Strange Attractors

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Strange Attractors

by Mistakes_and_Experiments, Orange et Blue Morality (Mistakes_and_Experiments)

Summary

Unspeakable Granger wakes up with missing memories in Hogwarts...in 1942. Hermione might not remember much, but she knew that even post-Voldemort, there were many wannabe dark lords she and her friends had to fight against. The world wasn't automatically sunshine and roses just because they've defeated Voldemort.

Also, go back? What go back? If she doesn't even know how she got here with all the wounds she had, then there's really no guarantee that a safe way to jump forward exists!

Yet the possibilities that are open to her...

if she could change the wizarding world half a century earlier, maybe they'd be more prepared against dark lords in the future. Perhaps a better world for the friends she'd left. With this in mind, Hermione Curie (Granger) sets out to use her field healer and master arithmancer abilities to the fullest (if she had to invent a couple of things earlier than they actually happened in her old future, so be it). Not to mention that in her very-biased-opinion, the wizarding world needs to be dragged out of its old prejudices, kicking and screaming if necessary. But who is that particular prefect? Her mind itches at seeing him…
Introductory Author’s Note:

I wrote this to entertain my sister, who is a doctor, currently taking maternal leave and is bored out of her mind when she’s not feeding the guzzling sprog. That meant she’s also available to provide instant feedback for at least half of her waking hour. Also, I’m in an in-between hectic state right now and haven’t quite settled down. Moving to my grandparents’ city to help look after them plus considering grad school there. Life is a bit crazy right now.

The closest thing to medical knowledge I have is from reading her textbooks and books of weird medical cases—mainly so she could discuss gross cases with me and I could stump her with medical mysteries. The most recent time I did that intensively was when I was helping her get through her biochemistry class years ago (she’s not exactly into basic science). Any remaining medical mistakes are mine rather than hers.

More Author’s Note:

Ingredients (Most of them, at least):
- Unspeakable Hermione
- Nuanced view on good and evil.
- Conversations, character development.
- A metric Eff Ton of Magical Theory and Related Worldbuilding. Seriously, I'm not kidding. This is why the story isn't even primarily romance, people.
- Politicking (look, it's one of the tags).

**Story Structure (in case you're looking for convenient pauses where there's guaranteed to be no cliffhangers):**

- First Arc: Chapters 1-29
- Second Arc: Chapters 30-62
- Intermezzo: Chapters 63-64
- Third Arc: Chapters 65-? (Currently being worked on)

**Notes on chronology:** Hermione drops in at the first few days of September and is unconscious for at least two weeks. She gets out of being an invalid around the end of the first/second week of October. First arc does not have timeskips because apparently I really enjoy writing in breadth and depth in terms of details and worldbuilding. Time flows faster in the second arc and I guarantee you that I will use time skips in the third arc and beyond because otherwise I'll never even finish one chronological, in-story year.
Chapter Summary

In which we begin with the stereotypical game protagonist – the amnesiac hero. There is, of course, a slight twist to this set up.

Chapter Notes

Notes on writing style: It has come to my notice that I have my own idiosyncrasies when I wrote this. First, I sometimes contract not only he is/she is into he's/she's, but I also contract he was/she was into he's/she's. Same with they were. Odds are, there is at least one they were that I contracted into they're.

I didn't notice my own idiosyncrasies until someone complained about the past/present tense mix-up. My first reaction was "what the hell are you talking about??" Because I didn't feel I had any. It took some analysing before I realised where the misunderstanding occurred. So, now I'm giving a heads up about it; just in case you can't stop thinking of all those contractions to be in the present tense and it ruins your reading experience, well, better stop now.

George Bernard Shaw gets a pass for dropping apostrophes altogether in his contractions (he writes don't as dont), while Lewis Carroll adds extra apostrophes (can't is written as ca'n't, would not is contracted into wo'n't). I don't think my habit is any weirder than theirs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~ First Arc – Adaptation ~
01 Waking Up with a Headache

The intense migraine seemed to be trying to pulp her head like an overripe orange.

Hermione sneezed at the dry leaf that was stuck too close to her nostrils and tried to pull herself up from her prone position – she had been lying on her stomach when she woke up. She groaned as her head complained about the changing positions with a more intense hammering. The chilled air raised goosebumps on her skin. It was dark out here, she could feel dirt under her knee. Even without knowing that she didn’t have the habit of sleeping outdoors, she had the gut feeling that something was wrong.

Her right hand had started feeling the ground around her for her wand. Fortunately for her, she found it quickly. The easy thrum of its resonance with her magic was comforting.

The unease wasn’t just a feeling at the back of her neck—she had become so attuned to it that it was closer to a sixth sense by now. It had kept her alive through the war, through the insurrections after that and even against the newer dark lords. She wasn’t about to ignore it now.

The witch stayed as still as possible, silently casting a spell to augment her hearing. There were no loud steps of a group rushing in her direction. She heard the hoot of an owl some distance away, of little feet scurrying up and down tree barks. There was the fleet footed skip of a fox on a hunt too.

Hermione sighed in relief and cancelled the spell. She let the scent of the forest calm her down while she pulled herself up slowly. Her head was still killing her and her lower back the kind of ache that felt as if someone had just drive kicked it and then stomped with steel boots for good measure.

I don’t think there’s any broken bones.

She tried to stand up and faltered when her left ankle failed her. A check showed her it was dislocated. Hermione found a convenient tree to lean against, held her knee carefully and then pushed it back in. The movements felt easy and familiar, something she’d done often enough that she’d bothered to excel at it. The pain sucked, but she could work with it. A minor Episkey should reduce inflammation for the moment, right? Right.
Besides, she wasn’t in any sort of emergency where she needed to pour magic to heal it immediately because she needed to start running soon. It could wait.

Hermione stood up again.

She ran a diagnostic spell for bone integrity, just in case, because fractures could be easily missed. Glowing green letters floated and told her what she needed to know.

“Ha!”

No fractures either, though hmm, apparently, she needed to up her calcium intake. That could be dealt with later. It would have been annoying if she had to put her left ankle in a cast. The aches she was feeling spoke of a lot of bruises.

She grimaced. Her memory was spotty. She couldn’t really recall what was the last thing she was doing. The memory eluded her the more she tried to remember. What with her throbbing headache, she guessed that she’d probably knocked her head hard. A concussion was possible. She needed to get out of the forest and find some help quickly.

There! There were lights in that direction. That was surely the way out. She would walk in that direction—well, limp in that direction seems to be more accurate, but she wasn’t complaining.

Had there been a fight? An ambush?

She unconsciously gripped the wand in her hand tighter before forcing herself to relax. But why was she alone? It didn’t make any sense. If they had been fighting, she should be with others—she wasn’t foolish enough to think she could tackle a group of blood fanatics or new dark zealots alone. She should have woken up in the hospital, right? If she had been ambushed and somehow lost (a part of her snorted in disbelief at that—she hadn’t been an easy picking in a while), she would’ve been dead.

….or worse.

(Who were these ‘blood fanatics’ and ‘new dark zealots’? Why were these people, with these names, the first thing that came to her mind? She could not recall. Why not, well, Death Eaters? She’d spent her school years aiding Harry facing them, right? Her head felt light and weird…)

The forest didn’t seem to be a particularly old growth. The trees were loose and they slowly continue to get looser as Hermione walked on and finally left the tree line behind her.

The distant lights were apparently those of a castle.

Hermione shook her head, uncertain if she was dreaming or not. But no, the vision stayed, the numerous lights on the windows twinkled their welcome. Even the sky was perfectly cloudless, an infinite velvet bed with infinite diamonds upon them. She could even see the Milky Way, serene and majestic in a way that you can’t see in the smog-filled skies of London. Hermione’s breath caught at her throat.

“Hogwarts? I can’t be at Hogwarts.” She protested to no one in particular.

There was a battle, (battles?) Even if the castle survived, surely it would not look this unscarred, as serene as an ideal sanctuary?

The perfect scene she’d found herself at was marred by the sudden rage growing inside her. She remembered vague outlines but nothing precise. No! She knew why Hogwarts shouldn’t look like
this. She can recall the battle (battles?). It was just there, at the edge of her mind…

The pain at her temples pulsed with her rising heartbeat and she dropped her face into her hand. No, she was not helpless. This was just a minor setback. She can get around this, yes? She was Hermione Granger, she’ll always find a way—

That twinge of oddness again, this time at her last name. It was her name, yes, but it no longer sat quite right with her, as if it was part of her but there were other histories she was missing. She was getting sick at these holes in her memory. Being Hermione, she channelled it into something more productive; finding answers. At the very least, she can borrow the Headmaster’s fireplace and floo back home—

(Wait, where’s home? Why can’t she recall any images, any feelings of where home is??)

The pain at the back of her waist was getting harder to ignore. She was gritting her teeth and focused on moving forward so much that she didn’t notice the drops of blood she was trailing. No, I’ll floo to the Ministry. She can always floo to the Ministry, she thought quickly, pressing down the rising panic. She was, after all, Unspeakable Granger—

(That uncertain twinge set off again—).

Unspeakable Hermione. She was Unspeakable Hermione.

(Shel held on to these solid pieces of her identity like an amulet, a lucky charm).

Well, at least she didn’t somehow forget Hogwarts. Considering that she’d spent her formative years there, under life-threatening conditions, it would be ridiculous.

Hermione stopped about halfway from the castle’s doors when her left ankle throbbed with pain. She sighed, sat down and after a vague accounting of what she was wearing (why was she wearing a tie? Was there a Ministry event, or something? Never mind, it could be useful) She wrapped her tie around the ankle to support the joint. She picked up her shoe to put it back on.

She had expected her comfortable and combat-tested boots. What she found was something else. Hermione hadn’t paid attention when she took it off, but she did now. Why would she be wearing mary-janes for field work? Wait, perhaps the field work had been an unexpected surprise. But who was responsible for the dress code for the last Ministry meeting? Umbridge? She scoffed.

