chrome, Ginny in lacy gold, and Malfoy in ochre, with a tan leather cloak.

He let out a low whistle and smirked at Theo. “Don’t you look like the consummate Hufflepuff.”

Hermione bit her lip and refused to meet Theo’s eye as he scoffed. Again.

The sunny, chattering, rustling congregation went down to the headmistress’s office, from where they’d be flooing over to the Lovegood residence.

It was a tight fit up the revolving staircase. Hermione was sandwiched between Ginny and Neville. She kept her hands on the latter’s back to keep him from falling back onto her. Her left side was pressed against Malfoy’s arm. She didn’t dare move a muscle till they spilt onto the thick carpet of McGonagall’s office.

“Good morning,” she greeted from behind her desk, and as Hermione participated in the reciprocatory buzz, she wondered why on earth anyone would consider yellow tartan as appropriate wedding wear.

The woman Xenophilius was marrying was called Jamila, and she had a round face with a beautiful smile, nestled in a halo of tight black curls.

The ceremony was lovely. In the midst of a field of bright grouse flowers, man and woman made tender vows to forever cherish each other. A glowing thread bound their wrists together.
There was no stuffy formality to be found: No rows of chairs, no alter, no aisle. Just a gathering, a couple, and their commitment.

Hermione stood between Harry and Ron, awash with muddled emotions. A pang in the heart always found a way to pollute happiness. Unfortunately, they weren’t like oil and water that never mixed; and the resulting blend tasted a lot like ennui.

The couple kissed and the circle of flowers around them exploded. Petals danced, flitted and darted about like humming birds. Applause broke out. Mrs. Weasley was smiling through her sobs, Luna hugged her father, Ginny leant against Harry’s chest, George and Angelina held hands – it was all love, joy, and yellow flowers. The cold, the ominous clouds above, the threat of a downpour couldn’t touch them.

During the reception, plain wooden tables and chairs were conjured, along with a counter laden with food that Hermione wouldn’t risk tasting. After a painful incident involving Ron and a mystery pie, they took to surreptitiously vanishing everything they put on their plate – after all, they had to at least give the impression of eating.

“The whole point of a wedding is good food,” Ron thundered, “What’s this bloody thing about then? Why am I even here?”

“But what about embracing spontaneity, Ron? What about being one with the–”

“Hermione,” he begged, “Don’t.”

It went along in that manner till late afternoon. Luna brought out a music box which emitted a lilting melody of flutes and lutes. Xenophilius and Jamila danced as the sun began its decent, scorching the field with its parting hues. Little by little, more people joined in. Arthur spun a flustered Molly round and around. Ginny dragged Harry off, George held Angelina close as they swayed leisurely.

“When did that happen?” Hermione whispered to Ron.

“Huh? Oh that. Dunno. When I got back from China, they were already a thing.”

“It’s nice.” She smiled as she watched George rest his chin on Angelina’s shoulder and close his eyes.

“Hm. Yeah.”

It got darker, and the dancing didn’t stop. Fairies – swarms and swarms of fairies – rose from the blooms and stalks, flashing, twinkling, whizzing...

Seamus had somehow procured a bag of chocolate frogs to assuage those (i.e., Ron,) who claimed they were on the brink of starvation. The pack of hungry hounds crowded around this unexpected treat, and Hermione broke away in search of company that wasn’t so single-minded.

She found a table occupied by Theo, Luna, Neville, and Malfoy, and promptly sank into the lone vacant chair left among them.

Neville’s brow puckered as he looked at her, and then at the spot that she had escaped from.

“What’s going on there?”

“Don’t ask.”

“Theo, let’s dance,” Luna sang and fist the sleeve of his robes.

“What, again?”

“Yes, again.”

He chuckled. “As my lady wishes.”

The three that remained sat mutely for quite some time. Harry and Ginny made a short appearance. Silence reigned still. They fled.
“Oh, what’s the time,” Malfoy whinged after forever and a minute had gone by. Hermione checked her watch. “Quarter to six. Still forty-five minutes before we can esca – er – leave.”

His answering exhale was heavy with frustration. “Fan. Tastic.”

“I’ve got cards,” Neville supplied with a feeble smile.

The mindlessness of Exploding Snap was exactly what was needed. Six rounds and many singed fingers later, it was time to leave. She lost twice, Neville lost four times, and she was absolutely positive that Malfoy had cheated, though she couldn’t figure out how.

He was grinning in a full, demented way as they stood to go, and even had the audacity to wink at Neville who was pouting over the burns he had suffered.

* *

Terry was in the common room when she passed by in her stupid dress. She kept her head down and sprinted up to her room to change for dinner.

That new-fangled study group met again the next day, to tackle shield charms. Hermione Granger was in lecture mode: poised, articulate, absolutely not officious.

“And so,” she concluded, “The most powerful form of the shield charm is *Protego Horribilis*, and–”

“*Diabolica.*” Malfoy popped up like a fetid blister.

“I beg your pardon?”

“*Protego Diabolica* is the most powerful form of the shield charm.”

To properly communicate her disparagement, she lifted her nose into the air. “It isn’t exactly a defensive spell.”

“That’s not the point. If we’re comparing the various kinds of *protego*–”

“Well fine!” (It wasn’t easy being forceful while maintaining a low volume.) “The most powerful, *defensive* form–”

“Purely protective and non-offensive, Granger. Vicious it may be, but *Diabolica* is still quite useful defensively.”

“If,” Hermione seethed, snapping her book shut with unintended violence, “Malfoy is quite finished being pointlessly pedantic–”

“Pointlessly?” His eyes widened as he gasped facetiously. “Attention to detail is very important. It’s the difference between an *E* and an *O*.”

She turned sharply to the boy sitting beside her with a fist covering his laughing mouth.

“Terry,” she railed (softly,) “Let him go. Please.”

“You heard the queen,” Malfoy jeered, “Let me go.”

Theo cackled. “I’m sure you’ve heard the old adage, Draco: *fool me twice* and all that. So.” He rubbed his hands together with glee, “What’s it going to be now? Herbology?”
Fifty-Six

Chapter Notes

A special thanks to TheLastLynx for making an absolutely gorgeous aesthetic for this story - it's played a part in the second to last segment of this chapter.

The time between supper and sleep were Hermione’s private study hours, during which she holed up in her room and immersed herself in heavy-duty revision. On that particular night, however, she wasn’t revising. Then again, the task she was involved in demanded some rather challenging spellwork – it could be considered brushing up on charms...

She pieced a network of gears into place, cast a modified *Piertotum Locomotor*, and set up a button to trigger a dormant concealing charm. And finally, at half past two, she coated her project in brilliant green paint, and curled up in bed.

*\n
In the morning, she raced downstairs, with her hair still damp from the shower. She’d overslept, and only just managed to get ready before breakfast began. In the common room, Theo and Malfoy were walking towards the exit.

“Theo!” she called and scurried forward.

“Don’t,” Malfoy muttered under his breath as she passed him. Sparing him no more than a fleeting frown, she turned to smile beamingly at Theo.

“Happy bir–”

“NOT YET!” he shouted at the top of his lungs, causing her to jump back in fright. “NOT YET, HERMIONE! AFTER NOON! After! Twelve! P.M.! You know this!”

“Right,” she breathed, “You maniac.”

Theo harrumphed and continued on his way. Malfoy followed. And as the door slowly closed behind him, he looked over his shoulder and bestowed a dreadfully self-satisfied grin upon her.

At thirty minutes to the sanctified hour, she tramped towards the edge of the Forbidden forest, where Luna had organised a little get-together. Hermione was one of the first to arrive; Luna was still in the process of hanging streamers on the trees. There was a large rug on the ground, with a crate of butterbeer, a basket of food, and a pile of plates. Hermione set down the large box she’d been carrying and quickly moved to assist the girl, conjuring colourful balloons at her request.
In small spurts, other people began turning up. The rug was soon more than half occupied. Finally, at noon (sharp!) the guest of honour arrived.

“Happy birthday!” the crowd chorused.
“Thank you, thank you,” Theo bowed graciously, nonsensically. His gaze dropped onto the box on the rug, and then snapped up to Hermione, deep blue shimmering for a confirmation.
She nodded and he leapt and dived like a deep cover fielder.
“Please tell me it’s the chocolate one from last – YES!”

They ate and drank well into the afternoon, warmed by butterbeer, hot rolls, and laughter as Seamus related a story of a brawl that had broken out in his pub a week ago.
Hermione rolled her eyes, but joined in the mirth in spite of herself. She looked at Theo, leaning against a tree, Luna against his chest; his happiness was plain and clear. It made her smile. Dean was sitting to one side with a sketchpad and pencil. Ginny was lying on her stomach with her legs in the air. Neville stretched beside Hannah, who was skimming her fingers over grass. Malfoy lay indolently with his head on Mandy’s lap.

Those brightly coloured streamers and balloons were swaying in the wind. The lake was iridescent, the sky was blue.

“I’m telling you, it was wild! This one chap breaks a bottle over his mate’s head screaming down with the Falcons, and that mucker doesn’t react. Not even a blink! Your man decks the chap till he’s a bleeding mess on the floor, says fuck yeh, arsehole, downs his drink, snogs his lass, and then.... then... Argh, me ’ead, he says!”

It was a splendid day.

* *

Evening fell, people trickered away, Theo and Luna disappeared into the forest for a (supposed) “walk”, and Hermione was the last one left on the rug.

It was getting chilly. She ran her hands down her cloak while muttering a warming charm. She took a sip from her bottle, and immediately wrinkled her nose in distaste. The butterbeer had gone flat and cold. The hazy hue of dusk stained everything – it was like she was looking at the world through violet gauze curtains.
Birds made a racket while settling into their nests. The lake gushed. It gushed and gushed, gushed. The wind rushed, rushed, rushed, rushed—
From inside the castle, the call for dinner sounded.
The tintinnabulation that so musically wells
From the bells, bells, bells, bells, bells—

“Can we go in? Have you caught that cold you’ve been waiting on?”
“Hardy har,” Hermione droned, and stood up. “Where’s Luna?”
“I want to give you your present.”
“Here? Now? Can’t it wait—”
“No,” she answered steadily, “I prefer there be no witnesses.”
While he stutteringly articulated his apprehension, she reached into her bag and took out a small
package wrapped in plain blue paper. And then she was the apprehensive one as he tore it open.

He held the clock close to his eyes, smiling in the most credible way.
She bit the corner of her lip and elucidated: “It isn’t just an alarm clock. I’ve done some work on it. You see that slot in the back? Once you write someone’s name there, they’ll be the only one who’ll hear it ring.”
“That’s really clever magic!” he commended, looking duly impressed.
“Yes, well–” She paused to stop him from spelling his own name on it. “You should give it to Malfoy.”
“Excuse me?”
“I’ve put a locomotion charm on it. It doesn’t just ring; it runs. Scuttles about like a high speed windup toy. It’s also immune to summons, stunners, fire, the reductor curse, and most hexes. And when it’s finally caught and you press the button on top to shut it off... it disappears. Only to reappear when it’s time to ring again.”
All through her explanation, Theo’s grin had grown wider and wider. He said, “And here I thought you couldn’t possibly top this scarf.”
“Oh, ye of little faith.”
They started back towards the castle and he put his arm around her like he always did. “You’re brilliant, little one.”
“Do not implicate me, though, Theodore Nott,” she warned, “Do not or else I’ll–”
“Of course I won’t! But honestly – this is the best thing you could’ve given me. Thank you.”
“Well, those antlers were brutal, after all.”

Hogwarts rose before them and the sun set behind them.

“Do thank Robert and Evie for the cake, will you?”
“Thank them yourself. And mum will skin you alive if you call her that.”

On the first day of March, she sent Ron an owl with a card, a bar of Honeyduke’s chocolate, and an invisible-to-all-but-him wand holster.
While coming down from the Owlery, in a show up prime arseholery, the universe threw Terry in her path.
“Um, hullo,” she stuttered.
He brushed past her wordlessly.

All she could do was roll her eyes. She felt an odd urge to talk to Harry, to tell him, hey, guess what – I’ve got myself into a Cho Chang situation. He was at his best when being drollly self-deprecating; he’d know exactly what to say to that.

She should’ve known it was coming. It was bound to.
Hestia’s expression reflected grave seriousness. Her hands were clasped behind her back.

“Of all known curses, one of the most dangerous is Fiendfyre. It’s a hundred times hotter and more hazardous than regular fire. It’s savage, sentient, and capable of consuming any and every thing that comes in its path. It can bring down an entire country in days.”

A bone-rattling shudder passed through Hermione’s body. Breathing, suddenly, became laborious, like she was choking to suck in air through clouds of smoke and flying ash. She closed her eyes and the backs of her lids were painted orange.

Orange that writhed, twisted, and soared. Burning, searing orange wrapped around her, reached out to grab her, tried to devour her – all she could smell was smoke – all she could feel was heat and the texture of Malfoy’s shirt against her cheek –

Impetuously, her eyes opened and sought him out. He was far across at the other end of the room, staring straight ahead. Back straight and arms crossed. Mouth pursed. So pale.
He had to be thinking about it too. He had to be wondering if those flames were still performing their deadly dance; whether they would do so eternally, locked up in the room that nobody could ever require. Was he thinking about scorching panic and blistering fear? Was he thinking about the friend he’d lost?

“Only the most proficient castor can control it. Even stopping the spell is near impossible – once cast, flames seem to pour out in an unstoppable stream. It can only be quenched if the castor has the skill to do so, or with flawless, powerful, pointed general counter spells. Yes, spells. This is not something a lone witch or wizard can handle. If you ever, Merlin forbid, find yourself at its mercy... run. Run like the wind.”

She ran and she ran and the ends of her hair were singed. Then it was her and Ron in a corner, surrounded by flames and flames, hissing, roaring, crackling, closing in –

The bell rang. She gasped.

A low commotion broke out as the class was dismissed. Chairs were dragging, feet were shuffling; the chatter had an undertone of awe.
Malfoy was one of the first to rush out of the room, and without a thought, Hermione followed.

She had to jog to keep up, darting between pillars and clusters of students. He was striding along with purpose and precision, climbing up one staircase after the other, until finally they arrived at the seventh floor.
She watched from a distance as he paced before that infamous wall, willing a door into existence. It had meant so many things to her, that door. A gateway to freedom, a symbol of rebellion, a safe haven, an enigma...
Up and down Malfoy marched with escalating agitation – to no avail. On his tenth or so attempt, she stirred from her corner and approached him.

“I don’t think it’s going to show up,” she whispered.
He stopped dead and spun around to face her. It seemed that looking at her worsened his distress, if the grimace that overtook his face was anything to go by. He turned to stare at the empty wall... and... Swallowed.
“What were you asking for?” she asked carefully.

“What the room of hidden things.”

His voice was hollow. He was hollow.

Hermione wrung her hands. “Fiendfyre is capable of destroying a Horcrux. I’m sure it must’ve broken the room’s enchantments as well.”

He didn’t respond, but remained fixated on the wall.

So she left him there. Her skin was prickling, her eyes were burning, her brain was relentlessly conjuring flashing images of a ruthless inferno – she kept walking until she was out in a courtyard, where there was fresh air and an open sky.

She couldn’t sleep that night.

She sat up with a book that detailed each and every wizarding law, and every single amendment, until the constitution was pouring out of her ears and messing with her constitution.

She felt ill. When the time came, she packed up her bag and went downstairs.

Dwelling on fiendfyre had reignited her memory in the worst possible way. She spent a week in a fog, remembering all the things that had happened later that night, and she sank back into a familiar pit of anguish.

The image of Fred’s lifeless body drove her into a state of unbridled madness, and she wrote a long, rambling letter to George about absolutely nothing – a letter she didn’t send.

She sat on the Quiddich stands for hours, just watching Ginny fly around, her hair shining like Fred’s had shone when he whizzed about swinging his beaters bat.

She stopped in the middle of her morning run to bawl, because the pinky dawn sky reminded her of Tonks’ hair.

The fog lifted suddenly, in an abrupt, clarifying moment, and she quickly climbed aboard a textbook. Words, theories, a swish and a flick, what-fucking-ever. Anything to stay afloat.

Her life had been fuelled by great expectations – her own and that of others – and there was no point in letting emotional meltdowns overpower them.

She kept repeating that thought to herself all through the afternoon, which was, in keeping with the aforementioned topic, ...one of those March days when the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold: When it is summer in the light, and winter in the shade.
Her table in the library had thankfully declared summer. Submersed in the light, she contemplated the stack of parchment in front of her. One at a time, she thought, one at a time.

The sound of vigorous footsteps shattered her flimsy resolve. Frustration promptly filled the ensuing vacuum and she grumbled, wondering who the hell would dare to intrude into her corner.

Malfoy emerged from between bookshelves and offered her a stiff nod as he settled on a chair at the other end of the table. His sleeves were once again rolled up just so, keeping his Mark hidden. His tie was loose, his expression was apathetic. He had this way about him that made her feel like she was the one imposing. It was insupportable.

“What are you doing here?” –She fought hard to make that enquiry in an even, placating tone. “According to your study schedule,” he sneered, “We’re supposed to be brushing up on Arithmancy right now.” “That’s correct.”

She blinked. She absolutely had not expected him to show up. She blinked again. If Theo ever decided to enter active politics, the world would truly be doomed. She sighed.

She sat up straight and pronounced, “These are exam papers from the last ten years. The first section deals with the history of Arithmancy – mostly objective type questions – we could, um, quiz each other?”

He took his time sighing, too, in a very lord, give me strength kind of way, so she thanked the lord for giving her the patience to deal with such affected behaviour. “Okay.”

In the 1980 Wimbledon Gentlemen's Singles final, Bjorn Borg met John McEnroe in an engaging tussle. Both were in their prime, seemingly matched in power and skill. Their fourth set tie-break lasted over twenty minutes, and resulted in thirty-four contested points. It was a story dad had told her many times over the years.

Nineteen years later, in the Hogwarts library, she threw questions at Malfoy, which he answered and followed with counter-questions, which she answered and –

What a rally!

“Who was the first person to apply Arithmatic principals to the Latin alphabet?” “Agrippa. Who employed multiplication instead of addition in one of the earliest–” “Apollonius of Perga. What is the numerical value of Sargon the–” “Sixteen thousand, two hundred and eighty-three. Where was–” “Sargon the Great, Malfoy.”
Game, set, match.

“What?”
“Not Sargon the second; I was asking about Sargon the Great.”
(In other words: Ha! You lose.)
“What the fuck does he have to do with any of this?” Malfoy barked, “He died long before the emergence of Gematria.”
She shrugged lightly. “Trick question.”
His eyes were simmering with vexation. He scowled. “Bloody stupid question.”
“I didn’t set the paper. You can stop glaring at me.” Smiling widely, she divided the second lot of parchments between them. “Comparative calculations now. The one who finishes first wins.”

The entire group met again a few days later to study Herbology, led by (a slightly pleased, slightly abashed) Neville. He came up with an impressive system to help them learn. They were each given a chart with a list of plants in one column, and the others, (labelled properties, uses, soil type, etcetera,) were left blank and filled over the course of their conference, as he quizzed them. In an unfortunate display, Hermione and Malfoy’s voices drowned out everybody else’s, as they each scrabbled to answer Neville’s questions before the other.

She found herself getting more and more riled up, but maintained a two point lead. He was getting increasingly aggressive.

“Do you mind?” Ginny groused by and by, “We’d all like a chance to participate, thanks.”

The tameness of an Ancient Runes session, later that evening, was a welcome reprieve, even though the dynamic between that particular set of five was a bit strange. Things got more than a bit strange when Luna decided to interject with one of her wild theories about ancient ciphers. Nevertheless, those instances were fairly easy to breeze by since Mandy had been going out of her way to be kind, and Susan was incapable of being anything but. Theo, true to form, made sure to keep them from getting too serious for long stretches of time.

Why was she being plagued by intermittent fits of melancholia?

While walking down to the dungeons, a draught caused all the tapestries in the passageway to flutter. Their wispy shadows struck in her a kind of all-pervading terror, and she fell against the cold stone wall, her heart in her throat...

...Thrashing, scrambling, trying to claw its way out...
“What’s the matter?”

Theo pulled her aside and examined her penetratingly, full of concern and bewilderment. All she could do was shrug in a surly way and mutter, “I don’t know.”

Her mood was the temperamental equivalent of a surly shrug as he dragged her out for one of their walks. He talked about the odd, confusing weather they were suffering; she didn’t speak at all. His shoulders were stiff, his inflection was stilted, but he didn’t ask her what was wrong again.

The free period before dinner had been allotted to Potions.

With the exception of Neville and Hannah, the whole bunch was present, and they looked up at Hermione expectantly when she reached. She, in turn, avoided their eyes by locking hers on the floor.

She sat down quietly and poured all her focus onto a piece of parchment, not saying a word as silence hovered all around. They were waiting for her to take charge.

Ya, boo, sucks to you. She took a leaf out of Neville’s book and began drawing neat, perfectly straight lines, to tabulate potion ingredients and their primary uses.

_Aconite: Wolfsbane, Fever-Reducing Potion_

Much to her relief, nobody questioned her. She pictured Theo shaking his head warningly at anyone who tried.

_Aconite Fluid: Doxy Repellent_

_Alihotsy: Laughing Potion_

She heard rustling all around – the crackle of parchment being straightened, of pages being flipped...

Her list progressed from _Ammoniacum_ to _Belladonna_ without any disturbances.

_Betony: Mad dog bites_

“Luna,” Dean proclaimed, “Oh, Luna. Some day I’d like to paint your portrait.”

“Would you now?” Luna asked with interest.

_Bezoar: Antidote to Common Poisons_

_Billywig Sting: Awakening Potion_
“Yes,” Dean affirmed, “Your face softly lit, emitting an ethereal glow, long hair bound in a scarf... lips softly parted–”
“Watch it, Thomas!” Theo growled.
“–looking seductively over your shoulder... The Girl with a Radish Earring.”
“It’s a Dirigible Plum.”
“Bless you.”

**Boom Berry: Wiggenweld Potion**

**Boomslang Skin: Polyjuice Potion**

“What about me?” Ginny demanded, “I went out with you – don’t I get a painting for my troubles?”

**Bubotuber Pus: Tumour Reduction potions, Beautifying Potions**

Dean cleared his throat. “Of course. In a dress of shimmering gold and mauve... hair spread around your face... flowers in hand...”
“That’s a bit much–”
“You will be my Ophelia, tragically drowning in a river.”
“You bastard!”
The air shook with ill-suppressed sniggers.

**Bundimun Secretion: Cleaning Fluids**

“What about Hermione, then?” Theo – the sod – broached, “Will you paint her?”
“Of course! She will be my–”
“Medusa.”

**Castor Oil: Love Potion Antidote, Hair Potions**

**Caterpillar: Shrinking Solution**

**Draco Malfoy’s head on fire.**

“No, actually – with those curls and rosy complexion, Hermione will be my Odalisque.”
“You’re wasting a perfect Gorgon-model,” Malfoy droned on.
“She will be surrounded by smoke and silk and oil lamps–”
“That hair can so easily be turned into a clump of snakes–”
“Draped on a chaise–”
“To say nothing about–”
“Completely naked.”
Absolute silence. Hermione’s furiously scribbling hand stilled. She could feel all their eyes on her. Fearfully, slowly, she looked up, and that indeed was the case: Everybody was staring.

Her face burned as she hissed, “Stop picturing it!”
In a move that was eerily synchronised, they all, as one, tilted their heads to the right.
“I said, *stop!*”
Theo opened his mouth to say something, and *Theo’s* opinion on the matter was the last thing she wanted to hear. She balled up her meticulously tidy chart and threw it at him.

---

Malfoy didn’t show up for the next Arithmancy meeting and she was glad.

She felt explosive. Her mind was buzzing with anxiety, her heart was racing, and when she picked up her quill to start writing, she realised her fingers were trembling. Her whole frame was quaking, in fact.
She let out a muffled whimper and buried her face in her hands. One lock of hair fell out of her bun and tickled the side of her neck–

She jumped up wildly, unable to *breathe*–

What was going on–

* *

......