As she put the shoe on with some choice complaints and mutterings, it crossed her mind that it might have been a budget meeting. Hermione groaned. No unspeakable she’d ever met liked the Ministry’s budget meetings. The running department joke was that they have to ‘play normal’ and not scare the comptrollers. She still remembered the first time she heard the Department Head’s speech.

“That means formal office wear, everyone! No project is to be worked on during that day—they must be shelved and contained. I repeat, shelved and contained.”

He sent a warning look around the room, and there was no shortage of people who looked away or ducked. As usual, there were always the more egregious cases.

“That means your lab, Malina Moreau—no one needed to see what you managed to raise from the bones found in some ancient ruin. I don’t care if you’ve managed to recreate the Chupacabra! This also means that cloud assistant you were working with should be bottled, Neptune O’Neil. Don’t leave it to drift around the common room to rain on unsuspecting people! We also can’t have
improvements to the coffee machine that is not Ministry approved—take machine additions off and remove the spells. You can all put them back later.”

A collective groan went around the meeting room at that. Never mind that half the room was cloaked and hooded, and some with genderless voices. The prospect mutual suffering in the wake of the dearth of good coffee made them all human.

“And for Merlin’s sake, the next person who leaves some mock-up, some joke version of the Lemarchand puzzle box for the bean counters to find for shits and giggles will be our next liaison to the Budget Office! Do I make myself clear?”

Hermione couldn’t help a small smile at the thought. The Unspeakables were unaccountably weird—they would be the first to admit that to anyone asking, but the Department of Mysteries were one of the few that strictly kept themselves away from politics and were more interested in the greater workings of magic. Granted, the few psychos the department manage to generate in its lengthy history were also far scarier than Umbridge. Yet the department also took the responsibility of taking them down too—unlike other parts of the Ministry itself, where people like Umbridge infested the place by the dozens. And then we have people like Cornelius Fudge.

She had just passed the castle’s doors, the warm air wrapping around her like a blanket. Her energy was flagging down. It didn’t make sense for a short walk. Why the bone deep tiredness that made her wish for a nice, clean bed to just fall down and sleep on?

The cold she was feeling wasn’t just physical now.

Hermione had figured out why it was familiar—this was the sort of tiredness that came after a battle, the exhaustion experienced after throwing spells left and right. Was there an attack on the Ministry? Was there somehow an attack at the heart of the Department of Mystery? (She was now fully aware that the Prophecy Hall was not close to the more well-defended and well-staffed offices.)

But if that was true, why am I alone, at Hogwarts?

She can’t remember. She can’t remember anything at all, what she had for dinner, her last lunch. Who sat at the cubicle next to her at work? Wait, does she even have a cubicle? No, and she didn’t have a mere table in a large open office set either. She was not that junior, not anymore. Yet when she tried to summon what her desk looks like she couldn’t see it in her mind’s eye. She can’t—

Hermione leaned back against the wall, took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She was going to regulate her breathing carefully. Her right hand had gone to her left wrist and didn’t find the emergency teleportation bracelet that had been standard issue for Ministry employees for a while (for a year? Two years? She can’t remember. Why can’t she—)

She was going to be fine. She didn’t have time to panic. Headmaster’s Office, she convinced herself. All I have to do is to get to the headmaster’s office, ask the headmaster to call people through floo and figure out what’s going on. Yes, I can do that. Then, if the situation is contained I can floo back straight to the Ministry.

If the situation wasn’t contained…no, she’s not going to think about otherwise yet. She didn’t need to give her creative and knowledgeable mind free-rein to run worst case scenarios. In that direction lies madness.

“Hello? Why are you out after curfew?”
The female voice was polite, even if overly-inquisitive. Hermione turned and saw a tall blonde. The teenager had a sweet face and a Hufflepuff tie, and she radiated order and goodness. Even from this distance, she could recognise the head girl badge pinned at her collar.

Hermione didn’t know how she looked like, but it must have been terrible for the girl to gasp and rush straight towards her.

“By Morgana and Circe! What happened?”

‘I have no idea’ doesn’t sound like a good answer to give. “It’s that bad, is it? I’m trying to get to the Headmaster’s office.”

“Who did this—”

“Whoever it is, it’s too dangerous for students to deal with,” Hermione had to stop her before her helpfulness got her killed. She was all for getting less people killed these days, especially when she had no idea of their skill level. Back when she was in Hogwarts, her year mates had been gearing up for war, studying spells beyond the curriculum. Even now, she considered that she’d been lucky—that everyone she knew had been lucky.

She wasn’t sure what present Hogwarts was like.

“Don’t you think the headmaster and the teachers would be better equipped to deal with them?”

The head girl saw the way Hermione limped and nodded, making up her mind. “You’re right, come on. Let me help you.”

“Thank you.”

The girl was insistent on getting Hermione to put an arm across her shoulders and lean her weight more. It was easier to agree than to argue, so she did. This was how they made their way in relatively comfortable silence across Hogwarts.

That was, until the head girl spoke again.

“By the way, what year are you?”

Hermione blinked. The question was so absurd that she had to turn and stare at the Hufflepuff in disbelief.

“What year?”

“You’re not in the seventh year, otherwise I’d have recognised you,” the blonde replied easily.

Hermione was about to mouth a rebuttal before she closed her mouth again to think. No. Did Malina slip her that de-aging potion she was working on? (She was working on eternal youth, of course, but a non-toxic, working de-aging potion wasn’t a bad intermediary goal). If she did, Hermione was going to slip her some after she adjusted the dose; let her see how much working in her lab with the height of a thirteen-year-old was going to cramp her style. She’d be complaining by the second day, much less the whole week it was probably going to take to fix.

“I’m Hermione,” she answered. The head girl was unimpressed.

(The possible scenario that flashed in her mind was actually Malina feeding her the potion while they were hunkering down in a room, wishing her good luck before someone else sent her to
Hogwarts, possibly via portkey. Then, the doors of the room would fall and her companions attacked…)

Hermione pushed any unpleasant images down. Her overactive imagination needs to shut up.

“And what house would you be from?”

“None, because I don’t go to Hogwarts,” she answered. She tacked on more words for plausible deniability when she saw the head girl’s expression, “yet. I’m not registered yet.”

The less the kid knew about her, the less danger she’d be in.

“Really? But you’re already wearing our uniform—trust me, I’m very familiar with Beauxbatons’ and Durmstrang’s, and this is definitely Hogwarts.”

Hermione couldn’t help looking down by reflex. Her skirt was a few centimetres below the knee, of heavy twill and in a style that even Hermione’s eyes could see as old and unfashionable. She was surprised she hadn’t heard any uproar from the denizens of Hogwarts at the uniform change to a dowdier one. Her mary-janes were clearly a perfect fit to the outfit.

It was clear that she was wearing a Hogwarts uniform.

A feeling of dread grew in her stomach. Who gave her a change of clothes? Why the need for subterfuge? It was as if she was sent to hide her, out of all things. But that was ridiculous. She was perfectly fine as an Unspeakable. Merlin save anyone who challenged Hermione Granger’s ability to defend herself. She’d acquitted herself on the field for too often.

*What on earth happened?*

‘-

The trip up towards the Headmaster’s Office was not friendly to her migraine. She was sure there was a herd of hippopotami stomping on her skull.

“Urgh.”

“I’m sorry. I really am. It’s just a little bit more.”

Hermione didn’t want to spare more energy just to answer. She merely shut her eyes and walked. Occasionally, her right hand massaged her temples—her wand had been slipped back to its holster on her forearm. (She was glad it was still there). She didn’t even open her eyes when the head girl opened the door.

“What brings you to my office Ms. Abbott—oh dear.”

“We have an emergency, Headmaster. Hermione here needs medical help.”

Hermione opened her eyes, and the first thing that she saw was Armando Dippet, sitting on the headmaster’s desk.

*That doesn’t even make sense!* A logical part of her brain noted. She was sure she’d heard that Professor Dippet was dead.

Her wounds, her tiredness, her *headache* was taxing. The absurdity of being at Hogwarts, in a Hogwarts uniform, was eclipsed by Dippet’s presence.
“I…how…”

“Miss? Miss, what happened? What’s your name?” His tone was gentle and soothing.

Hermione’s energy truly ran out and shock finally managed to set in. Her knees buckled and Hermione lost consciousness on the floor of the headmaster’s office. She didn’t hear the head girl’s yelp or Headmaster Dippet knocking a knick-knack or two from his shelves in his hurry to reach her.

Hermione was in a comfortable bed and she didn’t feel like waking up. She opened her eyes slowly.

She didn’t know what it spoke of her Hogwarts years that she could recognise Hogwarts infirmary by the pattern of spots on its ceiling.

The air was cool, sterile and all too familiar. The quietness was nice.

“Ah, I see you’re awake—no, don’t try to sit up yet. Just lie down for as long as you like. You’ve been out for a little over a day.” The nurse bustled to her left. Hermione glanced at the other beds and found them empty—which was how it should be. A school should be safe.

“I’m alright.”

The nurse’s face was unfamiliar, her hair a lively copper shade and she would be motherly if she wasn’t also so young. She couldn’t be older than twenty-five. The nurse smiled, as if humouring her.

“I’m sure you could still be better. I’ll find you some breakfast.”

Hermione pulled herself up to a sitting position anyway, especially since her throat was parched. It wasn’t Madam Pomfrey, but a part of her that knew Headmaster Dippet as dead also reminded her that Madam Pomfrey was dead. But…

_Alright, so we have Headmaster Dippet in Hogwarts again. How did that happen?_

As far as she knew, death was quite permanent. There were some theoretical methods to use to reverse death (it was the Department of Mysteries’ business to know, after all), but no one had found a practical application of those methods that worked. Besides, if you could resurrect someone properly, why choose Armando Dippet? The fanatics would have chosen Voldemort or Grindelwald, and a significant number of the DMLE would have chosen Dumbledore.

She poured herself a glass of water from the jug and saw the newspaper on the side table.