* *

Clarity came late at night when she resurfaced from a stifling nightmare with a gasp. Her limbs ached with the memory of pain. There were tears streaming out of her eyes, her lungs were aflame, and music rumbled in her ears.

*Seasons don’t fear the reaper
Nor do the wind, the sun or the rain, we can be like they are* –

Her brain hadn’t registered the date, but it was etched into her physiology, like muscle memory, or like...
Like an alarm that only she could hear.

She jumped out of bed, stumbled, crashed into her desk. Her vision swam and she saw crazed eyes, the edge of a knife, a chandelier...

Her pale, shaking hand grabbed her cloak and she ran out of the room.
Terror and hysteria took her up to the blasted snogging room. She pushed the large window open; cool, brittle air kissed her skin. She felt the ghost of Greyback’s rough hand on the back of her neck.

We’ll be able to fly, don’t fear the reaper

She stepped out onto the ledge, and her childish dread of heights was easily eclipsed in that moment when the only thing she could think about was the feeling of having all her worst fears turned into red-hot shards that pierced and shredded her soul... Ugh.

Damn Bellatrix to hell.

But she’d seen to that hadn’t she? What must the Aurors have found when they removed that rock? A mushy pancake of blood and guts, sprinkled liberally with bits of bone like chocolate chips?

She shuddered violently and crept closer to the rim of the ledge. The night spread out before her in all directions – the whole ridiculous, malicious, wonderful world – a study in Prussian blue.

She raised her forearms and wandlessly conjured a score of bluebell flames. They twinkled like the hottest stars in the universe, and moved in a slow orbit around her.

This – this – is who she was, stripped to the bone. Her life, love, and opinions condensed to present one concise image: A girl on the edge, with magic coursing through her veins, flowing out of her pores, surrounding her with dazzling light...

Hermione Granger. Witch.

She laughed out loud, and it was the sound of her ultimate reality. It was her primordial, eternal echo. It would resound forever in her universe, where she made her own stars.

“Can’t – breathe,” she choked, but Theo didn’t relent. He’d wrapped her in a tight hug the moment he saw her the next morning, in the entrance hall.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered, “I’m so damn sorry. I can’t believe I didn’t realise—”

She extracted herself from his hold and clutched both his elbows in what she hoped was a firm and comforting manner.

“It’s fine, Theo. No, honestly. I didn’t really remember until last night. Before that, I just felt... off, without knowing why.”

“I could see that,” he said, peering down at her regretfully, “I should’ve been around, or – or – something.”

“It wouldn’t have helped.” She gave his arms a squeeze before letting go. “And I promise you I’m fine now.”

“Ah,” he sighed, and leant heavily against the banister, “I can’t believe I forgot. I saw Draco looking pretty off as well, so I pestered him until he finally – and shit, then Susan told me you’d already gone to bed—”

“What did he have to look off about?”

Theo’s troubled appearance slipped away as his eyes tightened. “He was tortured to within an inch of his life that evening, too, if you remember.”

Hermione’s face crumpled. “Oh god,” she groaned, “I’m sorry. Is he...”

“He’s fine.”

“It’s never going to end, is it?” she whispered, “George’s – Fred’s – birthday is coming up. I don’t know how the Weasley’s are going to handle it.”

He reached towards her and took her hand. “It won’t end. But it will get easier.”
She twisted her mouth to the side as she took in the solemnity of his expression. “I know.”
“Did you get any sleep last night?” he asked.
“Not really, no. You should be proud, though. I went out on the ledge, all by myself.”
“The what?”
“The ledge around the roof of our tower—”
“No, Hermione,” he chided, “Call it by its official name, please.”
“Oh, fine,” she huffed, “I went up to Theo’s Peak all by myself.”
He beamed. “Let’s go up there now!”
“No, thanks!” she refused most emphatically, “I’ve had my fill.”

So of course they ended up going anyway. He collected Luna and Malfoy, she hauled Ginny along, and ten minutes later, they were up on the roof.

Hermione could sense the burbling turmoil behind every move Ginny made; perhaps she was especially attuned to it because she’d felt the same way so recently. There was nothing to be done about it. The pot was going to boil over on the first of April. Still, she sat close to her, with her legs stretched out so the heels of her shoes glanced off the edge.

Theo and Luna reclined against the roof, softly whispering to each other about clouds and their shapes. Beyond them, Malfoy’s back was curved as he sat cross-legged with his elbows on his knees. He squinted against the sun’s brightness; the light got caught and tangled up in his flaxen eyelashes.

The atmosphere was nothing like the night before; it was vibrant, sunlit, and held the dewy, blossoming promise of early spring.
Fifty-Seven

Ginny’s face was bloodless and her eyes were bloodshot.

It was four o’clock on the first day of the cruellest month, and she shuffled alongside Hermione towards McGonagall’s office. They’d been granted special permission to take the evening off.

The castle was, predictably, full of pranksters, and the floor was littered (in spite of Filch’s persistent, cantankerous sweeping,) with purple and orange wrappers that read Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

“Gotcha!” and “Fooled you!” and “Ha-ha, you numpty!” echoed off the walls, weaving around Peeves’ ubiquitous cackle.

In the long run, everybody was made a fool by fate’s cruel tricks.

When they arrived at her office, McGonagall placed both her hands on Ginny’s shoulders.

“Give your family my regards,” she said softly, and with extreme gentleness.

Ginny nodded. She pulled away and practically leapt into the fireplace with a garbled cry of, “The Burrow.”

Hermione offered her headmistress a weak smile as she followed.


Five-thirty.
The Burrow’s kitchen was swamped with deep purple shadows. The curtains were drawn and the only sources of light were the twenty-one candles that flickered atop a large chocolate cake, which was placed at the centre of the table around which all but three chairs were occupied.

Nobody thought to light up a few lamps. Nobody so much as moved or spoke.

Six o’clock.
Nothing changed.

But at ten past six, the floo roared. The entire gathering started.

It was Angelina, looking utterly worn and drained. Her braided hair seemed wilted, her robes were rumpled, her eyes were rimmed with red.

“I’m sorry,” she sputtered thickly, “He won’t leave his room. I’ve been trying for hours but–”

“He isn’t coming?” Mrs. Weasley’s voice was a hollow rasp.

“No – I’m sorry – he isn’t.”

There was an enormous CRASH! – Mrs. Weasley had tossed the cake onto the floor. She was on
her feet, panting, staring down at the mess with wild eyes. “Molly–” Mr. Weasley began... She let out a tormented howl. A gasp went around the table, but that was just the preamble. She broke down completely, wailing and weeping loudly and unreservedly. She backed away from the table, hands reaching out to grab fistfuls of air like she was desperately seeking *anything* to hold on to.

Bill was the first one to get to her. He pulled her to him, even as she screamed and protested. Then Ginny, Charlie, Percy, and Mr. Weasley were there too. They patted her, and shushed her, (but she *kept howling,* ) and coaxingly began leading her upstairs. “Fleur, calming draught, hurry,” Bill muttered as they passed. Hermione stood as Fleur fluttered to the pantry, not sure what to do. Should she follow them up? Should she help Fleur? Should she –

She saw a tall figure slip outside into the back garden and she went after it at once.

Ron tore across the lawn, all the way to the far wall. In the dark, she could barely make out his face, but the wretched urgency of this pacing provided enough clarity. Hermione dithered by the door, watching him get consumed by his agony. Finally, he collapsed on a log amid a thicket of weeds. He was bent over with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands – and she flew to him.

Cautiously, she sat down next to him and laid a palm on his back. She could feel the vibrations of his muffled sobs. “Oh, Ron,” she whispered, and bent to rest her cheek against the back of his head. His hair felt like soft grass, and smelled vaguely of some generic minty shampoo: The scent that had once wafted out of Amortentia. She gently stroked his back, and with her eyes half-closed, tried to think about pretty, tranquil things, hoping those thoughts would seep out of her head and into his.

There was a slight disturbance – moving shadows, muted rustles, and a *creak* – and Harry sat at Ron’s other side. He kept his gaze locked on the far distance. His shoulders were stiff and his jaw was clenched. When an erratic breath escaped out of Ron, he placed a hand on his shoulder and gripped it firmly.

Hermione couldn’t say how long they stayed that way. Eventually, Ron moved, and she lifted her head to allow him to straighten his posture. His entire face was red, swollen, and clammy. She wanted so badly to wipe it and hug him, but he took care of the former himself. Then he stood up, dusted the back of his trousers and said, “Okay.” “Ron?” Harry broached. “Yeah. Alright. ’Kay.” He began walking towards the gate. “Where are you going, Ron?” Hermione called, quickly rising as well and skittering behind him. “To George’s,” he grunted. She stopped dead, and so did Harry. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” “Don’t know,” Ron shrugged, “I know I’m not Fred... not even close. But I’m going to sit outside his bloody door for however long and remind him that he still has four brothers and a sister. I’ll sit there till he fucking *gets it*.” He breathed in and closed his eyes, calming himself down; he was never good at apparating under pressure. He opened his eyes, ready to spin –

“Oi, Ron – Wait for us, kid!”
It was Charlie, stomping towards them. And behind him was Percy, followed by Bill with his arm around Ginny.
The Weasley siblings stood in a line, all equally sombre and determined. They had always been so different from each other, such strong individuals, but in that moment they were the same blood and that was that.

The sound of their disapparation rent the sky and all that was left was the dark silhouettes of trees and hills. Harry and Hermione wandered back to the log and sat down. A little while later, Fleur joined them, with three glasses of wine levitating before her.
“How’s Mrs. Weasley?” Hermione asked.
“I’ve given ‘er a calming draught and zum dreamless sleep potion. Hopefully she will be better when she wakes up.”

Cicadas broke into song. Something – a frog perhaps – leapt into the pond with a splash.
Harry raised his glass and said, “To Fred Weasley.”
“To Fred,” Hermione and Fleur chorused.
The wine was sweet and fruity like a temperate spring evening.

The later it got, the more evident it became that Ron and the rest had no plans of returning. Mrs. Weasley was dead to the world and Mr. Weasley stayed by her side. Fleur made them some sandwiches which they ate out in the garden.

By and by, Hermione stood up and stretched. “I should get back to Hogwarts.”
“Hogwash,” Harry replied, “Come with me to Grimmauld Place. Let’s get drunk.”
He looked at her imploringly from over the rim of his glasses and she couldn’t help but laugh.
“All right. But you’ll have to let me borrow your owl so I can let McGonagall know.”
“Only if you call him by his name.”
She kicked his foot. “Prat. You’ll have to let me borrow Herms—”
“Why, of course!”

They bid Fleur farewell and apparated to that very familiar door with a silver knocker. Harry let them in, and she was once again thrown by how perfect the house looked, all agleam and spick and span.

A crusty drone pulled her attention away from the glittering chandelier.

“Master Harry Potter,” Kreacher croaked, “And... a guest.”
“Right you are,” Harry said cheerfully, “Could you bring us a bottle of firewhiskey and two glasses please?”

And so the day ended with Hermione sprawled on the sofa where she’d once spent so many fitful nights. Except back then, it had been tattered, musty, and generally foul. Now it was plush and clean. She had a glass of whiskey in one hand, and McGonagall’s reply to her letter in the other.

“She says, as you see fit, Ms. Granger. Ha! Can’t you just hear her disapproval?”
Harry grinned. “I can picture it.” He pushed his glasses down his nose, pursed his lips, lowered his brows...
Hermione nearly tumbled to the ground laughing.
They made it through one bottle and talked about Auror training and N.E.W.T. prep. Halfway through the second bottle, they reminisced about the Weasley twins’ rebellion against Umbridge. When Harry clumsily summoned a third bottle, he told her he loved Ginny so fucking much, Hermione and she narrated the god-awful mess she’d made of her dalliance with Terry. He poured himself another glass and she shook her head so vigorously that she maybe, possibly, messed up her pivot joint forever.

“I’m duh-hun,” she declared, “If I have one more sip I will die.”

“That’ll be a sad thing,” Harry mused.

“Do you remember the last time we got this... this... out-offit?”

“Yeah. Fucking tent.”

“Fucking tent,” she agreed, “You know, I’ve still got my DA galleon, if you’d like to chat with Theo—”

Harry offered her a sneer and a two-fingered salute. Then he downed the remainder of his drink in one gulp. How was he still up, she wondered, he’d had the lion’s share of the booze. He pulled down a sofa cushion and lay on the floor.

“Y’know what, Hermione,” he slurred, “You’re my four brothers and a sister.”

“What?” she giggled.

“I mean... say I locked myself in a room and all, I know you’d sit outside the door. Can’t be sure about anybody else, but you... you’d be there.”

“I would. And you’d—”

“Do the same for you? Yeah. ‘Course. But I’d wear armour, in case you get cross. Don’t want to end up trapped in a jar, with canary shaped spots or—”

“Oh, shut up.” She giggled once more.

Hermione apparated to Hogsmeade early in the morning, while Harry was still fast asleep on the floor. It was a Friday, and she had a full day of lessons ahead of her. She hurried to her room and indulged in a long, sumptuous shower. Yet, it was still only seven by the time she was dressed. She made herself a crown of braids. She sat by her window and leafed through her notes on explosive hexes. At five to eight she let her hair down, and shook it so it fell in its usual, atrocious disarray.

Theo was leaning against the chair directly in front of the staircase as she descended.

“How are you?” he asked at once.

She filled him in as they went to the Great Hall.

She sat before her empty plate long after she’d had her fill of tea and breakfast, thinking that Ginny would turn up at any moment.

She didn’t.

Hermione remained on edge throughout her lessons. Ginny was absent all day...

...Until she suddenly showed up during supper. She took a seat next to Hermione and began piling her plate up, not saying a word. Hermione kept watching her from the corner of her eye, and if this annoyed her, she didn’t let it show.
After eating, they ambled out together.

Unable to contain herself any longer, Hermione asked, “So what happened?”
“He didn’t come out till three. Looked damned awful when he did, but Charlie had come loaded with alcohol, so we just drank... a lot. And talked about Fred. I don’t know if it was plain horrible, or us making the best of a horrible situation... I know I nodded off at some point.”
She fell quiet as they neared a group of third year students.
“Today morning,” she continued once they were in the clear, “We went home and had breakfast. Mum had made her usual spread. George wore an earring shaped like a jester’s hat on his stupid gold ear. Mum told him it was atrocious. Dad, Percy, and Bill... Harry and Ron... went to work. It was all perfectly normal.”

They were near the Gryffindor common room by then; the fat lady gave them a friendly wave.

“I’m exhausted,” Ginny wheezed.
“Yeah,” Hermione replied delicately, “You should get some sleep.”
Ginny nodded, but lingered for a second or two as tears misted over her eyes. “Sometimes I hate that the world had the gall to go on after he died.”

The theory of potion making was intricate and deserved to be understood and internalised with full clarity. But Hermione knew what she had to by heart – word for word. Her preoccupied state of mind wouldn’t cost her a whole lot.

*Keep telling yourself that.*

She was sitting with a book on her lap as Ginny recited the fundamental laws, unwaveringly and accurately. The past hour she’d been in control; spirited, vivacious, and wholly and truly Ginny. “Yes, perfect,” Hermione said after she finished.
She smiled and then it was Dean’s turn to elaborate on known exceptions. Hermione passed the book to Theo to check him, while she rubbed her weary eyes.

She was experiencing a strange duality of existence: Everything that had happened last year was overlapping over the present in a very disconcerting way. The group that was sitting around her in the library was, (with the exception of Ginny, Susan, and Mandy,) the same group that had sat around her in the garden at Shell Cottage, on that surprisingly wonderful day in the middle of hell. Little Teddy was born... Lupin had arrived with stars in his eyes...

And Lupin was dead.

She rubbed her eyes harder, until she could actually see the sun setting over churning waves, hear the rush of water, smell the heady aroma of flowers and damp air... *Theo’s head thrown back in laughter, Luna’s quiet chuckle, Dean laugh-crying over his dad, and Malfoy... recuperating from torture just like her... alight with –*

“You alright?”
She pulled her hands off her face and blinked away the spots that spanned before her vision. Theo’s troubled, wrinkled countenance emerged as they receded.
“Fine,” she murmured, “Who’s next?”

Then came another Arithmancy hour, and she was once again alone with Malfoy. She had, out of habit, initiated another competition: A race against time and each other to verify a series of astrological forecasts.

And again, she was awfully distracted. Her eyes kept leaping away from her work to scrutinise him, while he remained diligently focused. He bent close to his parchment, then away quickly when the top of his quill brushed against his chin. His free hand absently came up to scratch the spot, fingers curling in and out. His Mark, as expected, was hidden.

How many more Weasley’s would have been dead if he hadn’t used the last of his strength to apparate and warn Bill?

His brows were drawn low at sharp angles almost parallel to the lines of his jaw.

Words left her mouth before she could so much as think about their appropriateness: “What was it like... when... when you decided to deflect? When you first went to Lupin?”

He stiffened immediately. His look of concentration morphed into a heavy grimace, and he raised his head to fix her with the fiercest of glares.

“What was it like killing Bellatrix?”

Ah, she should have anticipated such a rebuttal... had she given her question any consideration. She felt, at once, like the proverbial deer in the headlights and like a wild, cornered animal. Stunned, panicked, and ready to lash out with viciousness.

But she sat with those emotions for a moment, regarding the bottomless rancour of his expression. Then she decided to take a completely different route. She pulled her face to the side, staring blankly at the fuzzy halo of light around the lamp on their table.

“At that time – when it happened – I honestly don’t think I felt anything. I mean, I don’t remember feeling anything. She was throwing curses at me. Harry was – I thought he was dead. Tonks was dead, Fred was dead, Lupin and Lavender were dead. She’d just killed an innocent house elf in front of me and it reminded me of poor Dobby. And then she turned her wand onto Theo and I – I – Not him. That’s all I could think – all I cared about. Not him. And now... I don’t think about it. If I do – about the way I’d so easily, brutally snuffed the life out of another human being – I – I would just–”

“The man who has a conscience suffers whilst acknowledging his sin. That is his punishment.”

She sucked in a sharp breath and her eyes darted back his way. His aspect had turned analytical, in an uncertain, narrow-eyed and speculative kind of way.

“...Yes.”

“She wasn’t really human, Granger. She hadn’t been for a while.”

She knew that. And he’d said it in a way that implied that she ought to know that. Hermione bit her lip. He leant back in his chair and crossed his arms in a stance that suggested anticipation.
“That was from *Crime and Punishment,*” she said with a certain degree of stupefaction. He didn’t flinch as he confirmed, “It was.”
“You read it.”
“It’s what I generally do with books.”
“Right.”

She had been sure – an assumption that she felt was corroborated by his stone-facedness – that Malfoy would never want to bring up the whole book thing. Perhaps, as it had happened with her, the quote had flown out of his mouth without his consent. He was waiting for her next words while she had no idea what to say.

She picked up her quill once more, just so that she had something to do besides flounder. Maybe she could get back to work, and then oh so casually ask him what he’d thought about the book. All airy-like, barely looking up, *casually* flipping her hair over her shoulder, she’d say, *oh by the way, Malfoy, what did you –*

“Don’t think I didn’t know what you were trying to do, Granger, sending me all that dark, gloomy literature.”

Her quill-laden hand fell upon the table with a soft *thud.*

“Excuse me?”

His arms remained tightly crossed, but he leaned forward, peering at her with his head lowered. Another unspoken challenge that prompted in her *another* wave of discombobulation.

“You saw how close to the edge I was; you were trying to push me over. You wanted me to do myself in.”

She recoiled at the outrageous, vilifying ludicrousness of that statement and cried, “I did not! That’s preposterous! I – I gave you Wodehouse!”

“Then what where you up to?”

“Theo told me you were...” she let out a strange semi-vocal expulsion of frustration, “He *hinted* that you might have been reconsidering... Well, he seemed to believe that reading some books by muggles might, um, help you.”

“Ah! So you were trying to *fix* me!”

His expression was strange – a mix between deep scorn and mocking amusement; candlelight and a muddle of objectionable sentiments shimmered over his face. She felt fury scale up her spine. “Well, clearly it worked!”

It was his turn to retreat. His hands collapsed into his lap and he jerked back. There was a moment in which his face went absolutely taut with offence. His outrage was so satisfying... until he took a moment to blink up at the ceiling, and in that process, somehow wrestled his face back into a state of mild and contemptuous humour.

“You – good grief. Sure. It worked. You fixed me. I was broken and brainwashed, being tossed around in the tidal wave of war. But now I am of sound mind and soul; no longer a vile ideologue, but a ray of syrupy sodding sunshine – all thanks to Hermione Granger and her books.”

He waved a hand in her direction like, *behold – a profound oddity!*

How dare he make fun of her for it. How dare he make light of the fact that she’d bloody well *curated* and —- she had to bite the insides of her cheeks to keep from throwing that in his face. His disgustingly entertained face, like he had no memory of the empty, hopeless wreck he’d been back then.
But was that something anyone could forget?

An epiphany struck like a flash of lightening; she knew exactly what he was doing. That
determined smirk, that testing arch of his brow...

It was a sad fact of her life that the phrase for Theo’s sake, was something that’d been running
through her mind with increasing frequency, and in a completely unironic way. She was doing
things in his name like she’d finally found a deity she believed in.
But if Malfoy could resign himself to it, she most certainly could as well.

She pressed her indignation down to her feet, trying to stomp, stomp, stomp it out of existence.

“Pfff,” she scoffed, “I’ll have you know that my books and I have done a great deal. Just ask
Harry.”
His mouth quivered and stretched wider. “Oh fuck. Are you taking credit for all of The Chosen
Prat’s accomplishments, too?”
“I am not!” she rejoined, “Not all – just... just ask Harry!”
“A – I will do no such thing. Willingly conversing with Potter, about you of all things, is high on
the list of things I’ll never do. And B – I had no idea you were this deluded, Granger. Unbelieva–”
“I have to get to Ancient Runes,” she supplied superciliously as she shoved her belongings into her
bag... and took another something out of it. When she looked back up, he was immersed in his
calculations again. Just like that.
“Here,” she muttered.
“What’s that?”
“It’s a book, Malfoy. One of those things that you claim to generally read.”
“The Myth of Sisyphus?”

As she turned to leave, she heard the satisfying crack of a crisp spine, and the melodious sound of a
page being turned.

All the professors were at their most unforgiving during lessons, and every lesson involved
gruelling exercises and class assignments aimed to prepare them for the toughest possible exam
papers.

After a turbulent hour in greenhouse one, where Sprout had set up a line of dying plants that they
had to rescue within a ridiculously short amount of time, Hermione dawdled back towards the
castle covered in leaves. Everything was going fine for her until she got to the godforsaken
Bouncing Bulb.
She felt weighed down by her satchel even though it had a weightless charm on it.

She draaaagged herself up to the common room and melted into the first vacant armchair she
found.

The sensation of something being pulled out of her hair had her jumping forward, and she huffed at
Luna who simply grinned and continued to deforest her mane.
“Fun lesson, wasn’t it?” she asked.
Hermione groaned. “In the immortal words of Ron Weasley – *that was mental.*”
Soon enough, Theo came over to assist Luna. Hermione sat there feeling like a gorilla that was having lice picked out of its fur by its gorilla-mates.

Days later, she was back on that same armchair, working on an essay for Flitwick. It was technically dinnertime, but she decided to save time by scarfing down a bag of crisps and some biscuits that her parents had so kindly sent for her.
She had written two feet on the importance of regulating weather-modifying charms. But her reverie was shattered when a book landed on the table before her. She started and glanced up and saw Malfoy’s back as he paced quickly towards the door.

“Malfoy!” she called, “Malfoy!”
He turned slowly, resignation warring with reluctance and painting his face a funny colour.
“What?”
“You’re done?”
He sighed. “Yeah.”
She had to admit she was a little dumbfounded that he’d managed to finish it within a week – an insanely hectic week, at that. But she was careful enough to keep her expression stoic, and not sputter out her disbelief like she quite was tempted to.
“What did you make of it?”
He sighed again and stuffed his hands in his pockets as he walked closer.
“You’re really obsessed with making *points,* aren’t you?”
“Oh, that’s *me* is it?” she taunted.
“Yes.”
“And was my point successfully made?” she asked brusquely. He scowled. “What? Do you disagree with one of the greatest philosophical thinkers of all time?”
“I don’t know what I think,” he barked.
Her mouth opened uselessly for three seconds before she snapped it shut once more. He half turned to leave.
“I would have thought,” she whispered, “The fact that you’re still here, proves that–”
“Our lives weren’t merely *absurd,* Granger,” he growled, “We weren’t grappling with the ultimate, inescapable futility of life. It was the most desperately hellish situation, and... and...”
He broke off on an angry breath.
“But you still chose to struggle against it, didn’t you?”
“Not because I acknowledged and accepted the circumstances; not because I was unbound by hope. Hope was probably the only thing–”

And once again, he cut himself off. He was glaring at her with thunderous disgust and she wanted to squirm. She wished he would at least sit down – having this exchange while he loomed over her was maddening. She couldn’t really stand up without looking ridiculous... or aggressive.

“The third kind of absurd man,” she muttered, “The one who relinquishes all promise of eternity... action over contemplation...”
“Bah,” he scoffed, “I contemplated a lot of things. But certainly not about the meaninglessness of victory. That wouldn’t have got me anywhere.”
Hermione stared at her knees, and gulped. Her tone was quivery and pitchy when she whispered, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

“Are you happy?” he countered bitterly. She laughed. It was dull and dry. After a moment, she chanced looking up at him again. But he was busy boring holes into Titian’s painting of Sisyphus that graced the cover of her book. “It’s a metaphor, Malfoy,” she said, “Remove it from this context for a moment and you’ll see that it’s applicable in the case of any hardship, big or small.”

His eyes flickered back towards her and narrowed. “So your point was for me to focus on the merit of always struggling, and to brush over the entire chunk that examined the nature of life and the world?”

“In that case, Granger, your point was not successfully made.”

“Oh well then.”

Resentment and shame simmered low in her stomach. Yet they were quenched by the time they reached the back of her throat, doused by his awful, haunted expression.

“My point was,” she said instead, more shakily than ever, “That I would never want anyone to do themself in.” He didn’t say anything to that, just watched her in a steady, austere manner.

“Coming for dinner, Draco?”

It was Mandy. She came to a hesitant stop next to Malfoy and laid a hand on his elbow. “Sure.”

When the common room door closed behind them, Hermione tipped her head against the back of her chair and gazed at the ceiling.
Fifty-Eight

Chapter Notes

I have been sitting on this for a long time, with the intention of working on it - but apparently I'm simply not in the right frame of mind to do that. So here it is, as rough as can be. I hope you like it anyway.

I am also terribly sorry for failing to reply to reviews/comments. Life has been insane.

“I applied Arithmancy on nearly all of Trelawney’s predictions in third year!” she stated with acute (and slightly shrill) exasperation, “They were all so sensational and woolly. And that's exactly what the calculations showed – I can’t begin to tell you how many of them had zero probability of coming to fruition, Malfoy!”

He scoffed, lounging in his chair with an over-the-top show of patience like he was indulging a raving lunatic.

“And yet you spent a good chunk of your life courting death because of one of her oh so woolly prophesies. Potter’s entire life was dictated by it.”

“But that,” she rejoined hotly, “Was because Voldemort—” (he winced so faintly that it may just have been a trick of the candlelight) “—had decided to take the prophecy seriously! He made it valid by giving it merit it didn’t deserve. He marked Harry as his equal, and Harry being Harry couldn’t back away from the responsibility of doing the right thing—”

“So it’s all down to Potter’s messiah complex and The Da – you kno – his paranoia?”

“Yes! Trelawney simply rambles semi-ambiguously, and she’s only a seer because people have decided she is.”

This debate was taking place as they worked on an Arithmancy assignment for a lesson that was just half an hour away. There was a part of her brain that was screaming at her for wasting time, but that part was easily overpowered by her desire to...

Get.
Him.
To.
Concede.
He dropped his quill on the table between them and brought his elbow to the arm of his chair. He tilted his head, resting his temple against two fingers and thus stepping up his languid disposition.

“Let's say the prophesy only came about because of fear and gullibility. You still have to admit that the whole thing played out exactly as she had foretold.”

“Pff.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “That’s because she’s an expert at phrasing and walking the line between vagueness and suggestion.”

“I don’t understand. Is she a blithering fool or is she a shrewd genius?”
“People can be both, you know,” Hermione sniffed. He grinned. Something in his gaze sharpened. “Indeed.”

The implication was clear. Hermione felt her hackles rise.

“All right,” he continued as, in a fluid motion, he straightened his head and dropped his hand onto his lap. “Is Delphi the same way then? Was she a fraud as well? A devious-puppet-master-cum-deanged-babbler?”

Hermione attempted to execute a casual shrug though her shoulders were stiff with umbrage. “Perhaps. She was allegedly high on ethylene fumes, anyway. If she hadn’t opened her mouth – or her supposed third eye – we might never have known the pathos of Greek tragedy.” “And yet, there on that parchment in front of you, you have numbers that prove her predictions had at least some merit. And these calculations have nothing to do with how seriously people decided to take what she said–” “But the answer is never one, is it? We calculate the likelihood of something happening, but have we ever come across a prediction that’s proved to be certain? I mean, I could say it’s going to rain tomorrow–” “It isn’t.” “And it’ll fall somewhere between zero and one–” “Definitely zero.” “Does that mean I’m a seer too? Well, all right! Beware, Malfoy – before the midnight hour, all your hair is going to fall off!”

He was sniggering at her with one side of his mouth pulled higher than the other. “Put on monstrous glasses, drape yourself in trumpery beads, and you’ll look remarkably like Trelawney.” “Oh, off with you!” “In a bit, Granger,” he chirruped, “I need to get this assignment done first.” “Right–” she cleared her throat, “–So we should move on to–” “Just one more thing, though.” “What?” she sighed.

“How do you propose we test the true veracity of a prophecy?” “Well,” she hedged, “If such a thing does exist... I suppose it can be proved if the maker of said prophecy is kept in complete isolation, and makes the prediction to an unbiased, uninvolved party. And it’ll have to be something precise – not a bit of clever phrasing or something general and vague and open to interpretation...”

She didn’t need his look of derisive scepticism to know she sounded ridiculous.

“Right,” he drawled, “Let’s lock someone up until they say something that’s exactly to your specifications. And keep them there until it is fulfilled... or isn’t... but who knows how long that’ll take, yeah? I mean, it only took seventeen years for the Potter-Lord prophesy to come true. So let’s just keep them locked up forever, right? That’s really bloody ethical.”

Seriously. Malfoy was calling her out for being unethical.

“It was purely hypothetical!” she sputtered defensively. “And you do realise that no-sodding-one can ever make a specific prophecy in an isolated environment, don’t you?” “So you admit it’s a sham?” “True seers are said to react to the magic around them... like weathervanes for magical energy, if you will. I do believe it is perfectly possible to be intensely attuned to that. As for the way they choose to verbalise those inklings...” “Go on,” Hermione urged with narrowed eyes.
“Just a load of artistic liberties and bollocks.”
She reared back so suddenly that it was dizzying: “Huh?”
“You know. A bit of suggestive flimflam. Cleverly crafted ambiguity.”
“But – what – you just–”
“True, unconditional prophesies are a myth. Trelawney’s definitely full of it.”
“Malfoy!” she yowled, “If that’s what you – What the hell was all this about?!?”

He feigned a yawn. He cracked his knuckles, he sat up straight, he picked up his quill.

“We really ought to get back to this assignment – only fifteen minutes more to finish it,” he said.
“But!! Just hold on a minute–”
“Fifteen minutes, Granger.”

He began writing. Hermione’s mind reeled with vehement incredulity as she glared at his bowed, stylishly tousled head. Fifteen minutes...fifteen minutes... how long would it take to empty her inkpot all over those pale locks?
He smirked haughtily, as though he could hear her thoughts.

Fifteen minutes.

She got back to work, too.

The ceiling of the Great Hall was bright blue and clear with a flurry of owls circling beneath it.

Hermione ignored the *Daily Prophet* that was dropped in front of her in favour of drizzling honey into her bowl of porridge. The state of her hormones had put her in the mood for something terribly sweet, and she went about her task in a Pollock-ish manner. Finally, after she felt she had achieved some compositional harmony, she turned to the paper. Her spoon fell into the bowl with a dull splodge.

MINISTRY PASSES GROUNDBREAKING BILL FOR THE REHABILITATION OF WAREWOLF ATTACK VICTIMS:

10th April 1999: Following a six hour long deliberation with the Wizengamot, a committee led by the Minister for Magic himself was successful in launching its program to aid the scores of people whose lives were destroyed by Fenrir Greyback’s pack of werewolves. Under this act, (unofficially dubbed Lupin’s Law,) victims that have so far been under the care of St. Mungo’s Lycanthropy Centre will be offered a lifetime’s supply of Wolfsbane potion. The Ministry will assign a counsellor to help the adults secure jobs and housing.

An additional clause of this act has ensured that the many young orphaned children will be looked after. The construction of a sprawling mansion is underway at a property donated by Andromeda Tonks, (widow of the late Edward Tonks, and mother to the late Nyphadora Tonks.) The orphanage is to be maintained partially by the Department for the Regulation and Control for Magical creatures, supplemented by donations made by various anonymous sources –
Hermione’s eyes had misted over. She stared through the blur at the photograph accompanying the article: It showed Kingsley striding across the dungeons of the Ministry, followed closely by Percy, Andromeda, and various figures in plum robes, including Tiberius Ogden. She pushed the paper across the table to Ginny and Neville and shovelled a spoonful of porridge into her mouth. It was much, much too sweet.

She saw many things in her honey-drip painting. She saw Lupin’s rare, truly delighted smile that she’d only ever seen around Harry or when he spoke about his son. She saw his son, pink-faced, dimpled, waving his fist about. She saw the thing with feathers that perches in the soul – And she saw herself in plum robes, marching through the Ministry, steeped in the glow of something momentous and significant.

Since the day was so fine, and it a Sunday to boot, Hermione agreed to follow Ginny into the quidditch pitch after breakfast. She took a pew at a sunny spot in the stands and composed a letter to her parents as Luna, Neville, Hannah, Susan and Mandy chatted and discussed the game taking place above their heads.

It was three a side, and while Ginny, Dean, Demelza, and Malfoy were all competent chasers and Michael minded his three hoops, Theo couldn’t be less interested in performing his duties as a keeper. He floated idly and lazily around the pitch, paying no attention to Ginny and Dean’s fury. He swooped over to where Luna was sat and kissed her; Malfoy and Demelza scored some twelve goals each.

An hour later, he was still utterly unaffected by his team’s devastating loss. A few of them decided to head to Hogsmeade, and all the way, Dean and Ginny harped away at him. He told Dean that he looked quite sexy when he was angry.

They ate sandwiches at a new deli that had opened by the book shop.

Hermione supposed it was the weather that was making everyone completely crazy. Spring in the air – the season of blossoming love, flowers, butterflies, and blah-blah.

It wasn’t long after their lunch that Harry showed up and whisked Ginny away. He’d actually petted Hermione’s head as he’d left – he was in that kind of mood. Neville and Hannah disappeared soon after.

During the walk back to the castle, Theo and Luna were in one of their bubbles. Once inside, Mandy whispered something in Malfoy’s ear, causing him to smirk and drag her off somewhere down a third floor corridor.

So ultimately, it was just Hermione, Dean, and Michael climbing up staircases.

“Do you know,” Dean grumbled, “How long it’s been since I’ve had a half-decent snog?”

“Don’t look at me,” Hermione warned at once.

“I wasn’t,” he insisted irritably.

“Nor me,” Michael piped up.

Dean bared his teeth at him.
“I’ve got to send this off,” Hermione said, waving her letter as she broke away from the boys. She went up to the owlery and watched the owl carrying her letter fly off and away until it was a mere speck in the sky... until it disappeared into the blue.

She wasn’t wistful anymore, though her soul craved a kind of blossoming too. For the first time, she felt in control of her path. Fifty-eight days till the N.E.W.T.s. Though she knew full well that life did all it could to veer its players off course, she was going to try her damnedest not to let it.

There were no words to describe how vexed Hermione had been – and still was – by the sole *Exceeds Expectations* in her O.W.L result sheet. She begged Hestia to give her extra practice assignments.

She was on schedule, determined, equanimous, and sleeping no more than four hours a day.

Morning run – twenty-five minutes. Five minutes to sprint back to her room. Fifteen minutes to shower. One hour of revision before breakfast.

She was perfectly aware of how her peers looked at her when she brought her strident persona out during their group sessions. Increasingly, she found that they were just getting together out of habit; they could no longer work on the same things because very few of them were at the same stage that she was.

Tough as it was to admit, the subject she felt most accomplished in was Arithmancy. With Malfoy, she’d somehow found an ideal blend of competitiveness and productivity, (often fuelled by irritation, but that hardly mattered.) She was already halfway through a second notebook – they’d done dozens of mock exams, scores of calculations, proved and evaluated numerous prophesies... And just when she’d be at the risk of feeling smug or complacent, he’d show her up and she’d be irritated into productivity all over again.

Like for instance, at that moment she was unreservedly, out-and-out *desperate* to beat him for once after he’d finished tabulating three of Delphi’s predictions before her——

“Shut up!”

Stunned, Hermione snapped her head up. “Excuse me?”

He was glaring at her like she’d spit in his eye and called him a ferret. “Stop bloody muttering, would you?”

“I was not muttering!” she exclaimed.

“You *were,*” he persisted irritably, “You’ve called Delphi every name in the book.”

“No, I–” *Ahem.* She felt embarrassment flood her face. Her eyes dropped to her lap and she mumbled, “I didn’t realise I was saying that out loud. Er, sorry.”

There was no response from him for some time, so she risked a glance–

Yes. It was as expected. That same old *questioning-Hermione-Granger’s-sanity* look that she’d witnessed on all too many faces.

“It’s just all this... this... flowery rubbish she spouted!” she said with fanatical intent to defend
“Paragraph after paragraph of baroque superfluous ness... before she actually gets to the point!”

Malfoy’s mouth curled into a wry half smile. “You aren’t fond of the occasional poetic turn of phrase? I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s hardly occasional!” she protested. “And it’s so unnecessary here! Such a waste of my time, trudging through all this when there are so many other things to do!”

“How terribly inconsiderate of the great Oracle to not have considered your pre-exam schedule while making her monumental prophecies.”

“She was a seer,” Hermione sniffed, “She should have seen it coming.”

He laughed.

He laughed out loud with a kind of guileless amusement that was rich and infectious and left her grinning at the top of her quill.

“Well, Granger,” he declared with great pomposity, “You know what you must do.”

He paused long enough for Hermione to huff and ask, “Oh, what must I do, Malfoy?”

“Persevere.” There was an enigmatic twinkle in buried in his enunciation. “Keep pushing that boulder up the slope.”

Her grin was threatening to return with reinforcements. She sucked in her cheeks and said, (as dryly as she could possibly manage in that moment,) “You’re hilarious.”

“I know.”

He returned to his work, but Hermione dithered. It said a lot about the poor state of her mind that that small pretence at witticism had felt tremendously refreshing. She yearned for it to have lasted a little longer. It gnawed at her insides as she slowly dipped her quill into her ink pot and it protested as she pressed the tip against her parchment. She tried to look at the page of Greek characters before her but they all fused into a muddy haze.

“You know,” she ventured somewhat hesitatingly, “There are many more works in Camus’ oeuvre that are considered must reads.”

His hand stilled and he looked up at her from under pale eyelashes and curved brows. “All situated somewhere on the scale of bleakness, I suppose?”

“Well, yes,” she acceded with a shrug, “There’s one – possibly his most famous work of fiction – The Outsider–”

“I’ve read it.”

His pronouncement threw her off completely. She put her quill down and settled against the back of her chair. He had a familiar, incongruent blend of humour and contempt swirling about his face, under a thin veneer of apathy. She decided to label it his ‘in a dilemma’ expression – though she was the one who was really wavering between approaches; it seemed like that was how he always looked when she was in such a state of mind.

Perhaps she should call it his, ‘I’ll bet you can’t possibly pick the right thing to say, Granger’ expression. It was both frightening and downright galling that the onus was always on her. She should simply get back to work and put an end to the ridiculous deadlock.

“There’s a bookshop near the visitor’s entrance of the Ministry. I popped in before my trial.”

Hermione could’ve sworn she heard a farcically exaggerated noise of screeching breaks as he diverted her strategy once again. He hurried on before she could react–

“Of course, I only read it after... but the irony wasn’t lost on me. Certainly not when the memory of
waiting in my holding cell was so fresh in my mind. So you needn’t bother pushing this bit of depressing introspection unto me – I’ve been through it quite, quite thoroughly.”

“That wasn’t why I brought it up!” Hermione objected.

And it truly wasn’t. There was no part of her that conflated Malfoy with Meursault anymore – she knew he could cry bitter, broken tears out of worry for his mother. She hastened to say something vaguely reassuring... but he positively killed the sentiment as it began to climb out of her voice box.

(He scoffed. He rolled his eyes.) “Bullshit.”

So she scowled. She grabbed her bag off the floor and summoned a thick, heavy book from within her beaded pouch.

“When you go,” she said sourly, “The Pickwick Papers. One of the most clever and riotously funny books ever written. While there is a bit of incarceration involved, even a sourpuss like you–”

“What the f– Sourpuss?”

“–hilarious, and completely unrelatable. Unless some untoward ex-girlfriend of yours has dragged you to court for a breach of promise...?” He shook his head with very grave, deliberate solemnity.

“Well then,” she concluded, “You’re safe from any dangerous introspection.”

Malfoy turned the book over, running a finger along the spine as he read the back. His mouth was pursed to the side contemplatively.

“Spiffy new plan of action,” he declared after he’d finished. He sat back and placed his interlocked fingers on top of the book, all crisp and businesslike. “I daresay this is a much more effective means of sabotaging–”

“Oh, what is it now?!”

“Come on. Giving me a... what was it? Riotously funny and bloody fat book to read less than two months before the N.E.W.T.s? What is that if not sabotage? You’re trying to get me to fail.”

Hermione wished she had his remarkable facial control. How she struggled to keep down her laughter, while he maintained nothing more than a subtle smirk!

“Why on earth would I want to do that?” She dragged her voice as she spoke, hoping to sound convincingly fed-up.

He looked down his nose at his criss-crossed fingernails. “You feel threatened by me, intellectually, of course.”

“Oh, please–”

“Tell me, Granger... is this book full of flowery prose?”

Hermione leant forward and waited until he met her eyes. “It’s the absolute Dickens.”

She let herself laugh at her own awful joke, and when he didn’t crack a smile, she laughed harder still.

It was sacred, ritualistic circumambulation, it was Caesarian ambition, churning an ocean of milk, running her hands through her hair, slapping her face to keep awake during balmy afternoons and post-lunch lethargy...

She stuck a list of topics (classified according to subject) on the back of her door. Every night, at
Three days after she’d sent them her letter, Hermione received a response from her parents. They’d also sent her a small bag of treats and two large, bright white, multi-pocket folders – one for her, and one for Theo.

Outside the Ancient Runes classroom, she handed it to him and said, “Here. They’re sending you stationery, which means that they’ve decided that you’re their child. Welcome to the family.”
“Theodore Granger,” he mused smilingly, “I like it.”
“Nott-Granger.”
“Yes, Granger.”
“Nott-quite-Granger? It matters Nott. Granger or Nott, you’re still–”
“Hermione,” he chuckled, “You need to sleep more.”
“No, I do... No–”
“Don’t.”
“Okay, I will Nott.”
He groaned and buried his face in his folder; the devastation of his pose was much diminished by the fact that it had Chipper Choppers embossed on the cover in glinting sliver letters.

Hermione dragged herself through the common room door after a miserable, half-arsed jog around the grounds. She was lightheaded and couldn’t stop yawning. The purpose of her run – providing a boost of invigoration – had definitely not been accomplished. She expected to find the room empty at that early hour, but much to her surprise, she found Malfoy sitting by the large window with a book in his lap. Her book.

She dragged herself over to him. Somewhere along the way her foot hit a desk, and the noise jerked him out of the book. He blinked disorientedly while she parked herself on the arm of a nearby chair because she just couldn’t stay on her feet.

“Are you happy with the unrelenting hilarity of those Pickwickian adventures?”

Tinged blue and pink by the early morning light, he closed the book, (but not before marking his page with a black filigree bookmark.)

“You were wrong about it being completely unrelatable.”
“Oh?”
“I’m pretty sure Theo is based on Sam Weller.”
Laughter bubble out of her as she nodded in agreement. “Somewhat, I suppose. And what about you then? Are you like Mr. Winkle, with your delusions of sportiness?”
“Hardy har,” he sneered, but it didn’t seem very vicious. So she continued, “Although, if Theo’s Sam, you could be Pickwick... with the way he watches out for you–”
...He grinned so widely and unexpectedly that her breath caught in her lungs.
“So he’s my valet, eh?”
“No!” she refuted at once, “I was alluding to the parallels in personality only.”
“Right.”
“Yes, that’s right!” If he would stop grinning, she might be able to shoot him down properly.
“Like... like you’re the idle and rich Bertie Wooster, and he’s the clever and resourceful Jeeves—”
“Still my valet, though.”
“Not the poi—”
“And you,” he drawled, “Are most certainly an overbearing Aunt Agatha in the making.”
“I am not a snob!” she snapped, “And while I’m well aware that you treat your friends like
underlings, that was certainly not what I was getting at!”

It was only after his expression turned unreservedly frosty that she realised how open and
easygoing it had been before. Shame pickle at her inside and out, while her brain decided to supply
her with the memory of him bound before her, urgently seeking her commitment to Theo’s safety –
She wished she could snatch back her words and run away. Chagrin clung to her well-established
exhaustion and she felt fucking heavy – but unfortunately not heavy enough to sink through the
ground.

The colour of his eyes was made to communicate fury. Like ice sparkling over cold, hard granite.

She gulped. “I didn’t mean that.”
“Don’t worry, Granger,” he ground out in a disturbingly even tone, “For once you delivered the
exact point you were aiming to make.”
“Honestly, Malfoy, I—”
“Yeah, fuck off.”

He stood up and walked away, up the stairs to the boys’ dorms. She watched him go in silent
shame. He’d left the book behind.

That night Hermione decided, though she absolutely hated doing that dance with him, that she
would tender a proper apology to Malfoy. She’d felt awful the whole day, a feeling that had
reached its zenith when she remembered that one of his underlings was dead, and the way in which
Malfoy collapsed against a wall afterwards...
Yes, she would be copiously repentant. Of course she didn’t expect him to be gracious about it –
but that was all beyond her control.

*I apologise, Malfoy.*
*I regret what I said, Malfoy.*

She lay in bed and practiced saying the words out loud. They sat like something bitter on her
tongue; combined with the twisting in her gut, she thought that this was what dysentery felt like.

Alas, she caught no more than fleeting glimpses of him the next day. There he was during lessons;
but then he vanished. He wasn’t around for meals, he wasn’t in the library, he wasn’t in the
common room. Perturbed, she finally had no choice but to question Theo. He was in a rush to meet
Luna before curfew, and paused in a strange sprinter’s stance when she stopped him just a few
meters away from the door.

“Where’s Malfoy?”
“Why?” he asked inquisitively.
“Arithmancy... stuff,” she replied patly.
“In his room, I think.” He straightened and turned so he was facing her properly. “Do you want me to get him?”
“No! Oh no. It’s not urgent or anything.”