It was the Daily Prophet, as usual, though it was interesting to see the name set with more flourishes and curlicues than she was familiar with. She picked it up and scanned through the news—deaths from a violent attack at a home. Hmm. Possibly related to whatever attack she had survived last night. She quickly skimmed the others too.

‘…many Departments in the Ministry had disagreed with Minister Spencer-Moon’s suggestions of the application of a generalist competitive examination for civil service, following the guidelines found in the Northcote-Trevelyan Report…’

Hermione snorted. Entrance exam for ministry employees? The purebloods were going to have a cow and block the motion in the Wizengamot if it meant half their kids won’t pass. But why was
the Minister’s name unfamiliar? Never mind. Besides, it would be more useful to make sure that different departments actually have the same standards first before standardising the exam. Also, standardising wages throughout the UK? That was a bad idea. Living in the City of London was more expensive than Leeds or Newcastle-upon-Tyne—whose standard of living would the wage be set against?

The Guild of Tailors and Seamstresses at Diagon Alley complained that something Must Be Done about this inexplicable shortage of good fabrics, pushing costs to rise and customers to complain. ‘After all,’ one spokesman for the guild said to the reporter, ‘If we’ve managed to overcome food difficulties by increasing and improving our wizarding farms, surely something similar can be arranged for the garment industry?’

Hermione paused. Something about it was so alien (what fabric shortage? She hadn’t heard about any fabric shortage until now!) And yet at the same time so familiar.

(‘overcome food difficulties’)  
(‘inexplicable shortage of good fabrics’)

She glanced back at the title. Daily Prophet. Saturday, 26th of September 1942.

The logical part of her worked lightning-quick, had figured out that the wizarding world was getting confounded by the shortage and rationing that the wartime muggle world was experiencing.

However, a larger part of her wanted to hyperventilate and dizziness had started to set in.

“Fuck it.”

’-

Hermione laid down on the bed again with both of her hands were covering her face, while trying to come up with a reasonable argument why she was seeing a living Dippet and a Daily Prophet from 1942. She rubbed her temples over the bandage. The seriousness of her wounds easily discounted any pranks. The fact that she hadn’t seen anyone she recognised was another.

But time travel is impossible...

Perhaps she was merely dreaming. Feverish and half dead as she was, was it a surprise? Maybe she was still face down in the forest. Maybe it wasn’t even the Forbidden Forest. But going down that assumption lies madness. She might end up being desperate enough to wake up to try to kill herself (hello, Inception!)—and what would happen if she was actually alive now? She’d be well and truly dead.

She can prepare to test it later, but it was better to continue as if she was indeed in 1942 (somehow) and looking as if she was Hogwarts-aged.

’-

The sound of the rolling food tray caught her attention first before the footsteps. Her hair felt sticky and weird. She would bet it was in an explosive cloud around her head. She scratched her forehead and inadvertently displaced the bandage there. Hermione shifted it back into place with a sigh.

“What’s your name, Dearie? I caught on that it was Hermione from dear Agatha, but she didn’t give me your last name.”
Hermione glanced up and smiled at the nurse. She can’t be Hermione Granger, then. The first name that crossed her mind was the scientist Marie Skłodowska. The only person to have ever won two Nobel prizes in two different fields. A tribute to the first hero of her childhood. Unfortunately, a foreign last name would only make her stand out more, so she picked up Marie’s married name instead.

“Curie, Ma’am. Hermione Curie, but please, just call me Hermione.”

“I’ll write it down now.” She glanced up and saw Hermione’s still waiting look.

“Oh, I’m Maggie Edelstein. Nurse at the Hogwarts Infirmary.” She grimaced slightly. “And traditionally, all the nurses at Hogwarts are matrons, so everyone addresses me as ‘Madam Edelstein’, never mind that it makes me feel so old.”

She couldn’t help a small giggle from escaping, at least before she closed her mouth abruptly. Maggie Edelstein only smiled in return.

“I can call you Nurse Edelstein, if you want?” Hermione offered.

“Please do—and thank you for that.”

“It’s no problem at all.”

Nurse Edelstein brought a tray of dinner over to Hermione. The tray, fortunately, had legs of their own so it could stand like a small table over her blanketed thighs. The nurse left to do some organising in the back room but was soon back to accompany Hermione, as there were no other patients in the infirmary. Hermione did her best to finish the food, no matter how bland it tasted to her tongue, because she was aware that she needed to eat enough to heal. At first, Hermione asked what she had been doing just to open up some small talk. Upon hearing the cures stocked in the infirmary and the ones that aren’t, she started asking questions about keeping an ice box.

“Some of the potions that can spoil quickly can be kept fresh for longer under low temperatures,”

“That’s a good idea!” Maggie was enthusiastic, “but wait, some potions are only stable at high temperatures.”

“Then you’d need thermoses for those,” Hermione replied. “Actually, thermoses could be used for lower temperatures too.”

“Thermoses?”

“You know, containers that can keep drinks hot for long periods?”

The nurse shook her head. “A vessel with a warming charm cast on it is not a good idea, as the charm itself can interfere with the magical properties of some ingredients.”

Hermione shook her head. She’d had to bite her lip to stop herself from interrupting. “No. It’s not a magical solution at all. It’s a vacuum flask. Um, do you have any paper and—” pen, she almost said, “—quill? I’ll draw it and explain.”

And so, the tray of food was removed back to the food trolley and the small table underneath it reused as a desk of sorts. Hermione drew a general cross section of what a thermos is like, and how between the inner walls and the outer one is a vacuum (or as near to vacuum as possible). This lack of matter meant there was virtually nothing that can conduct the heat outwards.
“But does it really work?”

“The muggles have been using it for years now, or even decades. I don’t remember when exactly they invented it, but it’s been a while. If it didn’t work, why would they keep using it all this time?”

Hermione knew she’d captured the Nurse’s interest now. She was glad to know the nurse wasn’t one of the more rabid muggle-haters.

Yet after a while, Maggie sighed. “Unfortunately, the Hogwarts Board might think it’s not a worthwhile expenditure. After all, why does a school infirmary need to be comprehensively stocked? They’d argue that it would be mostly Quidditch accidents that needs to be handled.”

She listened carefully before looking down her bruised and scratched arms. They were bandaged now, of course, and smelled of sweetly-scented herbs.

The brunette raised her arms to display them.

“Because of Grindelwald, Nurse Edelstein. His sympathisers are everywhere, even in England.”

The nurse paled. “Is that what happened, Hermione?”

I can’t remember. It was an echo that never stopped in her mind, one that she blocked out most of the time. I can’t remember, I can’t remember, I CAN’T REMEMBER. But of course, she didn’t say that.

Hermione shook her head. “I can’t…I can’t tell you anything yet. Not until I’ve finished speaking to the headmaster and Professor Dumbledore. But what I’m trying to say is that, just because Hogwarts has been safe all these years, it’s no guarantee that it will continue to be so.”

Dumbledore was here already, right? Her memory about Hogwarts in the 1940s was fuzzy, but she might as well gamble it.

Nurse Edelstein nodded. “You’re right, but you should rest first. I’ll tell the headmaster that you’re still recovering. In my opinion, you can keep recovering even until the day after tomorrow if you don’t feel like meeting them yet.”

“Thank you.”

'—

For all the soothing calm that Maggie Edelstein exuded around her, Hermione knew that it wasn’t the entire story of her own condition.

If it was the entire story, she wouldn’t have blood-red urine.

(haematuria, another voice inside her commented with a knowing nod.

Wait, why did she know that?)

'—

Nurse Edelstein managed to hold the headmaster back for a day, but after that she couldn’t hold back his enthusiasm. Hermione yelped when he entered because she had yet managed to corral her hair to something more manageable.
“Your papers have come through, Miss Hermione! I have no idea who sent them, but they’re here.”

What papers? She thought, but did not say. (Who sent her here and why?)

“May I see them, Professor?”

“Ah, here. I’m afraid it got caught in the rain—your last name is beyond comprehension.”

She had to grudgingly admit that it was an ingenious device to allow her to pick any last name to her convenience. “It’s Curie, Headmaster. Hermione Curie.”

“Right. We’ll write that on your records. How are you feeling, dear?”

“Terrible,” she said easily, but with a smile that took the edge away from the painful truth. It still caught Dippet flatfooted.

“Um, well, yes, I can see…it’s such a terrifying event. A most unfortunate event. And for it to happen so close to Hogwarts too!” Dippet nodded. “However will the students feel on their Hogsmeade weekend?”

His hands were clasped tightly together. Hermione was sure that the headmaster was more afraid of secret attackers hiding in Hogwarts than she did, and she was the one who was injured.

“I’m sure it wasn’t at Hogwarts, Headmaster. Someone probably brought me here to safety.” She assured him.

“Yes, yes! That’s a great notion. Of course, Hogwarts is always completely safe!”

She glanced back at the documents the headmaster had carried once she was sure that he wasn’t about to start fretting. It was a transfer application to Hogwarts, for a fifth-year student. All the classes listed, however, were advanced ones. Not that she was even worried at this point. She tried to see whether there was any information on her parents, but no. They were only stated to be deceased.

“Headmaster, I…how am I going to pay for my tuition?” She asked.

If it was Dumbledore she was talking to, he would have noticed that she didn’t sound distressed or upset when she asked that, only curious, and would start asking some pointed question. Dippet was conveniently oblivious.

“No need to worry, my dear. It is clear that you have taken the equivalent of OWLs in Norway. I was about to ask you regarding your class schedule, but if you truly have no problem with it, then it is clear to me that these reports on your intelligence is true. You will be one of the most intelligent witches in your year, if not the most intelligent, and thus, you can qualify for a scholarship.”

Norway? Well, she can vaguely recall visiting Lillehammer once, and there was also another city (Tromsø? Trondheim? One of the two), but this was more than half a century into the past that even her meagre memories might not match. She just hoped she was never asked about it.

“Once you have recovered enough, Professor Merrythought will accompany you to shop for school supplies in Diagon Alley.”