Theo left with a quizzical air, looking at her for the long moment it took for the door to close between them. Hermione sighed and took a seat on the sofa next to Padma, whose aspect towards her had thawed considerably in the past week. It most probably had something to do with the fact that Terry was frequently spotted in the company of a sixth year Ravenclaw, (named Lucy or Lacey or something.) Well good for him and all that.

She stayed there after Padma called it a night, and long after Theo returned looking terribly mussed. At some ungodly hour, a trio of House-Elves showed up to clean the room and she, to their everlasting horror, insisted on helping them.

It was three in the morning when she finally went to bed, and it was the kind of unsettling sleep that felt like she had awoken mere moments after her head had hit the pillow. Her watch, however, told her that it had been four hours.

As she washed, she wished she was made of sugar or sand so that she’d crumble and melt under the surge of hot water. Pulling her socks on felt like an enormous task; she flopped back in bed after she had finished, head swimming, eyes burning, eyes watering, eyelids fluttering...

Her eyes flew open and it was eight-thirty and – bugger – she dashed out of her room in a deranged panic, bursting into the common room that was... full of people not in their uniforms?

Dash it all, it was Saturday.

Very sheepishly, she rolled along back into her room to change. She took a moment to observe herself in the mirror, trying to will the intensely high colour off her face. She ran her fingers through her manic hair and twisted it up into a high bun.

When she returned downstairs, Theo was waiting for her, obviously having witnessed her embarrassment.

“What is going on with you?” he asked as he led her out by the elbow.

“Nothing,” she sighed, “I’m ravenous.”

She fished a couple of chocolate bars out of her bag, (honestly, her parents were saints,) and together they walked around an open courtyard as they ate.

“You really need to pace yourself, Hermione.”

“You’re eating ten times faster than I am!”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” he snapped, “You already know that whole curriculum backwards. Stop being absurd.”

Of course when he said absurd, her thoughts immediately jumped to Malfoy. But then she realised that Theo looked more than simply annoyed with her...er, eccentricities. There was something just off about him.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He didn’t say anything – just leaned back against a pillar and looked at her with his mouth turned
downwards in a way that said not now, please. So she went and stood next to him and rested her head against the warm stone. Sunlight felt good on her face; when she closed her eyes it seeped through her eyelids, and the world glowed orange like a blazing rock salt lamp.

On Sunday afternoon, Hermione was the first one to arrive at the library for an hour of charms revision. She didn’t waste any time waiting, and immersed herself in her notes on conjuring charms. The rest of them straggled in in ones and twos, muttering hullo and making a general racket as they got their books and other paraphernalia out. She didn’t really acknowledge any of them... except Theo, for he plucked away the quill holding her hair up rather than going through the effort of retrieving his own. Him she scowled at.

“Where’s Draco?” Neville asked just as Hermione was about to set the hour’s agenda. She paused and looked around: He really wasn’t there. Surely... it couldn’t possibly be because of her, could it?

That’s when Mandy piped up, in a manner that was aberrantly testy – “Yes. Where is Draco?”

Theo took his time in settling, in draping his robes over the back of his chair and placing his parchment exactly between his inkpot and textbook. Mandy’s mouth was tightening by the second.

Finally, he replied, “Draco isn’t here.” A few people laughed, but Mandy was not one of them. “Where is he, Theo?” He gave her a blank stare. “He has some personal business to attend to.”

“That’s exactly what he told me before he left!”

“Then what are you asking me for?”

“I want to know what exactly this personal business is! He’s been a beast all weekend!” Mandy lashed out at a volume that probably gave Susan an ulcer.

Theo, unperturbed, said, “I’m not at liberty to say.”

“If he thought you ought to know he would have told you. Now, if you’re through tormenting poor Susan, I suggest you stop shrieking in the library. Hermione, darling, buddy, lead the way.”

She tried - she really did - but conducting anything through air that was cold and so thick was difficult. Ultimately, they all sat reading quietly on their own. Hermione was torn in three directions: her notes, Theo, (stiff as a board and chewing his tongue,) and Neville, because he had around a hundred questions about water charms.

On her way down for supper, Hermione encountered Theo and Luna at the top of the grand staircase. She was whispering fervently as she held his face in her hands. Then, with a quick kiss on his mouth, she left. He remained standing there, frowning at the tops of his shoes. Hermione went to him at once.
“Theo,” she begged, “What’s wrong?”
He gave her the same pleading look as before, but she must’ve come across as considerably less amenable so he sighed. “Draco’s gone to visit Lucius again. And you know me. I’m a pathological worrier.”
“Oh,” she squeaked.
“Yeah. I’m going to stand outside McGonagall’s office and wait for him to come back... should be any time now. I’ll see you later.”

Hermione gave his arm a squeeze as he went by. Then she went down to the Great Hall. She sat, as usual, next to Ginny, and helped herself to food as usual. She could scarcely eat any of it.

The Forbidden Forest glittered like a quadrillion-faceted emerald. Sunlight glanced off leaves that lightly fluttered in the morning breeze.

See what delights in sylvan scenes appear!
Descending Gods have found Elysium here.

Hermione walked down a corridor at a gentle pace, admiring nature every time it made an appearance, framed perfectly within large arches. She had successfully performed non-verbal human transfiguration ten times in a row, and there was still plenty of time before she was due in the dungeons for Potions. She’d been gifted a short breather, and rather than filling it with some more revision, she’d decided to take a stroll. Theo would approve.

The air wafting in through the open panes smelt warm and sugary, like mum’s clothes after she’d spent the day outside. Hermione was especially fond of hugging her in those instances. It was the kind of weather that compelled dad to make lemonade six times a day. He’d take her to the park to fly a kite, and they’d come home to find mum walking barefooted through the lawn, watering her precious flowerbeds–

When she first spotted him at the end of the passageway, she felt he might blind her. He was practically glowing, stark against the dark grey and brown stone behind him. He was leaning forward with his arms crossed and resting on the balustrade, staring outside and evidently lost in thought.

Hermione approached him with slow, measured steps. She was simultaneously bracing herself, going over her words in her head, and pulling out *The Pickwick Papers* from her bag. It was remarkable that she didn’t stumble.

She did, however, make quite an infernal *stomp stomp stomping* racket as she walked, and, quite unsurprisingly, that grabbed his attention. She was forced to cover a good distance while he watched her, hobbling as she was with one hand in her bag and hair flying about in the wind.

She was completely flustered by the time she was near enough to speak to him. He was all coolly blank and unruffled, staring at her without bothering to fully turn her way. She breathed in once, for courage, and immediately registered something sharp, woody, and mildly citrusy that was *not* just the summer air. It was better.

*Oh, just get this over with.*
She held out the book like a blessed offering and said, “Look. ...Draco. I apologise for what I said that morning.”

Because she was forcing herself to properly face him, she had the singular pleasure of witnessing the way his appearance changed. He looked from the book to her face in rapid succession. His eyebrows climbed up and his mouth curled into a wickedly amused smirk. He twisted just a fraction, so only one of his elbows was resting on the railing.

“Palms up... Calling me by my first name.... what is this Granger – some sort of psychological ploy?”

Yes. “No!”

“A pitifully obvious one.”

Hermione’s entire face was burning, and she just could not meet his eye anymore. She thrust the book at him, (thankfully he accepted it before it could fall to the floor,) and turned to the grounds.

“Oh look!” she exclaimed and pointed at Sprout who was tending to a few shrubs behind the greenhouses, “Have you ever seen a more fitting Demeter?”

She laughed when he did, pretending that it was aimed at her quip and not at her. It was a piss-poor attempt.

“And there goes Hephaestus, I suppose?”

She chanced a glance at him from the corner of her eye to find that he too was peering down at the grounds. She followed his gaze and found Hagrid, dragging a sack full of... something... from the forest to his hut.

“Oh dear god, no,” she proclaimed, “I really don’t fancy placing him in a forge, surrounded by fire and dangerous implements.”

“Ha! You’re right,” he guffawed, “Stupid, lumbering oaf would burn the place down in seconds.”

“Don’t call him that!” she snapped, all at once peeved. She also felt a stab of guilt; she hadn’t been to see Hagrid in ages.

“You said it first, not me!” Malfoy countered snootily, “He’s the epitome of incompetence–”

“He’s not incompe–”

“For fuck’s sake. You have to admit he’s a lousy teacher. I can’t believe McGonagall let him continue. Makes you wonder if she has any business calling herself Minerva.”

Hermione didn’t want to fight with him again, so she didn’t dispute his assertion. Also... she rather agreed with him. There was no reason besides blind loyalty and sentimentality to pick Hagrid over Grubbly-Plank.

“Professor Vector would be a suitable Athena, wouldn’t she?” she mused with renewed amiability. “Eh, I suppose,” he granted.

She stole another glance: He was staring straight ahead, squinting slightly against the glare. It was just so weird standing beside him like that, having a daft but reasonably cheery conversation. He seemed at ease, and she felt – well, at that moment she was utterly bemused – but before, for a moment, she’d been entertained and perfectly... okay.

Holy shit, this was MALFOY. Not for the first time, she was engaging in a casual and enjoyable conversation with MALFOY. It was Malfoy who turned to regard her at her sudden silence, quirking a brow, all curious and pleasant –
“Filch could be Hephaestus.” She blurted out, “I mean, he... limps about.”
“Why not? I’m sure he’s secretly capable of fashioning the most impressive and exquisite artillery.”
“You never know.”
“I agree. He’s definitely a man of many hidden talents. He’s got that air about him.”
She dipped her head as she laughed, and when she looked up again, he had resumed his perusal of the world outside, albeit with a small, crooked smile.
“Pomfrey as Artemis?” he proposed.
“Yes. And Flitwick is Poseidon.”
“Why?”
“Oh, I don’t know,” she shrugged, “My head is full of water charms.”
She watched as a tiny bracket appeared at the corner of his mouth. “Then there’s Hermes–”
“Ludo Bagman.”
He laughed at that, out loud and everything, and once again she was sucked into a vortex of ‘what?!’ and gobsmackedness.

“A long time ago, I would have thought Snape was Hephaestus, but now I think of him as Janus, the two-faced one.”
She said that without thinking, so caught in the moment. His face fell like a flame that had been doused and she could have kicked herself had both her feet not been lodged firmly in her mouth. With his new, regrettable grimness he mumbled, “If my father is to be believed, I am the two-faced one.”
Was she meant to have heard that?
“I’m sure you know better than to believe what your father says by now,” she retorted in a voice as low as his had been.
He grimaced. With an exasperated, almost disgusted sigh he pushed away from the arch and started striding down the corridor.

“Wha – Malfoy?”
“Potions,” he grunted by way of explanation, without looking back.

She got moving as well, but her accompanying sigh was resigned and deflated. What an unfortunate turn of events. Again.

On arriving at the dungeons, Malfoy was instantly assailed by Mandy who looked just about as happy as she had in the library the day before. Hermione skittered over to where Theo, Luna, and Ginny were standing.
“Where’ve you been?” Ginny asked.
She forced herself to smile and replied, “Took a brief, rejuvenating turn around the castle. Looked outside at the birds and trees. Didn’t think about the N.E.W.T.s even once.”
“Good girl,” Theo cheered.

They filled into the classroom, taking their places as the blooming god of crystallised pineapple bombarded them with an affable chant of come in, come in. He looked upon them rather indulgently with his round, protruding eyes.
“Just a little over a month before we bid each other farewell!” he cried, “I must admit, you all have
won a special place in my heart. Yes, yes, very special indeed.”
He wasn’t bothered at all by the fact that most of the class seemed revolted by that prospect.
“Now, while the rest of you prepare a quick Occulus potion, I have a special assignment for my top
five students. Ms. Granger – but of course – Ms. Patil, Mr. Goldstein, Ms. Bones, and Mr. Malfoy...
if you will make your way to this corner table here.”

They did, slothfully as their path was impeded by a very slow moving, bulldozer of a man. He’d set
up a long, rectangular table with five large cauldrons. Hermione claimed a corner seat with her
back to the wall. She caught Theo and Ginny’s eyes as she sat, and they both pulled different but
equally silly faces at her.
Padma took the seat next to her and they exchanged a smile. At the edge of her vision, two seats
down on the opposite side, Malfoy was dancing his fingers along the edge of the table.

“Excellent, excellent,” Slughorn beamed, “I’m sure you are simply dying to know what I have
planned for you!” He produced a parchment from his waistcoat pocket, (Hermione couldn’t believe
there was room enough in there for his hand,) and created five duplicates of it with a flick of his
wand.
“These,” he explained, “Are instructions for brewing a Repleo draught – the most powerful
replenishing potion in existence. There’s never enough at Mungo’s because it’s notoriously
difficult to make. Requires extreme precision, you see. Brew it successfully and your examiners
will award you an outstanding without a second’s hesitation.”

Hermione grabbed her parchment with no little zeal, full of the heady exhilaration that comes with
a new, unexpected challenge. The ingredient list was vast – thirty items in absurdly exact amounts.
The potion would take a month to prepare. She looked around her, thrilled, hoping to find someone
to share her enthusiasm. She didn’t have to look too far – Padma appeared as keen as she was.
Anthony, steadfastly team Boot, refused to acknowledge her, and Susan was still going through the
instructions.

The first order of business was to extract the juice of sixteen and a half boom berries. A tricky task,
as they were fond of exploding when poked the wrong way. She stopped after five, to flex her
fingers, and to edge away from Padma who was softly cursing at the dangerous sounds emitting out
of her berries.

“You’re squeezing the sides when you cut it,” Malfoy muttered suddenly, “Don’t do that.”
“How else do I get it to stay in place?” Padma wailed.
“Like this – make an L with your hand... yeah, nestle the berry between your palm and thumb.
Good, now press down with the tip of your knife – there you go then.”
“Wow! Thanks, Malfoy!”
“Sure,” he shrugged.

Hermione picked up a berry to test his method as well: It took the burden off her cramping fingers
completely. Wow, indeed. She looked up just in time to catch him watching her attempt.
Fifty-Nine

Chapter Notes

We interrupt this extended break from the internet to bring you this update. Thank you for being so (willingly/unwillingly) patient.
Fun fact: My current state of mind = Hermione in this chapter x 100 (minus the involvement of a blond distraction.)

This chapter - hell, the next ten chapters - are dedicated to mcal for being flat-out, all-round amazing.

There was a part of her – the part that pressed ice under her eyes every morning and prevented her from meeting Theo’s particular, penetrative gaze – that knew she was stretching herself too thin.

_Between the idea_
_And the reality_
_Between the motion_
_And the act..._

Fell Hermione.

(Literally, flat on her arse, as she attempted to annotate the annotations in her Runes textbook while skipping down a staircase.)

She _was_ the shadow, too – of herself, of her perseverance. Just a spectral mass that hovered and performed the things that Real Hermione had instructed her to perform. (After which, Real Hermione had crawled into a titanium sarcophagus and gone to sleep.)
Shadow Hermione carried on.
Now to Transfiguration, now to the greenhouses, and now... now... racing up to the library, and now to her room because everywhere else was so noisy –

The walking shadow strutting and fretting her hour upon the stage –

But her resolve never wavered and her schedule never slipped. So really, Hermione Granger was fine.

She was fine at seven thirty on a Friday evening, in the library that was more crowded than usual, but still reasonably quiet.

The mild light-headedness she was experiencing was pleasant. The throbbing behind her eyes had an interesting tempo. The fact that she had slid so low in her chair because she couldn’t hold herself up was easily ignorable.
See? Fine.

She took a break after a foot-long elaboration on planetary cycles to massage the base of her thumb. Across the table, Malfoy – with his impeccable posture and all – continued to write on a parchment that was quite clearly longer than a foot. How on earth had he managed to surpass her?
She slipped a little further down, and rested her head against the back of her chair. Her neck had been having a hard time handling the weight of her head.

“Did you ever go back to that muggle bookshop?” she asked with a barely perceptible crackle in her voice.

There was this thing he did – an understated stiffening of sorts – every time she spoke to him unexpectedly; like he was bracing himself or summoning divine patience or something. It annoyed her that he did it and it annoyed her that she noticed it.

“All right,” he muttered, (clipped, clear-cut – thank you very much,) then went on to flip very deliberately through his textbook.
Hermione hummed, (airy, intrigued – I see, do go on,) and asked, “Buy anything?”

She lifted her arms behind her head and gripped the top rail of her chair, stretching her shoulder blades in a very satisfying manner. He huffed and closed his eyes in a theatrical show of aggravation before looking at her.
His face said that he was looking at the shoddiest, most pathetic creature he’d ever seen. His voice said, “I didn’t get a chance to.”
“How come?” she persisted. She kicked her legs out, pulling them taught and straight and dragging herself lower. Her elbows folded awkwardly on either side of her head like blinkers. They put her entire focus on the crotchety person in front of her.
He huffed again, but this time he loosened. His shoulders relaxed.

“I was just browsing, minding my own business, when a woman as old as the hills barged in and shoved a book into my face.” He paused then, giving Hermione a shifty, speculative look. “She was short. Terrible hair, grating voice... now I’m wondering if she was you in disguise.”

“Hardy har,” Hermione mumbled.

She had an appalling, outrageous idea that involved sliding right off her chair... crawling under the table... sitting on the floor by his feet and resting her heavy head on his lap while he draped is very, very soft looking cloak over her –

 Fucking hell. She forced herself to shimmy inelegantly into a more upright position as he went on –

“So she began climbing all over me, shoving this bloody book at me while screeching, embrace the word o’ god, lad. what are orl these books compared to the word o’ god - nowt, nowt! Let the lord guide ya to salvation – screeching, I tell you – and I tried to shove her off over and over again–”

His put-on accent was absolutely atrocious. Hermione gasped, “Oh god!” and began to laugh.

“Exactly,” he drawled darkly, “She was raving. Then the owner came along – Slughorn-shaped bloke – and he began shouting at her – What’s tha’ doing, mum? leave ‘s customers alone, mad old hag! Get art o' the shop! Mum, gi’ over, mum!”
Hermione, stooped and boneless, choked out, “What did you do?”
“I fucking scarpered, of course. They were primed to bring the building down with their howling.”

A jarring, strangled sound tore out of the back of Hermione’s throat as she laughed.
“I suppose,” she wheezed, “That encounter did nothing to inspire an interest in actually reading the Bible?”
“I am quite done with dogmatic belief systems and their terrifying propagators.”

Oh, well done, you laggard, she thought but didn’t say. Instead, she went with: “If the Bible-woman and Voldemort were pitted against each other, who do you think would win?”

Her upper body had spilled onto the table by this time. She looked up at him through her eyelashes, waiting for him to turn cold.

But he grinned, he grinned, and said, “She would, without a doubt. You know how he was; performative and dramatic... all those long speeches and flourishes. Bible-woman would’ve bashed him over the head before he could even begin his dance.”

“Incidentally,” Hermione laughed, “Aggressive proponents like her are actually called Bible-bashers.”
“How appropriate.”

Ginny dragged her down the staircase after staircase at a frenzied pace, but Hermione was fine because that wild and physically taxing bout of manhandling was prefaced by the phrase, Harry’s here.
That fact effectively negated her intense fatigue and left her in a state that was, as previously mentioned –
F I N E.

They spilled out of the main doors and into the courtyard, where Harry was perched on the low stone stairs. He wasn’t alone – Percy was standing right next to him with his hands full of important looking parchments. That isn’t to say that the parchments themselves possessed any qualities that suggested importance: It was the way he held them, and his lofty expression, that lent them that status.

Hermione and Ginny settled on either side of Harry, and he put his arm around the latter and kissed her temple.
“Hi,” he grumbled.
“What brings you here?” Hermione asked.
“Kingsley dragged me along to speak to McGonagall,” he replied with a shrug, “To talk about this war-anniversary do they’re planning. And it’s always nice to have me around when talking about shit like that, you know.”
Percy clicked his tongue. “The Minister respects you a great deal, Harry. By keeping you in the loop he is–”
“Yeah, Yeah,” Harry scoffed, “He asked me if I would make a speech, too.”
“What did you say to that?” Ginny asked.
Harry stuck out his tongue and blew a loud raspberry. Percy pursed his lips.

Ha. Percy pursed his prissy lips.
“And where is this... do... happening?” Hermione enquired around a yawn.
“Here, of course,” Harry said blandly, “The Great Hall.”
“So what – the whole student body is to attend?” said Ginny.
“Only those of age,” Percy answered, “And it isn’t a do,” he added with a scowl, “It’s a memorial dinner.”

Persecuted Percy pursed his prissy lips primly.

“You know what Ron said?” Harry interjected, “It ought to be a don’t. As in, don’t do it.”

Persecuted Percy pursed his prim lips with pristine pissy prissiness.

“I should get back to the Headmistresses office to see if I am needed. Ginny, Hermione... Harry—” he nodded to them in turn, “I’ll see you later.”

He left and Harry groaned and planted his face in Ginny’s hair.

For some time, they were silent. The early afternoon sun was harsh, its white hot light flooded the ground and kissed the tips of their shoes. Hermione yawned again and reached up to rub her eyes.

“Are you all right?”

She blinked around at Harry who was eyeing her with some concern. But Ginny spoke up before she could –

“The N.E.W.T.s are a little over a month away, and she’s Hermione Granger – of course she isn’t all right.”
“I’m perfectly fine,” Hermione opposed deftly, “How’s Ron?”
“Good. He um... he...” Harry gave her a funny, uneasy peek, “He’s on a date with Verity.”
“Who’s that?”
“The shop assistant at Wheezes.”
“Oh. Right.”

Hermione stared at her knees, taken aback. That was, irrefutably, an unexpected development.

“No!” Harry moaned, “No! Don’t tell me you’re jealous. I can’t deal with jealous Hermione again—”
“Sod off, I’m not jealous!”
“The worst part of sixth year, it was!”
“Oh really?” she drawled, “That was the worst part?”
“Yes!” he affirmed as Ginny laughed, “You were so painfully, obviously over-the-top—”
“And what about you then?” she exclaimed, “Hissing and spitting every time Ginny showed up with Dean?”
“I was the epitome of dignity and composure—”

They went on in that vein till they were all grinning and finally, Hermione left to give the two of them some time alone.

She walked slowly and lightly; floated like a butterfly down corridors – Catch her if you can! It was as dark inside as it was bright outside, and dazzling streaks of dustlight criss-crossed across passageways through high windows.

She yawned, trying to remember if Verity had brown hair or blonde.
As she turned a corner and drifted into the sixth floor, her journey that had thus far been unimpeded by anyone of consequence came to a pause. Malfoy was leaning against the wall, with one leg folded and resting against the stones behind him. He was eating something out of a brightly coloured packet – Apple Rings, she realised as she got nearer. The distance between them shrank and shrank, and she wondered how exactly she ought to go about acknowledging his existence, and if she ought to at all. A nod? A brisk Malfoy as she breezed past? Dare she... smile?

Before she knew it, she was standing right before him, and tumbling out of her mouth were the words, “Hello, Draco.”

Well, that was one way to do it.

He kept looking at something over her head, but his mouth twitched upwards with amusement.

“Am I supposed to be particularly pissed off with you about something?” he asked

She rolled her eyes, (but not too dramatically, for she was sure they were too tired to perform something that impressive,) and replied, “Your name is Draco, is it not?”

“However did you find out?”

“So why shouldn’t I call you by your name?”

“That’s a fair point, Hermione.”

Never before had her name been said with such scathing mockery and contumely. It was that same inflection with which people might say cockroach, or Tory.

Or mudblood.

He still wasn’t looking at her and she wanted him out of her sight. But then something danced at the bottom edge of her vision, and looking down, she saw it was his packet of Apple Rings. He’d turned the mouth towards her, and as she blinked, he shook it. Twice.

Nonplussed, stumped, thrown for a fucking loop, she reached in and took one. And not a moment after, he carelessly took one for himself and chucked it into his mouth. One that her hand maybe, possibly could’ve brushed against.

“Thanks,” she muttered.

“Hm,” he grunted.

But his eyes were even now fixed on something behind her.

“What are you looking at?” she wondered out loud.

Once again, his mouth twitched. “Longbottom and Abbott are having a flaming row over there in what they believe is a well concealed alcove.”

“What?”

Hermione spun around. There was a cluster of pillars in front of her, so she shifted a bit to the side and – sure enough – she saw Neville and Hannah embroiled in an exchange that involved a lot of heated gesticulation.

“Oh–! But what’s happened?” she cried.

“No clue,” Malfoy replied, “They’ve put up a bloody silencing charm. But – Ah! She just thumped him again! Hah! That’s the third time!”

He sounded preposterously blithesome. She, with an equal amount of outrage, whirled about to face him once more.

“You’re foul!”
“Sure—”
“Standing here – scarfing down sweets like – like they’re some sort of spectacle—”
“They are.”
“Well, I refuse to participate!”
“Nobody asked you to,” he drawled, “Toddle along.”

He’d kept watching the poor couple keenly through that entire exchange. Not once had his focus wavered. Arse.

Hermione cleared her throat. “I will do just that.”
“Brilliant.”
“But first I want another Apple Ring.”

A pithy little laugh burst out of his throat, and it inserted itself perfectly within the stream of crackles that the packet made as he held it out to her. She was tempted to pull out a whole handful... but made do with just two rings.
She left then. And only when she’d reached the foot of the staircase leading up to the seventh floor did she look back over her shoulder.
He was still standing right where she’d left him, chomping away and being a prat.

Hermione had been marching to Herbology while caught up in extracting her textbook from her bag when, in her state of regrettable distraction, she’d collided into Susan. There was an Ouch! and an Oh no! and all the contents of her bag had fallen pell-mell onto the dusty ground.
But that was fine, and she was fine. Nothing that couldn’t be solved with some summoning and cleaning charms and a group of helpful friends. All was well. She wasn’t even late for her lesson. Her head wasn’t even swimming all that much.

She made a last minute amendment to her seating plan, abandoning the stool next to Ginny in favour of the one beside a rather forlorn looking Neville.

“Are you okay?” she whispered after their task for the day had been set. (Surprisingly tame for Sprout: They’d been provided with a pile of leaves and simply had to identify which plant they belonged to.)
“Yeah? Well... no. Not really.”
He twirled a shrivelfig leaf between two fingers and stared at it morosely.
“What’s the matter?” she ventured cautiously.
“Hannah’s furious with me,” he mumbled, “I took up this offer to go to Switzerland after school, and... well, I didn’t really consult her about it, and she doesn’t think we’ll be able to make things work...”
“Wait... Switzerland?”
“Yeah,” he sighed, “The Institut d'Etudes Herbologiques has offered me a researcher’s position—”
“Wow! Neville that’s incredible!”
“I still don’t believe it, honestly. I didn’t even apply myself. Never thought I’d... I mean... Professor Sprout did it, all of it.”
“She made the right call,” Hermione smiled, “You deserve this. Absolutely.”
“Yeah?”
“Of course! And just give Hannah some time.”
He looked glumly over to where his fractious paramour sat, pointedly ignoring him.
“She’ll come around,” Hermione pressed, “It’s obvious to one and all that you’re a brilliant herbologist.”

He flushed, and at long last, mustered up a smile.

After the lesson, she watched him timidly approach Hannah and offer to carry her bag. She refused, but didn’t stomp away from him either. They walked towards the castle together, with a good three feet between them.

“Did you find out what happened?”

Malfoy – and Theo, Luna, Ginny, and Dean – had appeared by her side, all looking askance.

“None of your business,” Hermione snapped.

“Let me guess,” Malfoy prattled on, “Did he accidentally set her hair on fire? No? Her skirt? Her tits? Dear god, not her fan–”

“Shut up!” she yelped.

“Nah,” Theo countered, pretending Hermione hadn’t spoken, “Finnigan’s the pyromaniac. Our friend Neville Longbottom has other issues.”

“Coordination?” Dean ventured.

“Yes,” Theo agreed, “He was probably aiming for one thing, and ended up going somewhere else.”

“You are all vile,” Hermione ground out, looking at Ginny and Luna to back her up. But Ginny was sniggering and Luna –

Luna said, “I’m sure Neville is a wonderful lover. I’ve kissed him, and he was very good at it. Oh, don’t worry Theo – it was before you and I got together.”

It was moments like these that convinced Hermione that Luna was honestly the most brilliant one of them all. For hours after her proclamation, Theo had kittens over and over again as he badgered her for the background, explanation, and justification for that kiss. Everybody else watched with amusement. The subject of Neville and Hannah’s relationship didn’t come up again.

Hermione was not fine.

Dad’s birthday was a day and a half away, and taking the time difference into account, she had to send his present by that night at the latest.

For context, it was already eleven thirty PM, and she still had a good portion of the scarf left to knit. Oh, why had she decided to gift him a handmade scarf? Just because he’d been so enthusiastic in his appreciation for the one she had knitted for Theo? She could just as easily have picked up a book and he’d have been thrilled.

But no – she’d chosen to knit, and now she was stuck trying to mind her needle AND the book that was hovering in front of her, as there was also a considerable amount of reading to get through for Arithmancy the next morning.

No, Hermione was not fine. Hermione felt downright hysterical. Every time she’d get caught up in reading she’d end up missing a few stitches, and then she’d get involved in amending her error and forget about reading and everything was just awful. Simply frightful.
But the thin, light wool in English-cricket-team-blue was going along the business of becoming a scarf rather well. She hoped it would make dad feel better about being stuck in a sea of Aussies while the world cup commenced back in England.

Then, a few minutes short of midnight, Theo wandered down into the common room, sat beside her on the sofa, and very patly informed her that she looked like a nutjob.
“I know,” she croaked, and much to her chagrin, she felt her eyes well up a little.
Which, of course, horrified Theo into a tizzy of sorts, enough to compel him to snatch up her hovering book and begin to read it out loud.
(That made her want to cry even more, but she reined it in for his sake.)

Her life got somewhat easier after that. Somewhat because the text was littered with equations and Greek symbols that Theo had no idea how to navigate. Nevertheless, he stuck with it for five entire pages before –
“Oh, fuck me!” he groaned, “This page is full of damnable swiggly things!”
“It’s alright, Theo,” she placated gently, “You’ve been enormously helpful. I’ll manage just fine now.”
He frowned. “No, you won’t. Not if we want Robert to get our scarf on time.”
“Our scarf?”
“Right. I’ll try my best to – Oh good!” He perked up suddenly; “Problem solved! DRACO! C’MERE, WILL YOU?”
“What are you calling him for?!?” Hermione demanded in alarm.
But Theo paid her no mind, waving animatedly at something – someone – behind her. An odd sensation that she could best describe as ‘internal squirming’ took her under its thrall.

(“Theo. This is not necessary!”
“Would you prefer I call that arse-faced pillock, Longbottom? Can he even read? He’ll probably just try to kiss you!”
“Get over that, will you–”
“No. Now hush. Draco! DRACO!”)

As her insides writhed, she simply stared at her deftly flashing needles, and two figures came over and occupied the corner of her vision.

“What?” said Malfoy, in a tetchy sort of way that did not bode well for anyone.
“Be a good lad and read the rest of this chapter, will you?”
The needles clicked against each other like clashing swords.

“What are you doing with an Arithmancy book?”
“Not for me, silly chap. As you can see, Hermione’s a bit occupied, and we can help her out by reading aloud to her.”
“Occupied,” Malfoy intoned blandly, “With... knitting.”

And that’s when Hermione finally looked up. Malfoy was grimacing at her labour like it was cat vomit. Just behind him, Mandy was watching the whole scene with open boredom.

“Well, Hermione clearly needs to rethink her priorities.” He turned to Theo, “Goodnight.”
Theo grinned. “You owe me a favour, Draco.”
“Yes,” he replied with a scowl, “You. Not Granger.”
“Well, since if you refuse, I’ll be stuck trying to plough my way though this shit, it’s definitely me you’ll be helping.”
“Or,” Malfoy argued, “Granger can handle herself like the big girl she is, and we both can—”
“But look at her! She isn’t big at all—”
“Honestly, Theo,” Hermione cut in cogently, “I’ll manage—”
“See! Well, goodnight—”

Malfoy spun around, but Theo caught the end of his robe and yanked him back.
“I told you to hush, Hermione,” he reprimanded pleasantly, “Don’t mind Draco, you know he’s a drama queen. Draco, Draco... you owe me one, you prick!”

“Get your paws off me!” Malfoy growled.

But then, much to Hermione’s great shock, he snatched the book from Theo and fell into the vacant armchair in front of them.

“Are you seriously—?!” Mandy sputtered.

“Yeah,” he snapped.

And then he began to read.

Hermione gaped at him for the duration of four sentences. Mandy, highly aggravated, sat on the arm of his chair, and for a brief second, her arm hovered over his shoulders before landing limply on her own lap. Theo put his feet up on the centre table and sat back comfortably.

The text poured out of Draco with practiced fluidity: He’d obviously already prepared for the next day’s lesson. Even the way he recited equations had an easy staccato rhythm. Every word seeped through the fog around her mind. She wove a scarf and he wove a bridge from the book to her brain.

Perhaps it was fatigue and relief — perhaps it was the way he said $\Theta$ — but she wondered...

What if she, like Penelope, undid her stitches night after night so that he would have to keep reading to her?

Instead she knitted faster than ever, even taking a chance on adding the famous crown-and-three-lions emblem in one corner. It was tiny and wonky, but quite satisfactorily discernable.

Malfoy made it past the “swiggly” pages and moved onto the next lot that was full of medieval suppositions about Ancient Greek methodology. His opinions coloured his tone, and by the time he was through, she knew how little he thought of Gabriele of Padua, and how impressive he found Leonardo of Pisa. He wasn’t wrong.

The last two pages dealt with fine-tuned modernised versions of that methodology. That bit he read at double his previous pace, somehow without compromising the clarity. Or perhaps he hadn’t changed a thing, and Hermione’s brain was up to its usual late night antics.

The scarf was a little over one-quarter away from completion.

“...opened a way for great advancement in the field of Arithmancy.” – With that, he snapped the book shut and dumped it on the table by Theo’s feet. Both he and Mandy had walked away before Hermione had time to internalise their departure.

“Thanks!” she called to his back, and he didn’t acknowledge it.

She went back to knitting in silence that was occasionally disrupted by Theo’s erratic snores.
The day had gone by quite finely.

She hadn’t overslept, despite getting just an hour and a half of shut-eye. The Arithmancy lesson had been a whole lot of fun; she’s even out-performed Malfoy, (and he’d looked sour and splenetic about that fact.)

By the time she settled down for dinner, she felt placid like someone who’d been lobotomised and she watched the day die its ruddy death through the Great Hall ceiling. She was meant to meet the group in the library after, for Transfiguration practice, but she’d already made her excuses. The fact was that by then, everybody was very aware of the date that was creeping up on them and it showed on their faces. And they tried their hardest to nullify that by acting out, with Ginny being the most outrageous of them all. Just that morning, she’d set off a few dung bombs in a corridor that Filch was cleaning, an ode to Fred or something, and ran off cackling louder than Peeves. Hermione wanted none of that.

So she slipped away and found a small windowed nook to sit in and read through her notes on her own. As the sky darkened, her reflection appeared in the glass, her reflection, HER, and it would never again be Bellatrix’s.

She rested her forehead against her reflection’s and closed her eyes ——

She woke up with a start, kicking her legs out and causing her book to fall to the floor. “Shit,” she hissed, and slipped off the ledge.

Hastily, she gathered her belongings and checked her watch: Eleven-twenty.

Three times she nearly tripped over her own feet in her scurry to get to the common room. She had to be in the forest by midnight to collect mallowsweet leaves for her Repleo draft, (cut with a copper clipper that was – bugger it all — sitting on her bedside table.)

She nearly collided into Draco at the entrance. She was rushing through the door with her hair in her face, and he was looking down, slipping a drawstring pouch into his pocket and –

“Oh!” she dug her heels into the ground and stopped inches away from his chest. She blinked up at his blank face as she regained her bearings. Then she asked, “Are you headed to the forest?” He raised his eyebrows.

“All right... good. Me too,” she gabbled, “Just have to collect something from my room. Would you wait for me? Yeah, okay. I’ll just – just be back—”

She made her way up the stairs in a solid sprint. Five minutes to, to five minutes after midnight: That was the small window the potion afforded them to collect the herb.

When she raced back down, Malfoy was nowhere to be found. Bastard. She shifted into fifth gear, scuttling down, down, and down, and she finally caught up with him on the fifth floor.

“You!” she gasped as she fell into step with him, “You didn’t wait!”

“Didn’t want to,” he jabbed nonchalantly.

“I hardly took two minutes—”

“I don’t care how long you took. I’m not exactly interested in company right now, and certainly not yours.”

Hermione’s temper sparked at once. “Well, too bloody bad! I have the same assignment as you, as you well know. I’m not coming along for the pleasure of your company either!”

He made a dismissive, mocking sound through his teeth. “Then let’s not talk, yeah?”
“I remember the last time we were in the forest together at night. You were terrified by the prospect of being alone—”
“What are you talking about?”
“You know... detention. In first year!”
“First—?! Oh, Merlin, shut the fuck up, Granger.”
“Fine!”

Yes – fine. Fine finefinefine. She moved to the opposite railing of the staircase, and they descended to the main entrance in absolute zero silence. The grounds were quiet and empty. The summer night was all warmth, cut by gentle cool breezes. The sky was full of stars and an enormous moon. Hermione peeked at Malfoy just as he glanced up at the sky and scowled. There was certainly something off about him. He seemed taut with tension, his left hand kept flexing, and his mouth was turned down. Well, clearly he was as affected by what was looming as anyone else. Yet, he was the only one being an arse about it.

As they neared the edge of the forest, Hermione spotted Padma, Susan, and Anthony just stepping into it. She didn’t call out to them.

Hermione and Malfoy lit their wands the moment the forest engulfed them. Tree trunks bleached by moonlight towered around them like the columns of a marble sepulchre. Crickets sang over and under the noise of their muted footfalls and the tender rustling of their cloaks. Hermione trained her wand on the various shrubs around her hunting for small leaves with those telltale serrated edges. She couldn’t see her other three classmates anymore. Just one surly, sulky Malfoy person. She wished she possessed the level of dickishness required to be such a slave to her moods. She had every reason to be snapping and barking at people too. How on earth had Theo put up with him all his life?

All thoughts ceased when she spotted a tuft of mallowsweet clumped around a thicket of trees. She dropped to her knees and began snipping – and Malfoy followed suit. However, she had to stop within moments.

“These aren’t mature enough,” she muttered, “We should go further.”
“Okay,” he replied gruffly.
They squeezed their way through the trees, and crouched low, scrutinising each sprig and twig carefully. Malfoy swore when he walked into a low branch. Hermione giggled. Little by little, scrounging around in that dense patch of vegetation, they managed to fill their pouches with leaves.

Hermione was dusting the back of her cloak, ready to head back, when a flicker of light caught her eye. It was a flash amid the deeply intertwined branches of two trees. Piqued, she moved closer, and with a wave of her hand, rendered the twigs transparent, revealing a clearing...

“Oh my god,” she breathed, “Malfoy! Look!”

She’d stumbled upon an actual centaur ritual! They stood in a circle, bare-chests smeared with something red, and their hind legs clicking against the ground in perfect synchrony.

“Holy shit! We need to leave!” Malfoy whispered frantically.
“What?” she hissed back, “Are you mad? Do you have any idea how rare—”
“They’re centaurs, you idiot! Do you have any idea what they’ll do if they spot us?”

One of the centaurs – with dark hair and a darker tail – trotted over to the centre of the circle, where
there was a small pile of shrubbery, and lit it on fire.

“That’s mallowsweet, isn’t it? And sage? Oh, they’re going to—”

“—Granger, get back here!”

Hermione stepped on a twig and the noise it made rang out like a gun shot. And everything she thought she knew about centaurs went flying out the window. They didn’t leap into a fury. They didn’t come bounding towards her screaming bloody murder. No: She’d startled them, and they collapsed. Every one of them. *Flop. Thud.* Like fainting goats.

“Run!” Malfoy ordered, and this time she obeyed.

Running through the thicket was like wading through a swamp. Malfoy was ahead of her, chanting “fuck fuck fuck fuck,” which finally drove the severity of the situation into Hermione’s head. Was this divine comeuppance for what she’d done to Umbridge? Surely whoever was up there agreed that that old bag got what she deserved?

They made it out of the forest unpursued. No hoofs thudded in their wake. No arrows whizzed by their heads – or indeed plunged into their backs.

Hermione laid one hand against her heart when they finally slowed, and brought the other up to wipe her forehead.

“Oh... oh my,” she murmured.

“What is wrong with you?” Malfoy seethed through his teeth, “Why were you trying to get us killed?”

“I wasn’t—”

“Trying to sneak up on a hoard of fucking centaurs! You know they’re psychotic, don’t you? They would have skinned us—”

“They didn’t though,” she countered shakily, “They didn’t at all. Did you see that? They just – just keeled over.”

“Yes, but—”

“Just toppled over like skittles—”

“Yes, I was there—”

“Did you know they could do that? I mean... *Why did they do that?*”

“Bad centaur of gravity?”

Hermione stopped walking. He kept walking. She stared at his gliding shoulders. Then she rushed back to his side.

“Did you just say—”

“I said what I said.”

“Malfoy. That was terrible.”

“I don’t augury.”

Unfortunately, she wasn’t too stunned to not laugh anymore. So she laughed, and she said “I refuse.”

“House-Elf-ish of you, Granger.”

“Ha!” she exclaimed, “That’s the most absurd one, because House-Elves are actually the least –
Hey?”

He made a tortured sound and began to strive off away from her in the middle of her sentence.

“Malfoy?”
“Do not start on the sodding House-Elves!” he called without turning.
“I wasn’t – Argh!” She sped up to keep pace with him. “I wasn’t starting on anything. I was merely pointing out that – Malfoy?!?!?”

He broke into a proper run, sailing across the grounds like some ethereal creature of the night. As if they hadn’t run enough already – fucking lout – Ugh – she took off after him.

“Malfoy!” she cried in a tone of unfortunately pitiable desperation, and it didn’t make a dent. He kept running. His hair flopped up and down like molten silver waves. The wind, so kind to the slothful, was brutal to those in haste. It slammed against her face and she felt her throat and eyes dry up. Nevertheless, Hermione had been running for nearly a year – she was no slouch. Malfoy’s long limbs could only get him so far.
He began running out of steam halfway up the grand staircase. By the time Hermione got to the top, he was slumped by a window with his hands on his knees. She clutched the newel post and fell into a similar pose as him.
But even through her gasps, she managed to throw out the words – “House...Elves... no-ot... selfish.”

Draco chuckled, and she looked up in surprise.
He was standing in the confluence of silver moonlight and golden lamplight. His eyes were aimed heavenwards with exasperation, but he still chuckled as he straightened and pushed his hair away from his brow.
Are you tired of hearing me apologise yet?

Hermione forced herself through a considerable throng of people huddled outside the library, clutching her satchel tightly against her side. The crowd mystified her, but not enough to really investigate. Of course she’d made an initial inquiry, only to be told, “You mean you don’t know?” by some overly excited fifth year girl, who then promptly went back to squealing at her similarly wound up companions. Hermione simply shrugged and pushed forward; it was probably something stupid anyway. She had more important matters to tend to – starting with runes and ending with charms.

She stumbled upon another surprise when she reached her usual table: Theo and Malfoy, in high spirits and laughing.

“Hello,” she muttered as she set her bag on the floor and took a seat.

“Hermione!” Theo cheered, “Where have you been all afternoon?”

“With Professor Babbling,” she replied, “Going over a practice assignment–”

“Oh!”

Theo grinned and Malfoy rolled his eyes.

“–but tell me... what’s all the commotion about? There’s a proper mob out there...”

“Oh that,” Theo said, grinning wider than ever, “Draco, why don’t you explain? It’s your tale to tell after all.”

Malfoy smirked and shook his head. “Nah, you go on. You’ll obviously enjoy telling it a lot more.”

“Well, alright. Thank you.” Theo rubbed his palms together with relish and began, “So you see, Draco here just got spectacularly dumped, via flaming row–”

“It wasn’t a row,” Malfoy objected.

“Fine. Dumped via flaming diatribe. In public, no less. Picture it, Hermione – just picture it! There they were in the courtyard outside the Great Hall: Draco Malfoy and Oh-So-Maddy Bowtruckle facing off; him all stoic and silent while she sputtered and fumed like a spastic steam engine... a crowd around them. Think of the final Potter-Voldy showdown. Same tension, same animosity.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes again.

“She called him all sorts of thing. Selfish bastard came up quite a few times, if I remember correctly. Oh, and inconsiderate hard-hearted louse... right, Draco?”

“Yeah. Twice.”

“Mhm. Then she screeched we’re through, Draco! We’re through!–” here Theo put on a high pitched voice, “–and scurried away. Left our man here to face a stunned and judgemental audience.”

“Oh my,” Hermione breathed.

“Yep,” Theo agreed and sniggered vacantly. Malfoy shot him an amused glance.

Hermione giggled, then quickly bit her lip. “It must have been quite, er...”

“Au contraire,” Malfoy drawled, “It couldn’t have turned out better for me.”

Theo slapped both his hands on the table and scoffed. “I agree that being shot of her is a blessing... but surely you’d have wanted a more dignified end?”

“No. You see, now I’m the wronged party. The one who was scorned and humiliated in public. I have the people’s sympathies. I like sympathy. I especially like sympathy when it comes from pretty girls...”

Hermione let out a little gasp of outrage. (And Theo threw back his head and laughed.)

“You’re quite an arse, you know?” she informed Malfoy.

He didn’t reply, but simply leaned back in his chair and grinned.

So she clarified: “It’s not something to be proud of!”

“Is it not?” he feigned a look of concern. “I had no idea! And here I’ve been working so hard, trying my damnedest to be an arse—”

“Oh dear,” Hermione interrupted, “There goes the one thing I thought you were effortlessly good at.”

He laughed effusively while looking straight at her, and Hermione’s train of thought went shooting out of the back of her head.

“So here’s a pretty girl whose sympathy you don’t have,” Theo declared.

“Eh, not a problem,” Malfoy shrugged, “Why, just a while ago, I was approached by the bold and buxom Romilda Vane, and she—”

“I’d be careful around her,” Hermione warned at once.

Malfoy set his elbow on the table and leaned forward. “Why’s that?”

“She tried to dose Harry with a love potion once.”

Theo let out a low whistle, while Malfoy scowled.

“She was interested in Potter?”

“Interested is putting it mildly.”

“Blech. Well, that’s killed my interest in her. Oh but tell me, Granger... how much of a fool did Potter make of himself?”

“He didn’t at all. She’d spiked a box of cauldron cakes, but Ron got to them first.”

Hermione looked away from him and stared at her hands. The memory of that episode sobered her at once.

Both Malfoy and Theo were greatly amused.

“Of course he did,” Malfoy jeered, “Nothing edible is safe when Weasley’s around, right? But I daresay he couldn’t possibly have made a bigger fool of himself by that point.”

Hermione’s eyes shot up and fixed him with a frosty glare.

“Actually,” she ground out, “Harry took him to Slughorn immediately. And there he sampled some mead from a very special bottle. So all in all, Romilda’s love potion wasn’t the worst thing he was poisoned with that evening. She was definitely the lesser of two evils.”

It was like she’d yanked the smug glee right off his face, and left him bare and bitter. She waited for the inevitable ire, the indignation, the denunciation...

He dragged his chair back and stood up. He paused, just for a moment, burning vicious hostility right into her soul. And then he left.

Just moments after he’d gone, Theo ran a hand down his face and groaned, “Hermione.”

“What?” she snapped.

“What?” He kept his face covered and his voice was muffled. “What was the need? You promised me you—”
“I said I’d be friendly,” she hissed, “I did not say I’d coddle him.”