“That’s very nice of you, Headmaster,”

“No, no. It’s no trouble at all! And as for your attackers, we’ll find them soon, don’t worry.”
“Have you contacted the Aurors?”

Dippet huffed. “They say that my report does not have enough information. Clearly it is obvious that a Hogwarts student is in danger and they need to do something about it, and yet they seem content to merely sit about.”

Well, she wasn’t going to argue about the lack of information, considering that no one would be able to come up with a plausible location of her attack.

“Perhaps you should tell Professor Dumbledore.”

“Dumbledore? Why?”

The headmaster moved forward and she handed the documents back.

“He has been monitoring Grindelwald’s rise for a while. If anyone can tell you about Grindelwald or his sympathisers, it would be him.” She said.

“Hmm, yes. Perhaps I should drop in and chat with him. Anyway, I hope you get well soon, Miss Curie!” Headmaster Dippet said his farewell, and Hermione gave some polite answer in return before he left.

With that, she was once more left to the emptiness of the infirmary.

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“Nurse Edelstein?”

“Yes, Dear?”

“Can you help me with my hair?” Hermione didn’t quite like how powerless she sounded. “It’s bad enough that the headmaster had seen it like this, I don’t want it to stay this way for days. I don’t even know what makes it knot at the back! It could be my own vomit for all I know.”

“It might be blood, though. You had some head wounds.”

The brunette sighed. “Right. That’s not exactly much better.”

The nurse patted her on the shoulder. “Well, we can do something about it right now, don’t worry.”

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Chapter End Notes

I fiddled a bit to make the cover. The chapters' photosets are all courtesy of my sister, though. She posts her edits (along with others that don't make it here) at Strange Attractor's graphics blog.
List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Lemarchand Puzzle Box, a.k.a, The Lament Configuration:** The Unspeakables are aware of old stories about such things and knew that it had also leaked over to the muggle world. They are relieved to have never found anything close to the real thing. It doesn’t mean that they’re going to stop making mock-ups of it, though, and ‘toy’ versions with less serious side effects.

**Marie Sklodowska Curie:** Marie Curie was awarded the 1903 Nobel Prize in Physics (she shares this with her husband and Henri Becquerel) for the joint researches in radiation, and the 1911 Nobel Prize in Chemistry for her discovery of the elements radium and polonium. I always thought of little Hermione as a budding scientist, and that she was going to go down that path if she’d never received her Hogwarts letter.

**Strange Attractors: (noun)**

**Attractor:** (mathematics, dynamical systems) An attractor is a set of numerical values that a system tends to evolve towards, for a wide variety of starting conditions of the system.

(more technical detail) an attractor is a particular region in the n-dimensional space of the system. (Mostly paraphrased from Wikipedia)

**Strange attractor:** Strange attractors are unique from other attractors because one does not know exactly where on the attractor the system will be as time goes by. Strange attractors are also unique in that the system never repeats itself (non-periodic).

(Mostly cribbed from Space Telescope Science Institute’s website, Dr. Larry Bradley’s page on Chaos and Fractals).

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**Additional Trivia:**

“Perhaps she was merely dreaming... But going down that assumption lies madness. She might end up being desperate enough to wake up to try to kill herself (hello, Inception!)”: I see no reason why Hermione shouldn’t keep in touch with the muggle world and watch the occasional movies after the War. It’s not as if the magical world has that much entertainment to begin with.

Lemarchand Puzzle Box a.k.a Lament Configuration: An eldritch item appearing often in Clive Barker’s horror stories. This includes the Hellraiser movies
02 Stranger in a Strange Land

Chapter Summary

*Albus Dumbledore visits the infirmary. Another professor also drops in. Hermione hears just how bad her condition had been. A prefect drops a book from Slughorn. A deluge of Hermione’s memories.*

*In which we see that Hermione’s head has a tad more cracks than she realised.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

02 Stranger in a Strange Land

The first thing that she kept in mind was that she didn’t know Albus Dumbledore.

Oh, she knew one Albus Dumbledore. He was the wizard who’d had to duel the man he loved, had taken on the mantle of responsibility from the wizarding world and held it for half a century. The man she knew was wise and experienced, but he had also gained an edge of tiredness. Her headmaster knew her and trusted her implicitly. This transfiguration professor would probably saw her as a mystery—and he might even wonder if she was a threat to Hogwarts.

It was a good thing for her boredom that he decided to visit her the next day. Even Nurse Edelstein’s encyclopaedia of herbs were getting too dull to read and she was reasonably sure that she’d managed to get her hair under control today. Dumbledore’s auburn hair and beard were a surprise, though, as was the reduced number of wrinkles. Without his obscuring beard and moustache, he’d probably look like a well-preserved fifty.

“Good afternoon, Miss Curie.”
“Good afternoon, Professor.”

He sat on the chair by her bedside. “I’m sorry for your experience. I hope the rest of your school year in Hogwarts will be better.”

“Well, as they say, if you start at rock bottom, the only direction left to go is up,” she answered. She did her best trying to give a non-answer answer. She glided past his bright blue eyes. Even if he caught her surface thoughts, it would be mostly filled with thoughts of boredom and how it was nice to have food from the kitchens brought here instead of getting the usual hospital food. In addition, she was wondering how she could try to create a thermos. Just for proof-of-concept.

“True. I hope Hogwarts can live up to the standards of your previous school.”

“Oh, I’m sure it can. It’s just a small study circle arranged by the wizarding families around, Professor, nothing to write home about. ‘School’ makes it sound so official.” There, she’d just avoided giving any details about her hypothetical old school.

“Considering your achievements, I doubt that your school is as humble as you make it.”

“Well, if there’s only ten or so people in a class, everyone gets enough attention from the teacher. Besides, I’ve always liked to read since I was young—I think my mother said I’ve started dragging picture books when I was two and a half and I was already reading a year after that.”

It was another child she happened to know who progressed that fast—she simply used it as her fake history. Her memory, however, can’t recall who.

She had to suppress a sigh. Draco would’ve been better at this game of avoiding details and pretending to not know Dumbledore’s name. Hermione, however, didn’t always have the patience for layered political conversations—and this was one, isn’t it? Why would she need to, if she could usually foist it off him? It was as natural as letting Harry to take point on any raid—he was the equivalent of a magical tank, after all.

(Wait, when did she start passing political conversations to Draco? She was sure it didn’t happen in the first few years after the war—everyone was too busy helping with the rebuilding process back then and they were only awkward acquaintances at that point, not friends yet. There’s a context here that she was missing…)“What class do you teach, Professor? And I’m sorry, I don’t think I caught your name.”

Dumbledore’s smile was knowing, but he nodded all the same. “Albus Dumbledore at your service, young lady, and I teach Transfiguration. I also happen to be the Head of Gryffindor House.”

“Nifty.” She commented distractedly.

“Miss?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Interesting, I mean. I’ve always found transfiguration to be interesting. It’s my favourite subject.” If she sounded happy, it wasn’t even a lie. She was also relieved that they didn’t have to dwell too much on her aforementioned past. “How far has the class gone on, Professor? Would I be missing too much? If you can give me the title of the reading materials, I’m sure Nurse Edelstein can find someone to get them for me from the library and I’d be caught up on all of them once I’m in class.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Please slow down, Miss Curie. I think you can rest for a few more days before you try to tackle academia head on. I see that your records speak for itself—you are diligent
as well as intelligent.”

“Well, achievement is 95% hard work.”

She couldn’t help with the trite sayings. If she didn’t focus on finding something pithy to say, she was afraid she’d start spilling something. Her nerves might even lead her to ask when Dumbledore heard from his ex-boyfriend last.

And that would be bad.

“You can take your time recovering for now. Resting when one is tired is not a vice.”

“Ah, of course, Sir. I’ll remember that.”

Still doesn’t mean that she wouldn’t try to get books from the library, though, or the various class syllabi. They do have class syllabus in this decade, right? Hermione was somehow unaccountably worried at the prospect of a teaching staff with messier habits.

Wait, last year’s notes! Yes, if worse comes to worse, she can find some kids from the Ravenclaw Tower who’re willing to sell copies of their last year’s notes for certain classes. At the very least, she could use that as a syllabus for any class. Hermione let out a mental sigh at the prospect of a backup plan.

“Rest well, Miss Curie.”

“I will, Professor.”

It was only after Dumbledore had left that Hermione realised that she had no idea whether Dippet did go to Dumbledore to ask about Grindelwald. If he did, she had no idea what Dumbledore thought about her recommending the headmaster that he was their local expert on Grindelwald.

She groaned into her hand, rubbing her forehead and shifting the bandage there yet again.

“I’m really not that good at these cloak-and-dagger things.”

Hermione wished Dumbledore would just ask her about it straight away.

It was one of the things that she loved from heavy duty magical pain-killers. Usually, they just knock her out to sleep for longer periods than usual, something about supporting the body’s natural healing mechanism. Once the sleeping period had passed, she can wake up just fine without the high feeling that certain common opioids gave. It was closer to an on or off switch—she was either still sleeping, or she was pretty functional when awake.

All the sleeping was hell on the social life, though. Of course, technically, one doesn’t quite have any when one is practically locked inside the infirmary.

(Wait, how did she know about the ‘fun’ side-effects of muggle painkillers? Why did she know that and when did she even—

Much more effective than oxycodone, that’s for sure. Her own voice added.

—know that? How did she know??)

‘-
It only took to asking Nurse Edelstein once to get the syllabi for all the classes she was taking. Apparently, the head girl had dropped them off on the day before she woke up—she was informed that she was out for a whole day. That was nice. She probably should thank the head girl and get her something the next time she went to Hogsmeade.

Hermione asked about who the head girl and head boy was to Nurse Edelstein, primarily because she wanted to thank her.

“Oh, the Head Girl would be Agatha Abbott. The Head Boy is her twin brother, Andrew Abbott. They’re both from Hufflepuff.”

Well, she supposed they were this generation’s Cedric Diggory. She might feel it odd because Gryffindor had always had a tunnel vision focus on Slytherin and vice versa, focusing on their houses to the exclusion of all else, but logically, she knew that Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff have their own talented people too. Why can’t this year’s head boy and head girl come from the same house? And why can’t that house be Hufflepuff?

“Does she like sweets?”

It wouldn’t be too hard to pick up some from Honeydukes.

Maggie Edelstein paused. “I think so. She was here once for a really bad flu and her brother handed a big block of chocolate to her as if it was digestive biscuits.”

Well, that thank-you gift was certainly covered.

“Thanks. Oh, can I go to the library to take some books? I’ll go straight back to the infirmary, I promise.” Hermione asked.

That had Nurse Edelstein giving her a stern glare. Given her experience with stubborn teenagers, it was also impressive. If she was a real teen, she would be cowed.

“You…! You’re supposed to be resting, Hermione! Did you know that the regular potions I stocked here did not seem to do be able to affect you much at the beginning? If Professor Slughorn did not step in to check your internal organs himself and brew a specialised potion, you would be bed bound in St. Mungo’s!”

“But, but…classes!”

“No. We’ll track your progress in the next two or three days. If you seem to be on the mend and stable, then I’ll listen to your complaints.”

Hermione wasn’t actually that desperate to catch up on her classes—she was sure what she knew would be enough, and at most needing a refresher. It was actually rather relaxing to be able to only focus on classes instead of the next emergency in—

“Oh, fine. I’ll be keeping this encyclopaedia, though.” Hermione said.

(—her memory drew a blank).

“And if you sleep too late, I’ll confiscate it.” Maggie warned.

Hermione solemnly raised her hand.

“Promise.”
On the other hand, Hermione knew she was going to need to go to the library often. Nobody would think twice about a known swot being seen in the library again and again, and her dedication wouldn’t raise any questions. Besides, she didn’t even need to think about how to be a bookworm. She was one. It was like putting on an old costume that one thought no longer fits, only to find out that it still did.

She needed to figure out why she was here, and what she can do if it turns out that she can’t go back—she was pretty sure that the answer wasn’t to help lessen the effects of WWII. It was already running at full bore right now and was going to end in three years, more or less.

A part of her was afraid that there would be no home to go back to.

(What if the world had ended with fire? What if things had gotten so bad that everyone thought their best bet was to send one Hermione Granger back? The so-called brightest witch of her generation?)

If so, it was probably a desperate, haphazard effort. It might explain the state of her mind.

Hermione hadn’t expected Professor Slughorn to come the next day. He was happy as he sat down at the chair next to her bed, the poor chair itself creaking slightly at having to bear his weight. Even his tweed coat had a cheerful pattern (how does he manage to find it? She wondered idly). His smile was genial on his pink face. Perhaps because he was looking forward to pulling another apparent talent to the Slug Club.

“My dear Miss Curie, you are looking so much better now! The last time I came here, I was so worried about whether you were going to survive the night or not.”

Her condition wasn’t that bad, was it? He seemed to catch her concerned look and waved it away.

“No need to worry now. If you’ve managed to pass the first two days, I’m sure you’d be up and running in no time at all. Oh, where are my manners? I’m just so excited to see you. I’m Horace Slughorn, Professor of Potions at Hogwarts. I’m also the Head of the Slytherin House, the same way that Professor Dumbledore is the Head of the Gryffindor House.”

Hermione smiled. She felt like she could kiss him for giving her the opening.

“I’m looking forward to seeing you in class, Professor. Also, I’m sorry if I sound so naïve, but what is a House? Professor Dumbledore mentioned it yesterday, too, but I forgot to ask.”

Slughorn’s eyes widened. “The Headmaster didn’t tell you?”

“I’m sure he’s busy enough running the school every day,” Hermione commented.

“Then allow me to do this for you! You see, Hogwarts has four founders, and the characters valued within the four Houses each reflect the character of that particular founder…”

She allowed Slughorn to go on. With enough positive responses at the right time, she would appear to be listening intently at all times.

He was actually rather comprehensive in his explanation, though a careful ear would notice that he was weighted more favourably towards Slytherin compared to the rest—it was where the ambitious and talented came and network among themselves, where people polish their skills and actually find an achievement to aim it at. He did give a good reckoning of Ravenclaw’s
appreciation for intelligence and the search for knowledge. He was straining in his efforts to find enough good things to say about Hufflepuff but he kept at it, using weird phrases like ‘uncommon hard work’ and ‘for industry and worker bees’, enough that Hermione had to bite her lip to stop her laughter. It was probably because their viewpoint was rather diametrically placed from Slytherin and thus was hard for him to make sense of why people would want to be in Hufflepuff.

His description of the Gryffindors were sheer art, though. He highlighted their courage and also their tendency to run headfirst into danger without checking. He mentioned their bravery and their fighting spirit while leaving it open that it really is easy to get most men to fight for their friends, or that rare is the person who checks what exactly their friend is fighting for, and whether they agree with that direction or not. He did not insult them, but he laid their weaknesses bare in a way he did not manage for the other houses.

Hermione grinned.

“Youre house and Professor Dumbledores house must often be in friendly competition,” she said.

Slughorns fluffy brows rose. “Hmm, well, yes. The children do so love to compete for the House Cup. How did you know?”

“You give the longest explanations for Slytherin and Gryffindor, while only covering what is necessary for Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff.”

She surprised him into laughter. The chair creaked again as he moved. “Very true! I’m afraid youve seen straight into the heart of the matter. If you are even half as talented as your equivalent OWLs scores say, my potion class would be a delight with you there.”

“You think too highly of me, Professor,” Hermione said, but she was still grinning.

“I’m sure I’m actually following a conservative estimate. By the way, Miss Curie, what house are you sorted into?”

Hermione furrowed her brows. She hoped she looked confused as opposed to cross-eyed.

“Sorted?”

“Youre saying youre not sorted yet? Morgana’s—” Slughorn coughed. “By Morgana, Dippet certainly is taking his time. Compared to a first-year, you will have more sophisticated ideas and opinions of your own. If you wish to know more about Hogwarts, you should read Hogwarts: A History.”

“Why, I’d love to, Professor! It’s just that when I raised the idea of going to the library to Nurse Edelstein yesterday, she gave me a really scary glare. I suppose I’m still under house arrest here. All I wanted to do was start going through the required reading for the classes! If I can’t go anywhere else for a while, I might as well get something out of it, right?”

She pouted.

“Excellent work ethics, Miss Curie! You will fit right in with Slytherin. I can help you with that. Why don’t you make a list of five books after you’ve read what is required from your classes? I’ll send someone to take that list this afternoon and help you get those books while you are confined to the infirmary. What do you think?”

“I think you’re being very generous, Professor Slughorn. Thank you.”
“Oh, think nothing of it, dear. I can easily imagine your boredom.” His gregariousness seemed to have settled down slightly after that, and there was something like concern in his eyes.

“Truly, Miss Curie, are you alright?”

It was more serious than anything else he’d asked or said. “I suppose there are some soreness, but that’s to be expected after being battered around so much. I dislike the weakness the most, though.”

“There are no sudden sharp pains?”

Something about the question piqued her attention.

“Well, no. That’s a funny question, Professor, because Nurse Edelstein always asked me about lingering pain, but she never asked me about sudden pains.”

Slughorn nodded. He didn’t deny her statement. “I’m not surprised that she didn’t. When the standard blood-replenishing potion and the like did not quite work, Professor Dumbledore and I was contacted by the headmaster. I had recognised a good number of the curses used on you and Professor Dumbledore managed to do the same. Many of these curses are dark and rare that Madam Edelstein cannot recognise them. As for the two of us…we have a, hmm, highly particular specialties.”

Slughorn was glossing over a lot of his own and Dumbledore’s history there. It wasn’t really a surprise, what did surprise her was how bad her condition seemed to have been. He grew quiet for a while before taking one long breath.

“Between the two of us, I think we’ve identified the worst of the curses and managed to stabilise your condition enough for the mediwitch that came later to work her miracles. Yet if we had not been available in the first few hours of your discovery…”

Hermione knew that Slughorn wasn’t even talking about St Mungo’s. Was she that close to death?

“I…” she took a deep breath. No, she wasn’t going to avoid it. She’d picked up some field mediwitch skills, and the least she could do was face it with open eyes.

“How bad was it, Professor?”

“I’m sure you don’t need to be concerned about it at all now. You’re already healing most of it away.”

She shook her head, unwilling to be redirected.

“Did I lose a loop of small intestine or so? No, it can’t be, because a burst gut of that magnitude is usually signified by a burning pain.” Hermione paused, thinking, “Oh! I remembered another symptom; possible vomiting of blood. I didn’t recall vomiting blood. I was in a bad shape but not that bad. There had been no follow-up fever. I don’t think I’d have only slept a day away if that was the case either, so I don’t think this is it.”

Her gaze was steady as she met Slughorn’s eyes, not reacting to his surprised or intrigued look.

“I remembered the persistent pain on my lower back. How were my kidneys? Were they bruised?”

From Slughorn’s wince, she figured out that she was on the money with that.
“They’re alright now, Miss Curie. Really, you don’t need to worry about it.”

“I still have blood in my urine. I don’t think my kidneys are exactly ‘fine’ yet.”

Her flat reply pulled Slughorn into giving her an answer. “There’s still excess blood that needs to be disposed of. Now, I’m sure hearing more will just lead you to worry excessively about it.”

“I’ll still worry even if I don’t know, Professor. The difference is that it would be a more irrational worry, one that’s harder to contain.”

Hermione didn’t realise that she’d looked down, her hands tightening into fists. It was still a shock for her to face her own mortality, especially when she couldn’t even remember how it happened. Did she fought well against forces that outnumber her? Was she negligent and was ambushed? If it had been an ambush, if she had been negligent, she couldn’t help but wonder who else was with her at the time?

Who else had died because she’d let them down?