“Argh.”

His hands fell onto his lap and revealed a tired, hassled expression. The dimness in his eyes and droop of his shoulders affected her as they always did. And so she sighed–

“I’m sorry.”

He blinked. “For what you said?”

“No. For snapping at you.”

He chuckled, bereft of all humour, and examined his thumbnail while chewing on his tongue.

“Will you be upset if I leave to check on him?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

She reached out and squeezed his arm. “Go.”

He offered her a grave nod and went.

Alone at the large table, Hermione squared her shoulders and reached into her bag. She had more important matters to tend to – starting with runes and ending with charms.

Nobody seemed interested in studying anymore. More often than not, Hermione was alone with her books, huddled in library corners.

It was quiet. Always so quiet.

And lonely.

After weeks of being with and in a group, she actually missed being the one primly trying to steer conversations back to work-related matters while her friends were determined to talk about everything but. She missed glaring at Dean, and elbowing Theo to shut it, and rolling her eyes when Ginny complained in a surprisingly Ron-esque manner.

She missed getting impatient with Neville, and she missed Susan’s unending shushing, and she – well, she found herself thinking about Arithmancy with Malfoy a lot more than she cared for.

Yet, the quiet of the library was still normal, in a sense. It was the quiet that had swept the castle that really did her head in. The entire student body seemed to have gone into a solemn meditative state.

Two days before the second of May – Friday – she thought she might scream just to tear a hole through the oppressiveness. In the potion’s lab, Malfoy, Susan, Padma, and Anthony were each stirring chamomile into their respective potions. Hermione stared down into her cauldron, at the bubbling sap green liquid within, and swallowed her hysteria down.

A few minutes later, Slughorn entered to make a casual round, and even he wasn’t himself. His distinctive beam had been dialled down to an unenthusiastic smile, and he merely whispered his approval as he checked each cauldron.

“Very good, Ms. Granger,” he murmured, “Perfect, of course.”

“Thank you, Professor,” she whispered back.

They all finished the task at the same time, and made a wordless exit as a group. And they all went in separate directions once out of the dungeons.

Hermione made a lone trek up to the owlery to send her parents’ a letter she’d written four days ago, in another lifetime.
Later that evening, all through supper, she couldn’t stop looking at Ginny over and over again. Over the impossibly soft hum of conversation, and the contrastingly loud sound of cutlery, Ginny’s gloom seemed to sound out like a call to prayer. Like the haunting cry of an Azan at sunset. Her head was bowed and she chewed with mournful reluctance. Hermione looked back at her own plate, took a bite, glanced around the room, and then fixed her attention right back at Ginny.

She abandoned her food when Ginny got up to leave, hastily following her out the Hall. Once at her side, she plucked the other girl’s sleeve and asked, “Want to walk for a bit?” Ginny agreed, and so they wandered. In silence... of course in silence. Hermione kept her pace passive and slow, letting Ginny take them where she pleased. And inevitably, they ended up in the corridor where Fred had breathed his last. Hermione hung back while Ginny walked straight up to the spot where he had lain, and watched with a lump in her throat as she plopped down right there. She looked up at her expectantly, and so Hermione unstuck her feet and joined her. A cold shudder ran through her body as she sat, much like the feeling of having a ghost float through you.

Ginny sighed. “I can’t believe it’s going to be a year.” Hermione hummed (she hoped) sympathetically. She was itching to fidget, but she fought the urge. She curled her hands into fists and put them firmly on her lap.

“Sometimes...” Ginny began, and then stopped. She caressed the stones in front of her with trembling fingers.

“Yes?” Hermione prompted gently.

“Sometimes... I... Shit.” She closed her eyes. “Sometimes I wish it had been Percy. Instead of Fred.”

Hermione didn’t know whether she ought to reach out and place a comforting hand on her shoulder. She didn’t know if she should say something, breathe a certain way... She bit her lip and stared; Ginny kept her eyes closed.

“But then I feel so awful... like such a – like the shittiest person in existence. So I write to him. To Percy. I’ve written to him so much this year; more than I have in my whole life. And I think he knows why. He’s a clever chap, isn’t he?”

“He is,” Hermione mumbled.

“I’m pretty sure he wishes it was him too.”

Hermione’s vision turned blurry with a film of tears. After she’d blinked them away, she saw that Ginny’s now open eyes were still dry.

“Have you heard from George recently?” she asked.

“I got a letter a few days ago. He isn’t coming for the do day after. He’s going away for a while.”

“Where?” Ginny shrugged. “Didn’t say. But he said not to worry, that Angelina will be with him, and that he’ll be back in time for my birthday.”

“That’s... four months away.”

“I know. But he needs this, don’t you think? You were different after you came back from Australia. Harry and Ron have been doing so much better post-China. Maybe there’s something to it.”
“Yes,” Hermione broached shakily, “A change of scenery and all that.”
“Yeah. And all that.”

Ginny breathed in then out, deeply and slowly, and stood up. Hermione scrambled to join her. She went with her all the way to the Gryffindor tower, where she bid her goodnight with a hug. Then she was alone again, ambling in suffocating silence to the eighth year common room.

She woke with a start on the anniversary of the day she’d worn Bellatrix’s skin. She knew she’d been having a terrible nightmare, but the details eluded her. All she was left with was bile coating the back of her throat, and a barely repressible inclination to cry.

It was Saturday and the morning had broken. She put on her running shoes and stepped into the clear and summery air.

The hours passed slowly. Hermione spent the whole day in the library, wearing her dad’s Genesis t-shirt as a security blanket. She didn’t move all day, save for a couple of loo-breaks. She didn’t eat because she wasn’t hungry, she didn’t get up to stretch because she didn’t want to, she didn’t walk over to pop open a window when the air got too stifling. Nobody came by to bother her.

It wasn’t like she’d been all that productive either. Her greatest achievement was a doodle in the corner of her parchment, of Linus clutching his security blanket. Somehow, it ended up looking more like Cornelius Fudge, and she scratched its face out thoroughly.

She’d even put her head down on the table and fallen asleep. When she woke up, it was a quarter to seven.

Her stomach rumbled. Time to head down for supper, she supposed.

But she couldn’t do it.

She wasn’t ready to face the entire student and teacher body sitting tight lipped about their silent screaming. She wandered once again to the fifth floor, to the rich forest tapestry with its jewel tones and classical splendour. Wood nymphs were caught up in a ritualistic dance, while unicorns trotted in and out of the woods. The thick and ornate brocade border shone with the muted intensity of antique gold.

She went to stand by the window and looked out at the calm summer night. She placed her palms on the wall where there once was a yawning hole. The moon, huge and almost full, threw its beams to skid over the surface of the lake and paint the strong and firm towers of the castle.

Such a quiet night. So dark.

*But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky*
Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

She was one sunrise away from another circle, another ring of her spiral, and all she could do was watch the loops spin round and around her. Once again, she wanted so badly to scream. She wanted to shout so loudly that the smooth gradient of the sky – silver to black – might shatter into an inharmonious mosaic.

She nearly did when a warm hand landed on her shoulder. But a low murmur of, “Hello, buddy,” stalled her.

“What’s wrong with you?” she hissed, “Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

“Sorry,” Theo mumbled.

He placed his other hand on her other shoulder, and rested his chin on the top of her head. And it wasn’t long before Hermione’s heartbeat slowed, and she was nothing but grateful to have him with her. They shared the silence of the night for a while.

“Luna told me you’d be here,” he said, by and by.

Hermione sniffed, rubbing her face against her sleeve. “How did she know?”

“No idea. I was seeing her off at the Ravenclaw tower, and she said, you should go find Hermione, I think she might be stuck on the fifth floor.”

“I’m not stu–” she sighed. “She really is something else.”

“She is.”

Theo moved his hands to her upper arms and turned her around. He lowered his head to peer into her face and asked, “You’re losing it a bit, aren’t you?”

Hermione didn’t bother denying it. She nodded and bit her lips between her teeth to keep her chin from wobbling.

“Come with me,” he sighed.

He steered her down the corridor, and Hermione shuffled along blindly. Her mind wandered, getting lost in the inky black cracks in the floor. They were walking on an elaborate warren, she realised. The cracks made up the most complicated labyrinth imaginable. The deeper she looked into them, the more the stones around them faded. If only she could fill them in with molten gold: A touch of kintsugi to heal them forever.

“Hermione?”

Oh, they’d stopped walking.
She looked up, but the cracks didn’t fade from her vision. They spread over Theo’s face and broke it into fragments.
She blinked quickly, multiple times.

“Yes?”

“Music’s good for the soul isn’t it?”

That was when she realised they were outside the music room. Again. Another circle.

“I suppose,” she mumbled.

He made to pull her in but she resisted.

“Hermione?”

“Aren’t you going to–”

She freed her arm from his grasp and gestured up and down her body.

“Cop a feel? No thanks.”

“No, you git. Aren’t you going to disillusion me?”
“Nah.”
Then he pulled her with more force than she was capable of opposing.

Just like the last time, Malfoy was sitting behind the piano in the middle of the room. He looked up when they entered and frowned. The tapers where burning low and were few in number: two by the door and one glinting on a stand next to the piano, encasing him in a fuzzy orb of light.
Theo picked one from the side of the door and dragged Hermione to the chaise. He placed the candle on the floor as he sat, and its light spilled into the cracks and turned them... Golden.
“Sit, Hermione.”
She did. Woodenly.

“I’m actually done here,” Malfoy called in a brittle voice. He was looking down at the piano keys, still frowning deeply.
“No,” Theo contested, “You aren’t. And you know you won’t be able to sleep if you don’t play.”

He sighed. And slowly, like the leaves of a touch-me-not plant unfurl once danger has passed, his scowl faded. He closed his eyes. His hands lifted, poised elegantly over the keys, his long fingers so perfectly still that Hermione twitched with anticipation.
And then they descended with the suddenness of a snapping whip, and the silence... the fucking all-pervading, maddening, parasitic silence... was blown apart.

Hermione might have recognised what he was playing, (it did sound vaguely familiar,) had he been playing it at its intended tempo. But whatever it was had been sped up tenfold, a hundredfold, and it was perfect, perfect, perfect.
It was the scream caught in her throat.

Draco’s head was bent and he was staring down beadily as his arms and shoulders rose and fell tumultuously. His sleeves were rolled up all the way to his elbows, exposing, after ages, his faded Dark Mark. It was distorted slightly by the veins that stood out on his forearm.

The music was utterly frenzied and booming. It wasn’t thunder, it wasn’t crashing waves, or some vagrant god’s fury –

It was war.
It was the roar of combating giants, and the fall of a thousand trampling feet. It was the death rattle, and a choir of cacophonous screams. It was the howl of your best friend as you held him back when all he wanted was to avenge his fallen brother –
And he pushed and he pushed –
It was a cry of No Harry No
A giant thrashing snake
The sickening THUD of an enormous boulder
Charge Avada Kedevra Rookwood Kill
It was the sizzle of a hex, the clash of opposing curses, the clatter of a falling wand.

Hermione gripped her knees, till her hands were snow white.

He showed no mercy, even when he stopped. There was no slow petering out. He didn’t bring them down gently. He just stopped. Just left them hanging in that discord. And even though silence had technically regrouped, it was powerless.
Draco was panting, hands still fixed in position, and that added to the impression that the music was still playing. He jerked into motion abruptly, and swung his legs around the bench. He got up and walked to the door without a word or look of acknowledgement.
Just as suddenly, Hermione felt Theo tugging at her arm.
The cracks were screaming out at her, a screaming chorus harmonising with the inexorable
phantom-music. They seemed to be bottomless, reaching down to the core of the earth... angry
jagged fissures that could ooze lava at any point...
They were making her dizzy. She looked away, stumbled, frantically grabbed onto Theo’s elbow...
He said something she couldn’t quite hear. Her heart rate was spiralling out of control.
Draco was a good twenty paces ahead of them, marching with purpose or desperation or both. His
head was bowed just a little, but his back was straight. His shoulder blades looked taut with strain,
stiff and unyielding like they’d felt against her cheek when they’d sailed over blistering fiendfyre.

...Lava spurting from the cracks...

“God, I just–”
“Hermione? What – what is it?”
“I just – just – wait here, please. Stay right here.”

She whimpered and dashed to the nearest window, throwing it open with such vigour that it was
amazing it didn’t blow apart. She leaned out as far as she could. Cool breeze soothed her scorching
face. She filled her lungs with fresh air and breathed out hard, hoping that it would expel her
demons.
The sky was smooth as ever – not a cloud, not a crack.

She only turned around when her heartbeat had stabilised. Theo was still exactly where she’d left
him, looking at her with misty eyes. Draco was long gone.

There was a moth on the canopy of her four poster bed. Hermione could only make out its
silhouette through the gauze. She lifted her hand and shot up a small gust of air. The cloth
ballooned out and the moth took off, fluttered mindlessly around the room once before landing on
her stomach.
It wasn’t a moth at all. It was a little folded up piece of parchment that read:
*Do behave tonight. Theo is watching you.*
She shook her head and laughed, sitting up unwillingly. Outside her open window, dusk was
progressively darkening... she couldn’t possibly procrastinate any longer.

She showered slowly, took an unnecessarily long time washing her hair. Then, wrapped in a towel,
she rummaged through Pat’s cast-offs, looking for something suitable to wear. She ended up
choosing a simple and plain olive green slip dress.
She dried her hair and left it to froth and frizz as it wanted to. Harry’s gift to her – the jade pendant
– was the only jewellery she wore.

Not remotely in the mood to linger in front of the mirror, she left her room; which happened to be
at the exact same time that Hannah and Daphne were leaving theirs. The latter, with a demeanour
as icy as her blue dress robes, stalked away immediately. The former smiled and walked down the
stairs with Hermione. They didn’t have anything to say to each other, but Hermione was dreading
the moment she would skip off with Neville. Maybe she could attach herself to them anyway? She
knew Theo had gone to fetch Luna, and nearly everyone was probably already downstairs. She just
wanted *somebody* by her side.
Her hopes were dashed when Neville and Hannah got engaged in an extremely long and forceful
cuddle. She couldn’t hang around without feeling like a shameless voyeur.
So she moved ahead and stood by an armchair, forlornly drumming her fingers against its headrest.
She wished she hadn’t dallied for so long.

Oh, she was being pathetic. She absolutely could walk into the Great Hall alone.

Her resolve was further strengthened when Terry and Anthony popped out from the boys’ dorms and Terry did that thing where he looked at her.

The corridors were largely full of curious younger students. Hermione ignored the whispers and nudges, looking straight ahead and nowhere else.

There was a thin golden arc drawn around the base of the Grand Staircase: An age line. She wondered whether there were some unfortunate kids with long beards currently moping in some corner.

The doors to the Great Hall were closed, and their frame was decorated with golden gladioli, emitting a strangely welcoming glow. As she stepped closer, she could discern a distinct humming noise, and she knew all she had to do was pass right through the doors. For a moment she wavered, (she tapped her heels together three times,) and then she dived in.

Fortunately for her, the hall was filled to the brim. It felt a lot like she’d walked through the barrier at King’s Cross, except that the people chatting and mingling were carrying beverages instead of trolleys, and were better dressed. The long house tables had been replaced with smaller circular tables, arranged in concentric circles around the largest centre table... which was where she was expected.

Hermione edged her way inward with her arms wrapped around her waist. Perhaps not the most confident of stances, but she wasn’t keen on brushing against anyone. Even the slightest graze may end up being a catalyst for small talk.

The place had been beautifully decked up. Golden floral arrangements in tall vases stood in the spaces between tables.

“’Ermione!” she heard when she’d just about reached her middle of the hall, and it was Fleur, waving at her from a table in the innermost circle. The Weasley table was missing one George, one Charlie, and one Ron. Hermione went around to Mrs. Weasley and put one arm around her shoulders in an awkward sort of side hug. The woman smiled and patted her hand, but she was clearly very out of sorts. Ginny and Mr. Weasley were both turned towards her, as if ready to spring from their seats and leap to her side at a moment’s notice.

Hermione concluded the customary hello’s and how are you’s and left with as much haste as propriety would allow.

When she finally got to her seat, she was met with a multi-voiced cry of her name.

“Good evening,” she said, nodding at Kingsley, McGonagall, and the assorted collection of Ministry and Wizengamot members. She didn’t bother studying them at all, and quickly looked to her left. Ron, and just beyond him, Harry. They grinned at her, with strain, yes, but also the kind of purity that she’d missed so much.

“Hi,” she grinned back.

Harry was sporting a stubble, and it suited him. In contrast, Ron was clean shaven and his hair was freshly cut. He was also wearing a set of very striking Chinese style burgundy robes with gold embroidery.

“You both look extremely smart,” she told them.

“Thanks,” Harry laughed, and rubbed his jaw.
“You look lovely too,” Ron said, “I mean, of course you do.”
Then he turned distinctly red.

Hermione looked away. The glass in front of her was tragically empty.

“It’s like the Yule Ball,” Ron muttered into her ear, “Tell it what you want.”
“Right.” She skimmed the mouth of the glass with one finger. “Merlot.”
Instantly the plain tumbler turned into a wine glass filled with rich crimson liquid.

The three of them were mostly left alone. They chatted amid themselves, in relative privacy as Kingsley’s booming voice dominated the airwaves. Hermione heard all about their first real mission – tracking down a maverick group of self-proclaimed Death Eaters... who actually turned out to be a lot of jobless pranksters.
“It was mortifying,” Harry groaned.
“I still say it was a set up,” Ron insisted, “Robards was testing us. Look at him, smug twat.”
He pointed completely not subtly at a man sitting only a few seats down.
“Hermione, we’re useless without you,” Harry added as he kicked Ron from under the table. Also not very subtly.

*

To say the whole event was an utter failure might be a touch too harsh, but it was exactly what Hermione was thinking.

Not long after she’d put away her second glass of wine, Kingsley made a one minute long, generic speech about strength and progress. Then it was time to eat, and it seemed like all conversation died. She wondered how many people were remembering the circumstances under which they’d dined a year back. Of course, she was thinking about how she’d barely been able to choke down half a bowl of soup in the Burrow... how she’d run up to cut away the burnt ends of her hair.

“...told them don’t do it...”
Ron was grumbling under his breath, as he savagely cut into his steak.

His family – save for him and Ginny – were the first to depart. They appeared to set off a domino effect, as more and more people took their leave. Even before pudding was served, the whole bundle of officials at their table stood to go, and Hermione took the opportunity to sneak away. She zipped over to a table in the second circle and dropped into the lone empty seat. Theo and Luna smiled at her, and she opened her mouth to say –
A mordant voice spoke up from her other side: “Oh look, we’ve been graced by the company of a guest of honour.”
Hermione’s turned to scowl at Malfoy, but he wasn’t even looking at her.
Dressed in plain but sharp grey robes, he was tinkling the ice cubes in his glass of firewhiskey and watching the women who’d been so harsh at his trial leave the Great Hall.

Over the next half hour, Hermione developed an itch on the souls of her feet that was begging her to sprint to her room. She did her best to keep chattering; in addition to the three already mentioned, the table housed Dean, Seamus, Neville, and Hannah as well, so there weren’t ever any lulls to stew in.
But then the food and dishes were cleared, and Neville and Hannah left. Dean and Seamus wandered to the other end of the hall. After they’ud moved, the table next to theirs was revealed, where Harry was sitting next to Andromeda, and he was cradling Teddy Lupin in his arms. Even from a distance, Hermione could tell his eyes were bright like their hue had been picked right out of the aurora borealis. Ginny stood behind him with her hands clasped, watching the whole scene tenderly.

Hermione called for her third glass of wine. Well, she could very well take advantage of the fact that all classes for the next day had been cancelled!

Kingsley left, Andromeda left. A group of Aurors left. Slughorn and Vector left. A few moments later, Luna said she was going to spend some time with her father. So Theo put his head down on the table in a sulk.

The hall was more than half empty.

“Fuck it all,” Malfoy muttered. He reached into his pocket and took out a bottle of whiskey. He reached in again and pulled out an unexpectedly large green bottle of who knows what. Then he reached in again and out came a small bottle of some clear spirit.

Hermione was both mystified and mesmerised by the spread. Malfoy jarred her out of her stupefaction in the most unexpected way.

“Hey, Weasley! Over here,” he called. What?

Ron took a detour from his journey to Harry and Ginny and barked, “What?” “What’v you got in that hipflask you’re carrying?” “What’s it to you?” “I have a feeling I can make good use of it.” “Sod off!”

Malfoy offered his absolute worst smirk and gestured to the bottles in front of him. “You see these? I’m going to concoct the greatest beverage ever made. If you contribute, you’ll get to partake.” “You’re mental.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed at he took in each bottle. He tapped a nail against his hipflask, and pursed his lips shiftily.

“Maotai. It’s a Chinese–” “I know what it is,” said Malfoy shortly. “So what’s it going to be?”

Ron placed his loot on the table. Hermione thought her jaw might get unhinged and fall to the floor as he settled into the chair Neville had vacated, and leaned forward as though grudgingly interested. She whipped her head around when Theo began to chuckle. He looked up at her with gleaming eyes... and winked.

Malfoy set to work with the methodical precision of a veteran potioneer. He conjured four wide mouthed shot glasses and began tipping the various liquors into them, pretending like he knew exactly how much of each needed to go in, adjusting the height with which the liquid fell like it mattered.

Hermione sat back and stared at his profile, still not able to digest what was going on. He was smiling slightly, and his eyelashes fanned over his high cheekbones that were flushed pink – the way, she’d noticed, that they did when he was in his cups. The line of his nose and the lock of hair falling over his forehead displayed extreme compositional harmony.
“And... done,” he announced. He pushed one glass full of muddy ochre awfulness towards Theo.
“One for Theodore, the Fucking Bore–”
“Prick!”
“One for Granger the Grating. One for the Weasel King, and one for Malfoy the Magnificent. Bottoms up.”

Was this some kind of go at redemption? Was this a peace offering? Did Ron even realise...? Draco had offered him a drink, not poisoned, and he’d accepted, and –

Ron threw the drink down in one gulp, and resurfaced red-faced and sputtering, “ACK! Fuck! Oh shit!”
He slumped and thumped his chest.
When Theo had his, he died a similar death. Malfoy simply grimaced and coughed lightly.
“Another?” he asked.
“Yeah,” Ron replied.
“Hermione hasn’t touched hers!” Theo bleated.
“Hurry up, Hermione!”
She frowned. Bringing the glass up to her mouth made her aware of how pungent it smelt.
“Get on with it, will you–”
She gulped it down.
And it promptly tried to make its way back up again.
“Gah,” she choked and clutched her throat, “Ohmgord.”
Her eyes were watering and they were all laughing at her. She felt goose pimples break out all over her body and closed her eyes to suppress a shudder. It had tasted bloody foul.

By the time she’d somewhat recovered, there was another glass in front of her.

“No,” she asserted, “No more.”
“Oh, grow up, Granger.”
She looked up, affronted, only to watch as Malfoy, Ron, and Theo all knocked back their shots at the same time. It was too much of a challenge for her to back out of. The second one was just as bad as the first. Surely her oesophagus had melted. She could see shooting stars streaking across her peripheral vision.

“One more?”
“Fuck off, Malfoy. ‘M going home.”
Ron swiped his hipflask off the table and staggered away. He also nearly collided with a vase.
“One more without Maotai?” Draco amended.
He didn’t wait for a response. Once the drinks were fixed, he shoved them towards Hermione and Theo, and their fates where sealed.

“Not much better,” Theo gasped, later.
“Not at all,” Hermione agreed.
Her hands and legs and lungs and heart where buzzing and burning.

Theo dragged his chair back and tried to stand... in vain.
“O Sa-lah-zaaar,” he wailed. It took him four tries to succeed. “Luna. I need Luna.”