“Shh, shhh. It’s alright, Miss Curie, Hermione. Everything’s going to be alright now.”

Slughorn had been confused for some moments before he decisively brought his chair forward and started patting her shoulder. His large left hand was awkwardly patting her hand. She appreciated the gesture. He might be a coward, and he might be odd, but for all his efforts at being an ambitious social butterfly, you can never accuse him of not caring for his students.

“It’s just…” she started. “Maybe I left someone behind—maybe I left many people behind. Maybe people were left behind because they were trying to save me. I don’t know. Why did I find myself alone? I can’t quite remember what happened, but I wish I was stronger—”

“You’re already stronger than many witches I know, Hermione. It’s not your fault, do you hear me? Whatever happens, it’s not your fault.”

She let herself cry on Slughorn’s shoulder, because she was just so tired of holding everything back.

‘-

Slughorn apparently sent one of the Slytherin prefects to the infirmary—she could see his badge easily from the moment he entered, shiny dark hair and perfectly polished shoes. There was a thick tome in his hand, and his robes seemed to be of a deeper, richer black than regulation.

He moved with an old-world elegance as he approached her bedside slowly, respectfully. With that grace, he could be a courtier anywhere from the frozen courts of Muscovy to the cutthroat decadence of Istanbul. His sophistication was something that Draco would kill for, back when he was still the prat of his Hogwarts days.

“Miss Hermione Curie, I presume?” His accent could cut glass.

“Um, yes, that would be me.”

He had the darkest blue eyes and Hermione was chagrined to discover that having a teenage body meant going through puberty again. It was an annoying distraction, as she struggled to remember that she was in the 1940s. Even in the twenty-first century, it was not polite to jump a man without getting his name first.
“And who do I have the pleasure of meeting?” she asked.

The words came out with more polish than she expected, as Hermione had half-expected to stumble through the sentence. Apparently, all the times that Draco insisted on showing how it was done among the purebloods ensured that something stuck.

She could see the almost-smile on the prefect’s face turning into genuine interest.

*I don’t really mind taking over the lobbying, Hermione, but you know I can’t always be around for all the meetings. It’s better if you know enough to stick a dagger back in the legislation when those bastards try to take advantage of you.* Draco had said with exasperation.

(There. Another memory about Draco. When? And what were they talking about?)

“Tom Riddle, fifth-year Slytherin prefect.”

She extended her right hand, but he kissed her knuckles instead of shaking it. His lips were soft over her skin spreading tingles while her memory scrambled at the name. It was familiar, but she didn’t know why.

“I’m sorry that you’re stuck in the infirmary for days on end.”

Hermione shrugged. “It’s annoying, but I do realise that I’m probably going to faint after one class if I tried, so I made my peace with it.”

“Yet I’m not at all sorry that I monopolise your company right now.”

It was hard to hold back her grin at his confidence. He was interesting, yes, but she wasn’t a fool that would be easily taken in—she had no doubt that he had many fans. Hermione didn’t want to be yet another one among the many girls trailing behind him.

“Really? You don’t even know little old me. Maybe I’m going to bore you to death talking about the standards of cauldron thickness. I’m sure you have much more interesting things to do than stay around, Mr. Riddle, heaven knows I don’t find running errands for teachers as one of my favourite things to do.”

Hermione met his gaze with a bland smile of her own. She really did not have a good track record with men with large egos. She already felt compelled to tweak him just on that basis, for one.

“You think too poorly of yourself, Miss Curie.” he replied.

“Well, no one else seems to volunteer for it. Clearly someone needs to.” She said easily. “Whoever would check my inflated ego otherwise?”

It was her flippantness, she knew, that caught him. She saw his eyes sparkle with interest now, as opposed to the more even politeness he’d started out with. His confidence implied that he was not one to back down from a challenge. Thus, if she couldn’t care less whether he stayed or not, then he was determined to stay to find out why.

“How far have you read Cook’s *Encyclopaedia of the Magical Plants of Britain*?” he asked, out of the blue. She furrowed her brows, not quite expecting the question.

“I don’t know, I jump around. That’s the whole point of keeping an encyclopaedia—I wouldn’t run out of reading material any time soon.”
He leaned back on the chair, his glance entirely too knowing and thus being generally annoying.

“If I were to make a blood cleansing potion, can I use red liverwort?” he asked. Hermione frowned.

“That wasn’t even in the ingredients…no, wait, you’re trying to replace something, aren’t you?” She turned her gaze to him, weighing his question. “You can replace blood kava with it, but it also means adjusting at least two other ingredients as well. The red liverwort is richer in metallic traces than most other plants that doesn’t react well with many others. Exchanging anything with it isn’t exactly an efficient substitution.” Hermione pointed out.

“If I say I was looking for some eight-petaled dryas in the Midlands?”

She snorted. The mistake was too blatant. “Looking for a dryas in the lowlands? Please. I’d say you’re either looking for the wrong thing or is in the wrong place. If the eight-petaled dryas is what you want, then I’d recommend checking the Lake District…or the mountains, even.”

The stared at each other for another second before he raised an eyebrow at her. He spoke up again.

“There are at least three common potions with laxation as one of their effects – I can easily exchange the laxative herb in each with rhubarb leaves. Is this true?”

Everything he’d said was correct. Hermione was about to nod her way through it until she noticed the wry edge to his smile.

“Wait, no! That was a trick question, wasn’t it? You’d want rhubarb stalks—the leaves are bloody poisonous! And these are closer to potions question than herbology!” She frowned.

He was undaunted by her indignant protest and gave his assessment.

“You already know around half of the Encyclopaedia’s contents.” He stated.

“I…” what was she supposed to do, deny? She didn’t even know how much she’d read, but it wasn’t the first herbal compendium that she’d read. His guess might not even be that wrong.

“What is it to you?” she asked back.

“Please don’t pretend you’re boring to me when we’re both perfectly aware that you’re not. You’re not average.” He said.

“You will never be average, Miss Curie. I’ll stand witness to that.” His statement sounded strangely like a promise, and the solemnity caught her off guard. He was serious. But those words…he should’ve been more careful with those words because just like ‘I swear’, ‘I stand witness’ had been important words in various magical rituals. What was he trying to do?

That odd not-quite-a-smile played at the corner of his lips. He was too intriguing for his own good.

“I just…sometimes there’s nothing more rewarding than sitting by a fireplace and read in winter. I’ve always read too much.” She spoke quickly, because she had no answer to her confusion, and she did not want to start losing her head around him. “What about you? If I ask you where I can find winter aconite in the wild, where would it be?”

A pause, and the answer rolled smoothly as if he’d just read it. “I would say ‘not here’, not outside a botanical garden, for the winter aconite is native to Europe and not wild in Britain. That, is also a trick question.”
There was the mildest reproach in his tone. If he expected her to look contrite, she certainly wasn’t. Hermione wasn’t exactly a young girl prone to stumbling in front of a crush, even if he was distractingly pretty for a guy. She merely smiled.

“Well! I didn’t even worry, because surely someone with your extensive knowledge would have found the answer too obvious. Even if it’s clear that you will be potion master faster than a master herbalist.”

There was no way that she’d allow him to trip her up, and if he owed her no apologies, then she didn’t either. Silence collected in the room as they held long steady glances at each other. He nodded first, as if giving respect to the position she’d taken.

“Professor Slughorn has informed me that you needed more information about Hogwarts. This is his personal copy of *Hogwarts: A History.*” With that, he stood up and deposited the book on the side table. Hermione’s eyes widened.

“I can’t take this—”

“You’re not taking it, you’re merely borrowing it for now and will return it later.” He clarified. “Please, don’t trouble yourself over something so trivial. Unless, of course, you can assure him that you’ve borrowed the same book from somewhere else?”

She couldn’t answer the question with an affirmative.

His words were firm, and she remembered other things too. Exchanging and taking small favours were sometimes a game among the young purebloods and halfbloods in Slytherin because it was casual and it was an easy way to start learning more complicated social games later. (She knew she’d heard this first from Draco somehow, even if she can’t remember how). She needed help so Slughorn gladly gave her this. She probably can say her thanks in the form of his favourite, crystalized pineapple candy.

“Alright. Please give the professor my thanks.”

“Certainly. Professor Slughorn also mentioned that you have books you’d wish to borrow from the library?”

“Ah! I’ve written them down and I’m sure I have the list somewhere…”

She started patting down the blanket in front of her, trying to find the errant scrap of parchment. That was when she could feel the lightest tap over her left elbow, over the fabric of the oversized robe she was stuck with.

“Hold still.” He was too close to her ear. She could almost feel his breath over her neck, feel the hand that was still on her elbow. She could feel heat blossoming from the two contact areas.

He caught a slip of parchment about to slip away from under her arm and pulled it free, stepping away.

“I believe this is it?”

Hermione took it from him quickly, focusing on the script and hoping her face did not just blush. As if going through a second puberty was not a horrifying enough occurrence.

“Yes, this is it.” She returned it to him. “No need to rush.”
He stared at her carefully, as if he was looking for something.

“What?”

“I might be free this evening after prefect rounds.” He stated.

“Alright.” She said. She thought she could see him almost surprised. Almost.

“Alright?”

“I did say that there’s no need to rush, right? So, it’s fine however it turns out for you tonight. I’m sure you have other things to do apart from running errands for Slughorn or the current Hogwarts invalid.”

Hermione truly had no idea what it was that she said that made him observe her minutely again, it was enough to give her feelings of sympathy for the butterfly underneath the magnifying glass.

“I’ll visit tonight—if it’s not too inconvenient for you.”

And with that statement and a firm nod, he was gone.

She had a nice satisfying nap in the afternoon (she still needed a lot of sleep to recover). She woke up sometime around five and started to skim through *Hogwarts: A History* quickly.

Hermione had known what it was like, memorised sections of it. But she knew that the book didn’t exactly stay the same across editions. What she was trying to locate first were the differences. Once she had the time to sit and read carefully, they were always enlightening.

This was especially true for editions that came out at around the same time that a new Minister of Magic had been elected. Why? Because it would reflect the new official position. It told her what parts of history gets scrubbed and hidden, what parts are now considered inappropriate or unnecessary for children. It told her about what the current Ministry likes to highlight; it was a canary in the coalmine to their future policies.

She’d turned this into her personal early warning system.

It was how she got the drop on the new Werewolf Registration Act when it was still in the planning stages. When she knew who the individuals responsible for it were, finding their personal weakness one by one was not difficult. Over the negotiating table afterwards, with Hermione’s ammunition and knowing their family histories backwards and forwards, Draco Malfoy owned them completely. (Being an upper-class twit has its uses, he’d said dryly).

(As he rolled his eyes. For all his grudging praise and sore-loser attitude before when he came short in the investigation with her, today, he’d gladly raised his glass and called for a toast in her name to the whole damned room. The entire fricking ballroom. All her hissed calls of ‘Malfoy, quit it!’ was soundly ignored. It probably helped him that he had Harry on his side. The Boy-Who-Lived casually dropped an arm across her shoulder and winked at her, eyepatch and all—though does it get called a wink when one only has one eye? Harry kept her from going after the pale twat. Neville and Luna were also blocking her way, damn them.

Ron was some distance away from them, but he did raise his glass for her all the same. There was a stunning blonde next to him...oh, Lavender. Ginny gave an awkward wave, but Hermione didn’t have any hard feelings. She waved back with ease. If Ginny wanted to accompany her brother, why
not? They were family. Hermione and Ron were on one of their longer breaks and she was surprised that any jealousy she felt was just a passing twinge.)

The memory disappeared as fast as it came, but something inside her relaxed. They were still there, even if in pieces, even if not easily recalled. Her memories were still there.

Nurse Edelstein checked up on her sometime before supper and then rang the bell to inform the house elves that they can start preparing for Hermione’s meal and send it up.

It was at that time when she managed to remember who exactly Tom Marvolo Riddle was. Well, at any rate, she remembered who he came to be, in her future.

He was *Dark Lord Voldemort*. The mad man with seven horcruxes. The dark wizard who tried to kill Harry and failed (twice).

She laughed, free and without compunction.

It was just…the sheer *irony* of the meeting. He had *no idea* who she was. At all. She herself had no idea who he was either. They were but two highly-intelligent students chatting each other up in the Hogwarts infirmary.

Tom had looked so normal—but of course, why shouldn’t he? He wasn’t that mad man yet. People overestimate how abnormal killers should look, as if there should be some chilling aura that they oozed. But if the neighbours of many a serial killer never quite noticed the wolf among them, as evidenced in their interviews, why should anyone notice what Tom Riddle is or is becoming?

(‘She’d helped sort various criminology and criminal psychology papers based on their relevance for Harry to read as he rose through the ranks of the DMLE and tried to change the Aurors into something more modern. She’d also read many first-hand accounts of some of the more famous crimes, and this includes the eyewitness statements. She knew the pattern of the Befuddled and Concerned Neighbour very well).

People wish to think that these callous killers should look different because they *don’t like to contemplate that they, too, can easily be one*. The average person does not like to think that the line between the upstanding citizen and the norm-breaking monster was not a firm wall set by a benevolent emperor to keep out barbarians, but a simple path drawn by a stick on sand, with a ringmaster standing by.

*Come on! You know you want to. Think of all the people that have harmed you and your family! Step this way, ladies and gentleman! Step right this way, and let’s make them pay with blood…*

If Hermione was younger, she might have been tense at the prospect of going to school with a budding Dark Lord. If Hermione’s mental age matched her physical age, she might have been angry at him for all the crimes he’d yet to commit, she might have been struggling to hide her alternating rage and wariness.

But she had vague memories of her and Harry (and Ron, and everyone else) hearing about yet another wannabe dark lord and her first reaction was to roll her eyes. ‘*Not this again*’, she had complained to Luna (another Unspeakable, different division), ignoring the looks of awe from the junior Aurors as she walked to Harry’s office to plan their next campaign.

(‘Her Gryffindor boys always pulled her from the Unspeakable when there was a major assault, regardless of how much they complained about the inter-departmental paperwork that was required. She was only too glad not to let her skills in the field deteriorate.'
And she wasn’t going to let them go into the field for a high-risk action without medical support, not after Harry lost his eye to a particularly dark hex. It couldn’t be regenerated as the curse had lingered in the scar tissue. But if she’d been faster, perhaps administered the right first aid…

Regardless of Harry’s assurances that it wasn’t her fault, Hermione began to study medicine and healing.

Of course, at least half of those new rising dark lords couldn’t hold a candle to Voldemort, but that wasn’t the issue. She remembered what Harry told her, of how some of the junior Aurors were surprised about the blood purist zealots were actually like when they raided their homes. Many were kids, still living with their parents, dreaming of non-existent and completely fictional past age of pureblood glory.

If they had not been born to decaying pureblood families, with nothing left as their legacy but vitriolic hate, who knows what they might have been, instead?

Tom Riddle was in a similar position.

Orphaned and abandoned, Tom Riddle survived the rigours of life in a 1930s muggle orphanage when he was the odd one out, a magical child without even the slightest idea that magic was possible. His accident of birth, unwelcome in both worlds, decreed that he would always be an anomaly somewhere, an aberration. Perhaps that was where he came to the conclusion that life is a matter of survival of the fittest. Perhaps that was when he transformed into Voldemort—who knew? Once he was Voldemort, he seemed to consider that the nature of life was Hobbesian—nasty, brutish and short—that men are by their nature a cruel beast. It was clear that his personal philosophy was to take what he wanted and destroy anything in the way.

For all that she was a witch on the side of Good, Hermione also knew that she wasn’t as naïve as she’d been when she was younger. She hadn’t hesitated to throw a strong wind spell at one of the idiotic Yaxley cousins to blow him away from Luna when they were ambushed, even if it meant she was pushing him off a cliff. Does it make her a better person for casting Ventus instead of Avada Kedavra on him? After all, the result was still the same.

He was just as dead.

She had been bloodied more than once in battle. The people she’d sent spells against had died in numbers too, whether directly like with that wind spell or later on due to their wound’s complications.

The truth is, Hermione Granger could be a killer just as easily as Tom Riddle can.

All it takes was for her to be pushed to defend herself or the people she cared about. Why should she be afraid of Riddle, then? If he ever tried to kill her, she wouldn’t even think twice about defending herself and trying to kill him back. But before it came to that, she was quite capable of just sitting down and talking with him.

Should she fear him because he might kill her? Because she could die?

Many of the people she knew had died— (Blurs, flashes of images but no face she could recognise. Who, dammit? Who had died that she couldn’t remember—)

—what was death but the next great adventure? She had seen that tiredness in Harry’s eyes after more than a decade in the wizarding world. She could recognise it easily since she’d seen it often enough in the mirror.
Hermione Granger no longer cares for the spectre of death. She does not fear it.

*I will not fear,* she said to herself, almost giddy with the realisation. She felt free. *Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that can destroy me. I will face it and let it pass through me. When it is gone, only I will remain.***

She was chuckling to herself when Nurse Edelstein walked in.

“Oh, honey, are you alright?”

Hermione wiped the tears escaping from the sides of her eyes. “I’m fine, Nurse Edelstein. It’s just…some of my memories were coming back.”

“Really? Are they of your family?”

Her friends. The Hogwarts graduates of her generation that had survived the war.

(“So, what made you drop in today?”)

*Daphne Greengrass stared at her oddly. Yes, she knew they needed more experienced people, and in an emergency like this, it also meant pulling those who were not Aurors. She just didn’t know why Harry would choose Daphne. It was going to be dangerous and messy, and the blonde pureblood princess didn’t seem like someone who’d care to do anything that would break her manicured nails.***

“Granger, you know that they got my father, right? They only need to use thirty curses for it.” Her tone was dry, ironic. “My mother only made it because she threw floo powder on a burning pile of support beams and hoped it would work. Did you know that she crawled halfway our dining room because they’ve broken both of her legs by then, and even cut off her left feet?”

*All because the Greengrasses wanted to be left alone instead of fighting for one side or another. Now? Now Daphne wanted her pound of flesh and the DMLE that was stretched thin easily welcomed her.*

After that, no matter how awkward she and Daphne were, they were still far more comfortable with each other than Hermione would be with people who hadn’t gone through the War and the post-war clean up.

“Hermione?”

She blinked and looked up into Maggie Edelstein’s concerned hazel eyes. It would seem that she was drifting again. She needed to do something about it soon.

“Family…” the young witch murmured. Maggie’s expression softened.

“If it’s too difficult we can postpone it for later—”

“Are we talking about all the people I’ve gone through the war with together?” Hermione asked all of a sudden. “Because if so, then yes, they’re family. *We’re* family, from the sheer amount of blood shed and deaths mourned, we will *always* be family until death parts us all.”

The witch had no idea what it was that she said that had created such a sorrowful look in the nurse’s eyes, but she wasn’t going to complain if Maggie was going to hug her. It was nice to be hugged. Hermione hugged her back with a content sigh.
Perhaps…perhaps there was a reason her memory was incomplete. She didn’t really want to know the depths of grief she could sink to if she knew that too many of her friends had died.

(There was an echo of truth at that idea that she did not like, and several memories with the vaguest glimpse of limp bodies, bruises and blood. She didn’t want to think that more than just a few of her friends had died over the years after the War).

Perhaps this way, she could keep holding on to the hope that they’re peacefully living their lives in the future she’d left behind and let that thought soothe her.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know the title is Asimov's. It just fits so well that I'm borrowing it for the chapter.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

Dryas: It is actually the name for a genus of plants. They’re shrubs native to arctic and alpine regions. It’s easy to imagine why Hermione snorted when she was asked whether it was a lowland plant or not.