And so it was that Hermione and Draco remained alone at the table. She didn’t want to leave.
“One more?”
“Yes.”
Why did she say that, you ask? Well, shut up.
She sagged deep into her chair. When Draco put her glass before her, she couldn’t reach out far enough to get to it. He chuckled, picked it up and brought it to her, leaning back into his own chair in the process. He was gripping the glass at the base, and Hermione took hold of the top. The tip of her little finger touched the tip of his thumb.
All the vibrations in her chest and extremities plunged into the bottom of her stomach in one fell swoop. She inhaled sharply, and when she looked up at his face, he was watching her expectantly with a single arched brow.
“Shall we?” he ventured in a low voice.
“Yes,” she breathed.

After that one, she felt like her head had blown off her shoulders and shot through the ceiling. Well, technically, since the ceiling was the sky, her head had blown off into space. And there it would float for evermore.

“If you say one more,” she warned, “I will... You... Don’t you dare say one more.”
He sniggered.
She held out her glass to him. This time, his thumb ran along the length of her finger. Her head, wherever it was, performed a summersault. The thrumming in her gut acquired an electrical charge. The point of contact was scorching.
He had no problem placing her glass on the table with his long, capable, piano playing arms.

“I’m surprised you’re still standing,” he drawled.
“What?”
His hair really shone, didn’t it?
“I said, I’m surprised you’re still–”
“I’m sitting.”
“Psh, twit.” He pushed some of that shiny hair back and continued, “You don’t look like you’d have a very high tolerance.”
It was Hermione’s turn to scoff. “After all that I’ve been through, what’s a bit of alcohol?”
His grin was wide and toothy. The colour in his cheeks had all the delicious decadence of rococo pink. She wondered if it was warm to touch. His eyes were lidded, foggy with a drunken haze... She wanted to lean in and look right into them to ascertain their exact shade.

But she leaned in and whispered, “How about another one?”

*Bad idea, baaaaaad idea*, screamed her head from beyond the Milky Way. But he looked positively delighted so her head could go dive into a black hole.

---

_Not again._

She’d woken up on a sofa – a realisation that she gathered after a quick eye open/eye shut motion – and the long moments that followed were just a blaring repetition of _not again_.

_Not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again not again _

“I know you’re awake, Herms.”
She cracked open one eye and looked at Ginny sprawled on the floor, surrounded by cushions. She too looked like she had just woken up.

“Urgh.”
“Indeed,” Ginny deadpanned, “How awful are you feeling?”
Ginny smirked. “I should think so.”

They weren’t the only one’s who’d decided to kip in the eighth year common room. Seamus was snoring from the window seat.

“What–” Hermione shifted, propping herself up on one elbow, “–Ah, shit. What happened?”
“Get completely cabbaged. I think you must have figured that out by now.”
She whimpered and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Yes, but...”
“Well, see, Harry and I had slipped away for a bit, and when we came back, you had your arse planted on the floor, and Malfoy had just about wet himself laughing.”
“No!”
“Um, yes.”
“Did anyone... who else saw...” Hermione’s hand fell away from her face and she gasped with horror. “Did McGonagall—”
“Ha, no. She was too busy chewing up Dean and Seamus for trying to modify a few paintings. Did you know that apparently nobody appreciates tits on medieval knights?”
Hermione sat up properly, and yeah, it fucking hurt to sit. The cloak that had been draped over her slipped to the ground.
“But Ginny, how did I get here?”
“Harry carried you,” she grinned, “Obviously he couldn’t go up to the girls’ dorms, and I wasn’t sober enough to be of any help, so... this sofa it had to be.”

Hermione felt like she was looking at the world through a fishbowl. Everything was bleary and wavy. Her eyes closed of their own accord and her head snapped back. They flew open again when Ginny squealed.

“Oh Merlin! You’re still drunk.”
“I... ugh... think you might be right. God, oh god, I’m going to be sick.”

All aches and instability forgotten, she slapped a palm against her mouth and bolted. Her bare feet slapped against the floor and her elbow suffered a painful collision along the way, but somehow she made it to her room, to her loo, in time to throw up violently.

Once she was through, she put down the toilet seat and sat down, bending forward till her head rested between her knees. Her brain was a sneakoscope whizzing like mad inside her skull. Her entire GI tract was burning.

She closed her eyes and didn’t move for ages. Not asleep, not awake, just aware that the world was an eddying bay and she was a jellyfish.

“Aaaaargh,” she moaned when she stood up.
She had to stay that way for a long while too, with her hands pressed against her stomach. Only when she was sure she wasn’t going to collapse, she slipped the straps off her shoulders and let her dress fall to the ground. She stood under a hot spray. No matter how much shampoo and body wash she used, she could still smell alcohol.

She brushed her teeth twice.

Before getting dressed, she turned her back to the mirror and peered over her shoulder. There were
indeed splodgy bruises on her bum. A touch of murtlap essence was the need of the hour. She considered just falling back into bed, but she couldn’t bear the thought of being shut in that room all by herself. She was actually still feeling a bit tipsy; she needed some fresh air.

Downstairs, Ginny was just on her way out too.
“You look better,” she quipped.
“Shower helped,” Hermione shrugged.
“Yeah, I’m going in for one of those too. Where are you off to?”
“A walk.”

As they strolled down the passageway together, Hermione looked at Ginny from the corner of her eye.

“Did I say anything stupid while I was out of it?”
Ginny cackled. “You went on about Malfoy being the best drink maker in the world.”
“I didn’t. Please tell me I didn’t.”
“You did. You kept trying to steal Harry’s glasses while he carried you, you giggled a lot. You passed out somewhere between the sixth and seventh floor.”
“That’s it,” she lamented, “I’m never drinking again. Theo is going to kill me.”
“What for?”
“He told me to watch myself–”
“He’s got no right to criticise you,” Ginny beamed, “He was babbling when Dean and Neville dragged him up to his room.”

They branched off in opposite directions at the staircase. Students were lolling about the castle in casual clothing, at ease. It seemed that they were allowing themselves some normalcy once again, now that the ‘big day’ had gone by. There was chattering, laughter, coughs, sighs, arguments galore... and absolutely no silence. Hermione marched through it all and out into the Hogwarts’ grounds.

It was another beautiful day. Somewhere under that same glorious blue sky, George was taking stock of a new landscape. Mrs. Weasley was probably at her son’s grave.
And speaking of graves, Dumbledore’s white tomb gleamed from a distance, so stark against the vivid green of the grass around it. She averted her eyes and headed towards the other end of the lake. She would sit on the shore, and bask in a morning of bucolic peace. She would roll up her jeans and let the sun cleanse her. She would let her skin absorb the earthy scent of the grass. She would –

She would come to a dead halt when she’d spot Draco sprawled in the exact spot she’d hoped to claim.

However, she didn’t feel any desire to flee. On the contrary, she felt an inexplicable gladness, and her legs carried her towards him even before she had decided that’s what she’d do. She just really wanted to talk to him, about anything really.
Dressed in a long sleeved t-shirt and slacks, he was lying flat on his back, arms behind his head, and eyes closed. They opened at the sound of her approach; his brow rose in his customary way. Hermione had to smile.

“How’s your arse?”
Her smile dropped.

“None of your business.”

He sniggered as she gingerly settled a short distance away from him.

“It’s all your fault,” she accused.
“Nonsense. That last one was your idea.”
“The whole... thing... was your idea.”

He flouted her assertion with a flippant grunt, and closed his eyes again.

“How are you feeling?” she queried.
“I feel like I’m dead.”

Hermione leaned back on her arms and gazed upwards. “That’s a strange thing to say.”
“Okay.”
“What I mean is–”
“Please don’t elaborate.”
“You can’t feel like you’re dead, because you’ve never actually been dead. You have no experience, no idea what deadness feels like. So at best, you can claim to feel like what you imagine being dead feels like.”
“Granger,” he groaned, agonised.
She allowed herself a secretive vindictive grin. “Don’t feel bad, though. Nobody knows what being dead feels like. Aside from ghosts, of course, but they must always feel dead – that’s just their way – so it’s a bit redundant.”
“All right. Thank you for burying me under such a teetering pile of bullshit–”
“Harry died. Kind of. But I don’t think that counts. He had a very singular experience. I don’t think you meant that you felt dead in a particularly singular way–”
“How about this,” he barked. “You make me wish I was dead.”

She glanced his way to find him glaring at her.
“Yes, you could say that. It would be stupidly dramatic, but sure.”
“Your incessant nattering will be the death of me.”
“Ye–”
“The inane, incomprehensible pedantry of your argument is potentially deadly.”
“ALL RI–”
“If I imagine the bleakness of death, all I can envision is a rocky desert and your voice echoing endlessly.”
“And you Draco – you bore me to death and I–”

“Ah, ah!” he crowed, “You mean I bore you to what you think death might be like.”
“Damn it!” she grumbled.

He laughed. She knew he was looking at her, but she couldn’t look back. Over the grassy fragrance she’d been craving, she could smell his cologne.

“There’s a muggle artist called Damien Hirst. One of his most famous works is a tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde, stored in a giant glass display case.”

He was silent for a while. She tried to picture what expression he might be wearing. Probably one that conveyed how daft he found her.

“An actual shark?”
“Yes.”
“And that’s... art?”
“Yes. But can you guess what he titled it?”
“Oh, do tell. I’m on tenterhooks,” he droned.
“It’s called The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living.”
He practically guffawed, and she just had to look. His eyes were squeezed shut, his head was thrown back against the grass, platinum blond spilling into green...
She was laughing right along with him.
As he calmed, he opened his eyes and stared at her. She had to turn away again.

Quietude reigned after that. The sun got hotter with each passing minute, adding to Hermione’s headiness. She so badly wanted to lie down. She was dying to lie down. Watching sunlight dance on rippling water was hypnotic.

Draco stood up and dusted the back of his trousers.
“You’re going?” she asked.
“Yeah. Thomas and Finnigan said they be up for some quidditch about now. See you around, Granger.”
“See you,” she mumbled.
She watched him walk away, getting smaller and smaller, till she lost the battle against gravity and lay down. A sigh escaped her lips and she stretched out her arms as though hoping for something divine to burst through the sky and embrace her.
I genuinely thought I’d have more free time in this final quarter of the year. 
Said the universe: LOL.

In case you missed it, I posted a Theo’s POV outtake from this story called 'Interlude’. 
Check it out, if you like.

Theo wouldn’t stop moaning and it was driving Hermione absolutely batty.

He’d been that way for the past two days, ever since Xenophilius had witnessed him in a state of drunken disgrace. Naturally, he blamed Draco. He was stewing in an awful strop, scowling and growling and categorically not speaking to that sadistic, ruinous dick. His words, not Hermione’s. 
The dick, in turn, derived great amusement from the whole situation, unerringly spouting lines like, “there is such a thing as personal responsibility, you know.”

“He’s filling Luna’s ears with such poison, Hermione!” Theo whined as they wended their way towards the greenhouses, “I’m ruined! Ruined!”
“Come now, Theo. He’ll calm–”
“He won’t! He thinks I’m some sort of a degenerate! What if he convinces Luna she’s better off without me?”
“You know that won’t happen–”
“Fuck me, he called me a miscreant! Me! A miscreant! ME!!”

All the while, Draco walked on a few metres away with his hands in his pockets and a swing in his step like he was Gene Kelly on the cusp of a dance.

With the NEWTs just thirty-three days away, Hermione’s classmates finally achieved the level of fanaticism that she had acquired two months ago.

But of course, that didn’t mean they were all now equally frazzled.
Oh no.
Hermione was still miles ahead. She was out of–

(“Control!” Ginny upbraided, “You’re out of control, Hermione!”)

–patience. She was out of patience. She’d had to “regretfully” step away from their study group.
She couldn’t tone down her tempo to match theirs, and nor could she afford to take on the onus of their shortcomings. Neville was still mucking up water charms. Dean still couldn’t manage human transfiguration. Nearly everybody found theory too boring to focus on for too long.
Unlike the week before, there was something gratuitously comforting about sitting on her own, steeped in schoolwork and revision. The nature of the quietness was insulating, not isolating. She didn’t know how the other camp was faring: The primarily Ravenclaw, Terry-Anthony-Ernie - Now-With-Mandy-And-Etcetera study group. When she spoke to Padma she was pleasant and cordial, but bizarrely cagey, so Hermione decided to give herself the benefit of the doubt. She was head and shoulders ahead of them.
She was on top of it all.
Ah, sod it; she was drowning.
Spells were jammed between her teeth. Laws were pouring out of her ears. Runes were hiding in her hair. Equations swam in her bloodstream. She could barely keep up.

One night, a week after the anniversary dinner as she lay in bed trying to switch off, she wondered when she’d begin whistling like an overheated pressure cooker. Going from intense emotional strain to all that work-related stress was utterly maddening.
She closed her eyes and pictured Mentone beach in the early afternoon – warm from the sun, cool from the sea breeze. Scenic and calm.

She only ran on the weekends now – for no more than twenty minutes. It was all she could afford if she woke up at five-thirty sharp.

On one particular Saturday, thirty-one days before the NEWTs, she took five laps in front of the lake, and then, unexpectedly, had to dash halfway across the grounds because she spotted Hagrid stepping out of his cabin and was afraid he’d offer her a cup of tea. Just as she slowed to a stroll it began to rain. The cool spray felt lovely against her heated skin, so she didn’t scurry towards shelter. She pushed back the hair that had escaped from her plait and tilted her face upwards.
She was proper soaked by the time she got back indoors.
The dark corridors were draughty, and Hermione shivered. Still she didn’t dry herself off, didn’t cast a warming charm. The chill was vivifying; she trembled and smiled absently to herself. She moved like sodden driftwood in a brook – gliding and gliding, caught on a wave and trembling, upstream and up staircases, down narrow channels and hallways –

The door to the music room was open just a crack, just enough for light from within to beckon, and she floated right in without a thought or care – like driftwood – sodden, trembling –
A short, sweet melody swirled around her before stopping abruptly. Draco looked up at her with frank surprise, brows furrowed with confusion. He blinked a few times.

“What are you doing here?”
“I–”
Seeing as she was, in essence, driftwood, Hermione found words to be particularly challenging just then. He turned away from her, like he had grown tired of looking at soggy lumber.
“What is it?” he pressed, stroking his fingers along the fallboard as he frowned.
She eyed the action for a second, while full sentences took shape in her mind.
“What were you playing? It was really lovely.”
“It was,” he agreed.
“Why did you stop?”
“Because you fucking burst in, didn’t you?”
“Right.” She scuffed her muddy trainer against the floor. “Sorry about that.”
He sighed heavily and rolled his eyes. “Oh, it’s fine, Granger.”

There was such intense frustration and sarcasm in his tone. Well then. Driftwood was flammable too.

“So, continue then,” she demanded haughtily.
He shot her a brief, irritated glance. “Is that an order?”
“No. Please continue, Malfoy, please.”

There you go. She could produce that perfect sarcastic tone, too.

But he played. And it truly was lovely. Hermione moved a bit to the right so she could lean against the wall by the door, but she didn’t dare go any closer, lest she break his concentration again. She didn’t know the piece. It was overwhelmingly sweet – sentimental, even, and it brought to mind pure romanticism; blooming gardens, soft gold, a summer breeze...
It ended far too soon, on a gentle note that bloomed into an iridescent bubble of tranquillity.

Hermione was scared to speak, to breathe. She didn’t want it to burst.

Morning had staked its claim properly by then. It had stopped raining. The room was sundrenched and Draco was swathed in its light, dappled in refracted hues from the stained-glass windows. His eyes were downcast, and he slowly pulled in his lower lip, sinking his teeth into the soft, pink flesh.

Hermione decided she ought to leave. She really ought to. Right now. Draco’s lip slid out from under his teeth, even pinker than before. She should push away from the wall and leave. He began randomly pressing down on keys.

“My mother composed that,” he said suddenly, in between two high notes.
“She composed what?” Hermione asked stupidly.
He closed his eyes and huffed. “The Hawkshead Attacking Formation, of course.”
“Huh? Wha– Oh. You meant that piece.”
“You dazzling genius.”

It was her turn to huff, though she wanted to smile – actually she didn’t want to smile, but her blasted mouth had decided to anyway.

“It’s really quite lovely.”
He resumed his random tinkering. “So you’ve said.”

His sleeves were rolled up again, all the way up to his elbows. Hermione averted her eyes, choosing instead to focus on his unbuttoned collar–
On the way his fringe fell–
On the scene outside the window.

“Do you compose as well?”
“Nah.”
“Did she – your mother, I mean – teach you how to play?”
“No,” he replied with a mellifluous chuckle, “She tried, but apparently I was a bit difficult as a child, and required a stricter hand than she was capable of presenting.”
Hermione laughed as well, but she didn’t dare look at him.
She looked at him, and he was still watching his fingers hit random keys.

“She called in this disagreeable vulture from Austria to teach me. He hated me, I hated him, but he loved the piano we had, so he stuck around for six years.”

“Had to have been a really impressive instrument,” she smiled. He looked back down; she looked back out the window.

“Is it the one that’s in your room now?”

The absolute silence that followed made her want to physically pull back her words and jam them down her throat. She gingerly turned her head and found him gazing at her with his eyebrows raised high.

“I haven’t been in your room,” she blurted hastily, “I promise.”

His chin lowered. His brows rose higher still.

“It was Theo’s fault. He called me over. And – I didn’t step in. Stood by the door, really, I–”

“What the hell was Theo doing in my room?”

His manner was inexplicably nonchalant. He resumed his piano key plucking. It worried her.

“He was – well, the butterflies.”

“Ah.”

“Which I had NO hand in, whatsoever. I didn’t help him, I didn’t give him the idea, I didn’t do anything. In fact, I told him he was being daft, repeatedly.”

Draco sniggered. (-dum-da-da-dum-)

“Relax, Granger. If you were involved, I suspect I’d be suffering a great deal more than I am.”

She let out a breathy laugh, taking stock of the relaxed slope of his shoulders and the tiny brackets at the upturned corners of his mouth.

She remembered the existence of an evil green alarm clock, and her blood ran cold. And for goodness sake, she was still in damp clothes; falling ill was the last thing she needed right now.

“So, um,” she stood up straight and cleared her throat, “I’ll be off.”

“Finally,” he drawled, eyes fixed on the piano keys. But the ghost of his grin still lingered.

She left him with a sardonic, “Ha ha.”

Jogging up to the common room, she wondered if it would be bad form to demand Theo give the clock back... give his birthday gift back...

Bugger.

Serendipitously, the end of that thought coincided with her meeting Theo just outside the common room door.

“Hello,” she grinned.

He took in her appearance and came across fairly taken aback. “What happened to you?”

“I got caught in the rain.”

“No shit, Hermione. But you have heard of drying charms, haven’t you?”

“I couldn’t be bothered,” she shrugged, “Have to shower anyway. But where are you off to?”

“Where I’m always off to. It’s either you or him disappearing all the time and I’m the poor twat who has to go hunting.”

She pursed her lips and gave him a look. “He’s in the music room.”

His expression took on a curious tilt as he searched her face for god knows what. “That’s generally
the first place I look. Is he moping?”
“No.” She clasped her hands and stared at his shoulder. “He was playing his mother’s composition. I stopped to listen.”
“Ah yes. Pretty piece. But you should listen to Draco’s stuff. He’s better – Narcissa will be the first to say it.”
Hermione frowned, and what felt like a ball of solid lead dropped into her stomach.
“He composes as well?”
“Yeah.”
“Oh.”
“What?”
“Nothing.”

She took a breath and smiled at him. “See you after breakfast?”
“Sure, just tell me one thing first...”
“Hm?”
“You went in – in front of Draco – like that?”
She bristled. “Looking like a drowned rat? Yes, I bloody well did. What of it?”
“Er, Hermione.” He paused and twisted his mouth to the side, looking both hesitant and wildly amused. “Hermione. Your top is quite, quite see-through.”
“WHAT?!” she squawked in horror. She looked down and sure enough, saw the distinct outline of her bra. With a squeak she crossed her arms over her chest and ran. The door slammed shut behind her, before she could hear Theo burst into laughter – which he undoubtedly would.
Her mind was screaming every expletive it knew as she ducked her head and rushed into her room.

Why. Why did this stuff happen to her?

She fell back against her door and squeezed her eyes shut, wishing the wood would absorb her and keep her trapped forever. She could be a door, honestly, she wouldn’t mind. A step up from driftwood, wasn’t it?
Ah, shit.
Why why why.

She went and stood in front of her mirror. Her face was red and glowing, and her plait looked like a thick, frayed rope. She forced herself to examine her torso. Through the thin, white material, her powder blue bra stood out markedly. But it wasn’t so bad. It was modest... and speaking of which, she was only modestly endowed.
Modest.
Even when her t-shirt was wetter and more transparent, she must have looked modest. In any case, Draco hadn’t reacted at all. He’d barely even looked at her.
She peeled off the treacherous item of clothing, followed by her joggers and, standing in her modest, pastel underthings, she scowled. Nearly all her bras and knickers were modest and pastel. Perhaps she ought to invest in something more exciting. Something black and lacy, or bright red and skimpy...
Would Draco look at her then?

What the fuck?

She jumped away from the mirror and stumbled into the bathroom. She stood under a stream of hot water and did the quickest, most methodical job of washing herself. A moment’s pause and she’d have ended up hitting her head against the tiles. Repeatedly. Was this really what her life had come to?
She dressed very quickly too, not going anywhere near the mirror, while reciting the runic alphabet out loud, over and over again.

Fuck the world, fuck her life.

“...raido, kenaz, gebo...”

Malfoy. She had to make such a fool of herself in front of him. Of all people, him.

“...wunjo, halagaz, nauthiz...”

But he had looked at her. Sparingly. Was that propriety or disinterest?

“......Isa... Jera......”

Had he really not noticed?

“EIHWAZ-PERTH-ALGIZ-SOWULO--”

*

She stayed sat crossed-legged on her bed, nibbling on biscuits her parents had sent her, veering wildly between intense revision and suppressing a strong impulse to leap out of her window.

She wondered what must have transpired between Theo and Malfoy.

_Theo might have said, “So I hear you saw Hermione earlier?”_  
_“Yeah,” Draco would reply._  
_“You saw her, huh?”_

She moaned and planted her face in her mattress. What would he say to that? What? What? But then again... she slowly lifted her head and stared blankly ahead... Theo wouldn’t bring it up at all, would he? He wouldn’t. Would he? She’d never survive a fall from such a height. How absolutely perfect.

So alright, she’d jump. After this chapter here...

And the morning passed in this manner.

At noon, her stomach launched a violent rebellion that shut down her entire system. The higher ups in her cerebral cortex were forced to freeze all function, which in turn completely immobilised the manual labour department.

Her hands lay folded uselessly on her lap, and she nibbled on her lip. The demand for food was not to be suppressed, not even by a battalion of reason and impending mortification. And then reason turned against her. It joined rank with voracious hunger and pounded impending mortification into dust.

To _hell_ with it. He had acted like nothing was awry, and so could she. That’s all – nothing happened. She would
eat quickly, and go to the library; thirty one days till D-day. *Ob la di, ob-la-da, life goes on... Bra.*
She hated herself. She put on her shoes and left the room.

No sooner did she step into the common room, than Theo was on her, brimming with umbrage.

“Do you have any idea how long I’ve been waiting for you?”
“Um, sorry–”
“You said we’d meet up after breakfast–”
“Yes, but I got a bit caught up in–”
“Where’s your fucking galleon?”
“My galleon?”
“Yes! I must have sent you two dozen messages!”
“Oh,” she blinked, “I don’t keep it on me anymore.”
“But you must!” he demanded indignantly, “You absolutely must!”
“Well, alright. Now shh, calm down.”

She took his elbow and led him down to the Great Hall. Obviously, calm down he didn’t, so she listened to him rant at length about unreliable, constantly disappearing best friends and the utter parody that was his life.

They parted ways to get to their respective tables. Malfoy didn’t make an appearance, and it was only after she’d eaten and found her way back to her secluded table in the library that she realised she hadn’t been breathing easy at all.

*#

Much, much later, she emerged from the world of magical weaponisation with the suddenness of being snapped out of a hypnotic state. All the lamps around her were blazing, and the shadows had lengthened and thickened. Nine o’clock. She wasn’t in the mood to race down to catch the fag end of supper. She would just make do with biscuits again.

To her weary and abstracted mind, the corridors of Hogwarts looked like a secret underground complex – a railroad where Nazis might have hidden precious art, or a catacomb under the streets of Rome...

And she spotted him at the end of the passageway. It seemed she was always spotting him at the ends of passageways.

Her first instinct was to flee.

But he was not alone. There were six fourth year students there too, and they were all crouched on the ground, amid a pile of books and parchment and stationary. Hermione made a beeline towards him and as she got closer, realised that they were also standing in a shallow puddle.

“What happened?” she exclaimed.
“Peeves,” said Draco and a few of the others.

She dropped into a squat next to him and picked up the book nearest to her. It was thoroughly soaked, so she went about the business of casting a drying spell. She kept her eyes lowered when she held it out to him, choosing to watch his fingers as they clasped the book.
“Thanks,” he muttered. 
Draco kept a lot more in his bag than the kids, who quickly sorted their stuff out and went on their way. It was just him and her and the flickering lamps, flaring and ebbing almost in tandem with her pulse.

Silence while involved in a task was all right, but silence while walking side by side was unendurable; especially if she wanted to avoid a resurrection of the mortification squadron. The moment she handed him the final bit of parchment she burst out with, “You never answered my question.”
He arched a brow at her as he repaired the strap of his bag. “What question?”
“About your piano. The one you have with you in your room. In your flat. Is it the same one that was in the manor?”

There had to have been a more coherent way of phrasing that.

“But why do you care?” he groused absent-mindedly. His shoes squelched as he walked. “Fucking nasty berk of a poltergeist...”
“I’m just curious,” she muttered.
“Huh?” He aimed a drying charm at his feet.
“...About your piano.”
“What are you–” He looked at her, exasperated, as he tucked his wand into his pocket. “No, Granger. It isn’t the same bloody piano.”

They’d started walking again – in search of the Wałbrzych gold train – lamps to the right of them, lamps to the left of them, sanity behind them.

“I see,” stated Hermione.
He let out a heavy expulsion of air.

She peeked up at him, and realised that he looked rather tired himself. Bedraggled, too.

“I didn’t take a damned thing from the Manor;” he said in a low voice, “But for a few personal belongings.”
She sensed that she wasn’t to say anything yet. There was a faint variation at the end of his sentence that suggested there was more –
“I don’t want a damned thing from the Manor.”
At this point, his mouth clamped shut with finality.
“Are you planning to sell it off, like Theo?”
“Can’t,” he retorted shortly, “Isn’t mine to sell.”
“So, it’s just going to...”
“Waste away?” He laughed bitterly, “Probably. At least until father gets out and reclaims it. I doubt mother’s ever coming back.”

Even in profile, she could tell his eyes were flinty and cold. Clearly, he wasn’t going to say anything more.

“My parents’ sold off our house over the hols,” she offered, “I know what it’s like, not having a home–”
“I have a home,” he snapped, “You know, where the manor piano isn’t.”
“Um, yes, but–”
“I like my flat,” he added roughly, “It’s home.”
“Yes, yes, it’s very nice. Comes with the world’s most trying flatmate and all. But what I meant was–”
She heard a little sigh of a laugh. She looked up, he looked down and it was a meeting of ironic half-smiles.

“He’s an odious little shit, yes. At least the Dark Lord didn’t traumatisme me with songs about pyjamas and bananas.”

Hermione’s hand jumped up to her mouth and she giggled into the back of her hand. “I don’t suppose he brought tacky, glittery ornaments for your living room?”

“No, just the occasional round of people to torture... a snake the size of a river... the general stench of death—”

“But at least there weren’t any butterflies.”

“There weren’t, bless him. And nor did he spend entire nights shagging his extremely vociferous girlfriend—”

She had to stop walking for her laughter, tickled to death and simultaneously horrified at the picture her brain presented her with: Voldemort in the throes of passion... *Ugh*. Draco stopped too, a little ahead, and turned around with a smirk that was stained with a sort of triumphant overlay, like he was celebrating the fact that he’d managed to completely overturn her attempt at having a serious discussion.

...Or something. Hermione didn’t care.

“Oh dear,” she wheezed.

*Deer. Merlin. Don’t even get me started on how much worse it was when Theo had those antlers. Luna is fucking strange.*

She laughed harder. They were at the foot of the staircase leading up to their tower, and by the time she sobered some, Dean, Neville, and Hannah were standing around her, asking what was so funny. She shook her head and began climbing up the stairs.

Halfway up, a crabby bellow chased after them – “*Why weren’t you at supper?!*” – And they all about-turned.

Theo marched up and stopped in front of her. She ran a hand through her hair with tired uneasiness and sighed, “I was in the library and lost track of—”

“Of course you did. *Again*. Fucking hell, Hermione. You’re going to wither out of exis—”

“I’m fine—”

“Even Ginny says so!”

“Well, tell *her* I’m fi—”

“And you!” He spun around, pointing an accusing finger at Draco. “*Where were you?*”

Draco looked down his nose at his simmering petitioner. “I was the victim of an ambush.”

“*Huh?*”

“Peeves attacked me with water balloons and sliced my bag open.”

Theo stared impassively, even as Dean began to snigger under his breath.

“Well,” he said by and by, “I commend him.”

“I hope he gets you tomorrow then,” Draco sneered.

They moved in a slow huddle, like a lone summer cloud over a field of daffodils, and drifted into the common room. Theo slung one arm around Hermione and Draco each.

“Daddy worries about you, my pets,” he professed.

She pushed him away, chuckling at the interminable revulsion on Draco’s face. Muttering a vague farewell, she slinked back into her room for another three to four hours of quiet revision.
At five in the morning, her eyes opened and she was at once wide awake. Sweat ran down the length of her spine. She kicked away her duvet; the motion caused an intense pang to rip through her. She twisted one leg over the other so very tightly and splayed her hands over her pelvic bones. Then slowly, she let one squeeze into the space between her legs.

Her core was throbbing like mad – she could feel it, she could feel it – her legs untangled and she slipped inside her knickers. Just one light stroke elicited a full body shudder. She closed her eyes and pictured a handsome torso... and a hand, two hands... hands that slid down her body, and up again to squeeze her breasts...
That’s it. That’s all it took. Her body twisted and her mouth fell open. She felt like she’d been struck by lightning.

Sunday progressed like a drive over rough terrain in her grandfather’s old, decrepit Morris Minor. By the time the sun set, Hermione felt rattled, exhausted, and a little sickly.

After a warm shower to recuperate and banish sleep, she left her room in a rush. Her satchel bounced against her leg as she skipped down the stairs and across the common room, and then twined around her when she stopped suddenly and spun, as her name was called out.

“Yes?” she asked Theo, performing a quick and hopefully discrete examination of her shirt. He shuffled over to her with a bit of trepidation, pulling at his scarf’s hold around his neck. “You’re going to the library, yeah?” he asked, “To meet Draco?” “To study arithmancy,” she amended. “With Draco?” “...Yes.”
He nodded, biting the inside of his cheek. There was a deal of undeniable restlessness in his conduct. So she asked, “What’s the matter?” “Go easy on him,” he muttered. “What – what do you mean?” Theo huffed, and ran a hand through his hair. “He just got back from Azkaban a short while ago. He’ll be a bit... probably very... edgy. Maybe even prattish. Let it slide, alright? Please.” She swallowed and pulled up her sleeves. “Okay.” “Seriously,” he pressed, “You have a way of phrasing things in a way that – I mean – just – go easy on him.” “I said I would, didn’t I?” She pulled down her sleeves. “Yeah, all right. Good.” “Theo?” She pulled up one sleeve. “Hm?” “Why don’t you ever go with him? You’ve always said Lucius was something of a father to you.” He half-smiled, but it was utterly cheerless. “He blames me for Draco’s defection, his supposed betrayal. Which is fine, honestly. At least that means he’s borderline cordial around him.” He clicked his tongue before Hermione could say anything more, and gently pushed her towards the door. “Go on. Off with you.” So she went.

Of course Theo was the impetus behind Draco’s apostasy. One moment he was pulling her into an
alcove, commanding her to ensure Theo’s safety... and the next he was taking down his own
comrade-in-arms at Bill and Fleur’s wedding, shoving information into Lupin’s hands...
Hermione stopped just short of the library and pulled in a deep breath.  
Stuttering again, Granger? Shit, you’re a dreadful conversationalist.
The moment came back to her in a Technicolor flashback: His scornful, vexing smirk and his
duplicity.  
Except it wasn’t – he wasn’t –

Another deep breath, and she entered the library.

He was sitting at their usual table. Looking up as soon as she emerged into his line of sight, he gave
her a curt nod and rifled through his stack of parchment while she got settled. He continued to rifle
long after she was ready, her books out, her quill in the inkpot, her arms daintily crossed. He was
frowning, not deeply, but in a preoccupied way. His sleeves were down and buttoned.  
She had to clear her throat twice to get him to look at her.  
“Hello. Shall we get started?” she smiled.

What was she doing? This kind of fluttery pleasantness was bound to aggravate him as much as
open antagonism. Tone it down, you twit.

There it was: He scowled. “Sure.”

“You know,” she said, smoothening her perfectly smooth parchment, “I remembered another
delightfully hilarious book that you simply must read.”
“Is that so,” he droned tonelessly.
“Oh yes,” she blabbered on, “Three Men in a Boat. I’ll warn you against reading it in public; you
might end up making an absolute fool of yourself.”
...Much like I am at this moment.
He oozed disinterest. And yet she blathered away – “Indeed. You should read it.”
“Okay.”
“You really should–” Oh god Hermione, shut up– “Right away.”
“Right away,” he repeated dully, lackadaisically, frown still in place.
“Yes, because, you know... it’s all a part of my plan.”
“Plan.”

How had his expression not changed at all?

“Yes, my clever, diabolical plan to sabotage you!”

The longer he kept looking at her like that, the shorter her life expectancy got.

“Like you’d claimed before. That I – that I was sabotaging your future using literature. Trying to
get you to fail.”
He didn’t even blink as he said, “Right.”

She picked up her quill and printed ARITHMANCY across the top of her page, just so she
wouldn’t have to look at him anymore.

“I asked Vector for some equations for practice, since we’ve gone through the entire text book and
past papers,” Malfoy divulged, and dropped a long scroll between them. “They’re supposedly
extremely challenging – here’s the answer sheet.”
And he put down another scroll.
“All right,” Hermione mumbled.
He hadn’t been wrong – the equations were extremely challenging. Hermione had to vanish away her work three times before arriving at a plausible answer, which when tallied against the answer sheet, turned out to be completely off beam.

“How?!?” she hissed.

She combed over her calculations, redid them, and tried a different method; nothing worked.

“What the hell?”

“Shut up, Granger,” Malfoy ticked her off.

“This doesn’t make sense!” she fumed.

“What doesn’t make sense?”

That’s when she noticed he’d managed to cover a good foot and a half of parchment. She tried to lean over and have a proper look, but with a flick of his wand he turned the sheet over.

“Hey!” she exclaimed, “I was just trying to—”

“Copy my work?”

“No! Just trying to see if you’ve got the right answer.”

“Of course I’ve got the right answer,” he chided with a curl of his lip.

“But how?”

“What do you mean how? They’re quite straightforward, not challenging at all.”

Hermione’s airways were closing. “Not challenging?” she squeaked.

“No.” He was regarding her like she’d vomited all over the table.

“How many have you done?”

“Four.”

“Four?!?!?”

She peered at her calculations closely, with her nose nearly touching the parchment. Yet, she couldn’t fathom what she’d done wrong, what she’d missed. She skipped over to the next one – off by four integers – ugh, fine, once more – off by four integers – fuck this – again – OFF BY FOUR –

She skipped to the third.

She got it completely wrong.

“What is this absolute rubbish?!” she snarled, throwing her quill down.

“Granger, are you quite alright?”

He was just sitting there with his stone cold icy frowny sodding nonchalance like a smug equation solving supercilious patronising knobhead............ She was supposed to go easy on him. Bletch.

“How,” she ground out, “Are you managing to solve any of these?”

He didn’t answer. Hermione watched incredulously as he thrust his belongings into his bag and stood up.

“Where are you going?”

“Supper. Theo might have a stroke if we don’t show up.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I’ve figured these out!”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

“Malfoy, wait,” she beseeched, “Please.”

Sighing, he placed his palms on the table and leaned forward, presenting her with the mien of a persecuted man.

“Could I please have a look at your work?”

“No.”

“Oh, come on!”

“Not a chance,” he quipped.
“Why not?!?” she wailed, “I haven’t solved a single equation!”
“You probably have.”
“No, I haven’t! The answer sheet—”
“Is bogus,” he cut in, “Bullshit. I wrote down random numbers under the table while you were rambling on about that book.”

Hermione’s heart stopped beating and sank to her stomach. Her lungs deflated.

“What,” she quavered. Finally, her expression felt as blank as his. “What?”
“Do you need me to repeat what I said,” he enquired lightly.
Her temples where pounding. “Why would you... Why?”

He watched her closely, eyes roaming across her face. He tapped his right index finger against the table twice, before pushing himself into an upright position.
“Don’t you see?” he said, “It’s all a part of my diabolical plan to sabotage you.”

Then he grinned. Suddenly. Blindingly. And he left.

Unfortunately, not a single bookshelf suffered a bizarre lapse of basic physics, and he was able to escape without getting lethally crushed. She watched his dapper frame and foul hair till they disappeared from her sight, and she was SEETHING.
She wanted to throw things (at him,) set things on fire (and throw them at him,) curse very loudly (at him)... She blistered under the influence of that dangerous cocktail of fury until all she could do was put a hand over her eyes and dissolve into hysterical laughter.

Anthony was the first one to botch his Repleo Draught. Rather than stirring in octopus powder slowly, he dumped in the entire amount at once. His potion curdled, and Slughorn tut-tutted bumptiously.

“Impatience never pays, Mr. Goldstein.”

Not two days later, Susan messed up, through no fault of her own. She was only being an upstanding head girl, comforting a young boy who’d had a total breakdown; his mother had been killed during the war.
So as it was, by the time Susan got to the dungeons to add dew to her potion and lower the heat, it was already burnt. Slughorn was duly sympathetic, but said that there wasn’t enough time for her to start over.

Twenty-seven days to go. Permanent agitation and pins-and-needles.

That afternoon, in Transfiguration, McGonagall placed her hand on Hermione’s desk and said, “Transfigure my hand into a paw.”
“Beg your p–pardon, Professor?” she stuttered with wide eyes.
“Are you not confident in your grasp of human transfiguration, Ms. Granger?”

She was. She absolutely was – she could perform it wandlessly. But this was Minerva McGonagall’s hand. How could she possibly be blasé about it?

“What kind of paw?” she whispered, “Cat, dog... lion, tiger, bear...”

McGonagall’s mouth thinned. “Surprise me.”

She went with lion because she hoped, thoughtlessly, that it would flatter the stern woman. However, she didn’t seem remotely gratified when Hermione was successful. All she said was, “Very well done,” in a crisp tone and turned her paw back into a hand.

She went from person to person, demanding they transfigure her hand, and witnessed various degrees of success. Her students’ reactions ranged from consternation to sheer terror. And for whatever reason, everybody decided that a lion’s paw was the way to go; with the exception of Padma, (who went with tiger), Ginny (wolf), Ernie (bear), and Draco (rabbit).

(“Mind if I cut it off and keep it for good luck?” Theo, who was sitting next to him piped up. McGonagall shot him a withering glare.)

There were paws with missing claws, paws that were too large or too small, too hand-like, too amorphous blob-like. These instances were followed by a dry, “Do practice, please.”

Finally, she stopped before Dean who’d been cowering at the very back of the classroom. “Professor,” he whimpered, “I really don’t think this is a good idea.”

She disagreed, he insisted, and the dispute carried on for a few minutes, before McGonagall barked an order in her most unyielding tone. Dean’s wand was raised in a flash.

Another flash later, McGonagall’s skin had peeled off her hand like a banana. A chorus of ill-suppressed screams ripped across the room.

“SHIT! HOLY SHIT!” Dean yawped, “I’m sorry! Professor, I’m so sorry!”

She pulled back her skin with a mere flex of her fingers. “Calm yourself, Mr. Thomas. I will not give you detention for failing at this task, but I certainly will if you swear in my presence.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry.”

She looked down her nose at him, then strode back to the front of the classroom.

“I suggest,” she added over her shoulder, “A little more practice.”

The whole week was a whirlwind, having to sit for mock tests in all her lessons. There wasn’t much to feel discouraged about: Her runes essay was well received, her shield charms were impenetrable, and all her arithmantic equations were spot on. That final accomplishment won her a wink from Draco, which was one of the most baffling things she’d ever had to recover from.

On Friday evening, she reluctantly agreed to help Dean practice human transfiguration. “I have to get to my potion in exactly an hour,” she warned him.

He set about trying to transfigure a very unwilling Neville’s hair red. After about half an hour, his apprehensive, half-arsed attempts had bequeathed nothing more than a vague copper tone to the locks.

“Stop faffing, Dean!” she urged, “Put some force behind it!”

“Yeah,” seconded someone from the small audience they’d amassed, “Stop being such a wet little wimp!”
Dean jabbed his wand right into Neville’s hair; it turned a lurid shade of magenta.

“Close enough,” Hermione sighed, “I’m sorry Dean, I have to go.”

She ignored his groan and Neville’s cry of, “Oi! At least fix my hair before you—”

Blessed peace enveloped her once outside. She entered the potions’ classroom with ten minutes to spare, and found Draco seated behind his cauldron, with a clicking timer and a pile of minced anjelica at hand.

“Cutting it a bit fine, aren’t you?” he greeted.

“No,” she averred and dashed into the supply cupboard.

It didn’t take her long to crush the required number of stalks, and as she waited for the timer to go off, she wondered, “Where the hell is Padma?”

“She isn’t coming.”

“Why ever not?”

**Ding!** – The timer sounded.

She measured out one ounce of minced anjelica and tipped it into her potion. It instantly turned a milky green colour. Draco set the timer again, and then sat back even more at ease than before, propping his legs up on the stool next to his. Hermione got comfortable too; they had thirty-two minutes to kill, after all.

“Why isn’t Padma here?” she asked again. He didn’t reply at once, taking time to conjure a cushioned backrest for his functional, standard-issue stool.

“She is,” he eventually disclosed, “Under the impression that we are to add the anjelica tomorrow.”

“Oh no!” Hermione lamented, “But hold on. If you knew she had it wrong, why didn’t you correct her?”

“Why would I?” he challenged.

“Because it’s the decent, sporting thing to do!”

“Pff.”

“She wants to be a healer, Draco. Successfully brewing this potion would have helped her prospects immensely!”

“Would you want a healer who can’t even follow basic instructions?”

Hermione crossed her arms and glared. “She isn’t a healer yet! She’s going to learn—”

“Yeah, and now she knows the importance of reading instructions closely. I’ve taught her a valuable lesson. You should be commending me.”

“You’re an absolute bastard.”

He sniggered, tipping his head and causing his hair to sweep back. “Now,” he remarked, “I just have to wait for you to mess up.”

“I never mess up.”

“We’ll see.”

She had to be losing her mind, because whenever he was like this – playful, teasing, full of humour – she felt squeamish and something akin to **shy**. She picked up her measuring spoon and began carving runes in the anjelica that remained on her chopping board.

“I considered becoming a healer for three days,” said Draco offhandedly. She smiled at her rune art. “Just three days?”

“Yeah. Then I remembered I hate blood and dis—”

“Only certain kind of blood, right?”
He stopped talking. Her squeamishness took on a different quality. Well, crap. She peeked up and met his slightly stunned glower with a sinking heart. She didn’t want to fight; hadn’t the inclination nor the patience for it. Fights meant investing time in disdain, meant dealing with sneery, caustic, irascible Draco. So she bit her lip over a smile, puckered her brow, and shrugged wryly. Like, *aha, just kidding, gettid?*

His brows shot up over wide eyes. He shook his head, dispelling a short disbelieving and winded laugh.

“So you hate blood?” she rejoined with a controlled smirk.

He took another moment to speculate, biting the corner of his lip. “Yeah. All blood. Every kind. Can’t stomach it.”

“That might come in the way of healing, I suppose.” She rested her folded arms on the table and leaned forward.

“Diseased skin makes me ill.”

“You are such a delicate little flower.”

That amused him for some reason, and he chuckled. He then leaned forward too.

“They’re called refined sensibilities, Granger. Why do you think I abhorred Weasley from the day I first beheld him?”

“Ron’s skin isn’t diseased!” she remonstrated.

He’d stolen her smirk and he wore it with pride. “Are you sure, though?”

“Yes–”

“Really sure?”

“You’re an id–”

He leaned in further. “It’s a good thing you two never got together. What if you’d caught his dreadful affliction? Such a terrible shame it would have been if he’d marred your–”

There was a thunderous crash from outside the room, followed by a stream of howled oaths. Hermione and Draco exchanged a startled glance.

Theo came hobbling in, bent awkwardly as he clutched his leg and dragged his bag behind him.

“What happened?” Hermione cried, jumping off her stool.

“Fucking tripped, didn’t I?” he grumbled, “Here’s a lesson, don’t leave your shoelaces untied.”

“Thank you,” she drawled tartly, “But I’ve known that since I was about five.”

He stuck his tongue out at her. She struggled to not reciprocate.

Now that she knew he was alright, she felt a hot spike of irritation. He always had *impeccable* timing, didn’t he? Could he not have delayed his fall by three seconds? She glanced at Draco, and he was smiling slyly at Theo, his previous sentence clearly forgotten. *...If he’d marred your...? Marred your?????*

“What brings you here, Theodore?” he probed.

“Boredom, Dracodore.”

“Where’s Luna gone off to?” Hermione huffed.

Theo looked at her a tad quizzically. “Magical Creatures. And Thomas and Longbottom are creating an awful ruckus in the common room. I couldn’t stand it.”

The timer went off then, and Hermione and Draco tipped their remaining anjelica into their respective cauldrons. The potion within glowed a perfect mint green, and they quickly covered them with a lid.
“Is it done?” Theo asked.
“Nearly,” said Draco, “Needs to simmer for ninety-eight hours.”
“Then we can go eat?”

Theo made them walk very slowly, so it took an immoderately long time for them to get to the Great Hall. They parted at the door, and Hermione walked stiffly to her table. She felt dissatisfied and it was annoying. As annoying as Neville’s reproachful look, blaming her for whatever silliness he’d had to endure earlier. She flopped down on the bench and helped herself to some chicken. After two bites, she rubbed her unfreckled cheek and sighed.

As another Saturday morning rolled in, Hermione vowed to only wear thick black t-shirts (reinforced with a water-repelling charm) while running.

The rising sun, the glossy lake, the trees in summer bloom were all mere blips in her disconnected reverie. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the runes she’d examined the night before. Delphi’s prophesies rang in her ears in Bellatrix’s low rasp.

But also, the thing was, surely he thought her skin was at least somewhat nice, if it was liable to get marred.

If the previous week had zipped by, the one that followed was a veritable blur. She barely remembered anything that had happened. Did she even remember the things she’d read, the things she’d purportedly mugged up?

She stopped dead on her way to the library to go over the characteristics of motile plants.

Ginny detained her, and stood persistently in her path, imploring her to come outside.

“Look! Just look at how lovely the weather is!”
“I don’t care—”
“I’m not asking you to get on a broom, you ninny. Come soak up some sun, get some fresh air.”

No no no no. Hermione put both her feet down. Ginny stomped off sulkily, and Hermione went on her way with no regret. She needed to concentrate fully, and wasn’t going to allow anyone or anything to mar her concentration.

The NEWTs were seventeen days away.
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