Red liverwort: Something I really made up. Ha! Well, the liverwort itself does exist (I’m thinking of the flowering plant, not the one that was the primitive cousin of moss). I just thought I’d make up a new species from within the same genus or order. Blood kava is just as non-existent, but the kava does exist, many of its cultivars have psychoactive properties.

Rhubarb: It is actually an edible species of vegetable. Its stalk is edible and usually treated like a fruit; it is drenched in sugar water and then baked into a pie. It’s pretty tart without the sugar. The leaves, like Hermione has said, is poisonous. Cut it away and don’t eat it, folks.

Winter aconite: A genuine flower, generally poisonous. Native to continental Europe.

Additional Trivia:

“I will not fear, she said to herself, almost giddy with the realisation. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that can destroy me. I will face it and let it pass through me. When it is gone, only I will remain.”: Hermione is reciting to herself an abbreviated (and slightly modified) version of the Bene Gesserit quote from the novel Dune by Frank Herbert. It’s not precisely the same as she was going on memory and it wasn’t as if she had memorised it on purpose:

“I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And
when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”
“Do you have any spare dresses?” Hermione asked.

“Dresses, really?” Maggie Edelstein asked, not quite sure about what she’d heard.

“Well, we know that the uniform I wore when I arrived was a mess. I can’t exactly wear that, can I?”

The nurse left the cabinet she was checking and walked over to Hermione’s side. Hermione admired the bright copper sheen of her hair.

“What brought this about?”
The brunette witch took a deep breath. It was not difficult to channel her actual reservations into the surface. “Well, Professor Slughorn visited and he’d been kind enough to promise to lend me his book.”

“Ah,” Maggie nodded sagely. She glanced at the side table where the thick volume of *Hogwarts: A History* lay.

“So, right around lunch time, there was this Slytherin prefect who delivered it for me.”

Maggie’s smile turned sly at this point. “So, Was he handsome?”

“Maggie!” Hermione’s surprise wasn’t even faked. “Oh, I’m sorry, Nurse Edelstein—”

Nurse Edelstein waved it away, her eye alight with curiosity. “Oh, it’s alright when there’s no one else. I know you’re not being a nuisance when you drop the title. So, who was it? And I know he’s good looking, young lady, otherwise you wouldn’t have been this distracted from your books.”

“Tom Riddle, Fifth year.”

The nurse sat on Hermione’s bed, mulling over it. “Dark hair, intense gaze?”

“Exactly.”

Maggie sighed. “Ah, he’s memorable alright. Already so charming at this age, isn’t he? He’d grow up to be quite a lady-killer. If only I was your age.”

It amused Hermione to see her lost in thought.

“Well, I’m sure he’d be flattered by your assessment.” The nurse gave her a look for her cheekiness. Hermione drummed her fingers over her thighs, observing her nails. “He said that he’d deliver some library books tonight, and I know we’re not even friends yet or anything of that sort, but I just hate the idea of not looking my best, you know? I already can’t get out of bed much, I still can’t go to class. I can’t get to know my classmates and everyone’s life continues to go on without me…”

“I understand,” the nurse said, softly. Her hand was on Hermione’s shoulder.

“It’s just a little normal in your life, isn’t it? It’s not any trouble at all. I’m sure I have a dress that would fit you very well.” Maggie said.

The younger witch looked up at that. “Oh, no! It’s not necessary at all. I was just wondering if there’s any extra dresses around that people forget, maybe from who knows what year. You don’t have to lend me yours. It’s too much—”

“It’s not,” Maggie insisted. “Anyway, the last dress I saw in storage here has crinoline. Do you want to wear crinoline?”

Hermione laughed at that, shaking her head.

“No, not really.”

“Exactly. Now, don’t bother your pretty head about it, I’ll be back with the dress in no time.”

A dress might be a pretty confection of silk and lace, but a dress is also an armour for social
occasions.

Ginny had given up trying to impart Hermione any fashion insights beyond the basic highlights. Surprisingly, it was Daphne’s signature bitchiness that made Hermione snap to attention.

(“Please, Granger, you’re a powerful woman. I know that, the fools that have faced your explosive wrath on the battlefield know that, but must you always dress like a cast-off spinster aunt for the Wizengamot?” The blonde Slytherin narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t—”

“You do,” the chorus of agreement had come from one Ginny, too-relieved to have back-up for now, and even, horror of horrors, Luna. Everyone turned to the Ravenclaw in surprise.

“I do have an eclectic taste, but the goddesses celebrate womanhood and sensuality.”

Ginny and Daphne nodded in agreement at that and at Luna’s ersatz-patterned but flattering dress with the low-cut back.

 Yep, still much better than Hermione,” the redhead commented.

“Hey!” Nobody paid attention to the brunette’s annoyance.

Daphne turned her attention back at Hermione.

“The way you dress right now only makes them underestimate you. I’m sure you can stomp them in no time every time they do that, but don’t you get bloody tired of having to do it again, and again, and again? If they’re not going to learn any time soon, you might as well dress like an empress. That way you’d hit them over the head hard enough with the impression of power that it would give them pause before they try to run another idiotic ploy past you.”

“Are you guaranteeing that this would make them stop being an idiot?”

Daphne nodded. “If nothing changes in two months, you can go back to dressing however you like.”)

Of course, Daphne wasn’t wrong. Apparently, some people are just that dense that they keep judging a book by its cover, even when the damned book had gnawed their arms into stumps. She’d gotten used to what Daphne taught her, though, even developed her own sense of style. It was less of an effort for her to pay attention to her wardrobe these days than it had been before.

This was a social occasion. Ergo, her armour for the occasion would be a dress. She did her best not to over-plan. That would look too desperate. It wasn’t as if they were going to go anywhere with ballroom dancing on the cards. Still, she couldn’t be lax either. It was always better to go in over-prepared when you’re across the table from Tom Riddle than under-prepared.

Nurse Edelstein certainly went above and beyond the call of duty, and Hermione was proud that she could certainly call her a friend now. After checking, there were three dresses that the young witch could easily wear. The first was a daring red dress that called to her, but considering the Gryffindor overtones, she skipped it with a sigh. She was looking for something more neutral.

The second dress was of a muted turquoise colour that was closer to celadon and it was the one she ended up picking. It was also something that can as easily be worn on a nice autumn day as a night out of town. Nothing too formal. Just the perfect level between casual and nice that she was looking for.
Maggie Edelstein has heard of Tom Riddle.

It was the same way she knew about the Abbott twins and the same way she knew about this generation’s members of the Black family. The school was an endless font of gossip if you knew who to ask, and sometimes the students are just too interesting.

Yet for all his high profile, Tom Riddle remains a bit of a mystery. Academically gifted, helpful towards the professors and practically the perfect student…the picture it presented was too flawless, too curated. She knew it was probably just because he was another Slytherin with enough cunning to manage his image, but it didn’t mean that she wasn’t curious about what his true self (or truer self, at any rate,) was like.

“So, what is Riddle actually like in person?” Nurse Edelstein asked as she watched her young charge purse her lips in contemplation about the collar of the dresses. She realised that Hermione Curie’s life was probably filled with tragedy, but must someone so young look so serious all the time?

“He is brilliant,” Hermione started with, her lips curving upwards slightly as she said this. It was clear that she thought it was enough. Maggie sent her a disappointed look. The brunette sighed and continued. “His confidence sometimes slips too easily into arrogance. At some level, I’m sure he’s narcissistic.”

Maggie’s brows furrowed slightly.

“Why does he sound more annoying the more you describe him?”

“Because I know he’s pretty to look at, but I’m not blindly besotted?” The student’s voice was dry.

Maggie huffed.

“Hermione darling, you’re taking the fun out of this game!”

The witch had the temerity to chuckle, as usual. “You wish to hear more of his good side, then? Fine, I can do that too. He moves with a purpose. He does not idle or dwell in doubt. You can see ambition powering him and be certain that whatever he wants, he will get. Happy would be the witch that he decides deserve the world.”

“Many Slytherins are ambitious,” the nurse pointed out.

“Maybe,” Hermione nodded in easy agreement. “But I’m sure none had the perfect combination of sheer brilliance, charm and ambition that Tom Riddle has.”

Maggie’s hazel eyes were scrutinised the young patient more intensely than before. She made the statements with the easy certainty of one who knew they were true beyond doubt. Yet it was not the snap-judgment of a shallow crush—Hermione had amply demonstrated her acknowledgment of his flaws earlier. The young witch was confident that she’d had a good measure of Tom Riddle’s character.

How? And just as importantly, why?

“What exactly did you speak with him about?”

She shrugged, her tight brown curls bouncing with the movement. It was actually cute. “Oh, the usual. Books.”
“Books?”

“Yes. He saw me borrowing your Cook’s Encyclopaedia, you see. So, that was how we started talking about herbs.” She said, almost flippant. Maggie couldn’t believe that Hermione caught all that about Tom Riddle just talking about *herbs*.

“I think you’re skipping over a few important things there.” The Nurse said through narrowed eyes.

“I might be.”

“Hermione,”

The brunette gave a knowing sideways glance from underneath her eyelashes, her lips full with many unsaid secrets akin to her mysterious life before Hogwarts. It was these little things that made her seem older. Maggie thought with not a little fondness that she was going to cut a swathe through young men in the school and not even realise it. “You can find out many things when you’re talking about herbs, you know. Especially when he says, and I quote, ‘You will never be average, Miss Curie.’”

Her brows rose at that, as she couldn’t help but be bemused. “Ah, you’ve managed to impress him.”

Hermione’s smile was impish as she shrugged again. “Oh, I don’t know. I wasn’t even trying.”

Nurse Edelstein picked up one of the crumpled parchments on the bed and threw it at Hermione’s face, ignoring her high-pitched yelp. She had the childish glee of seeing the transfer student *finally* acting immature.

“Cocky, aren’t you?”

“Well, apparently something worked. Why shouldn’t I just savour the feel of something going right?” The brunette asked.

Maggie immediately spoke up before Hermione could dwell on it too much. She’d taken it as her personal mission to distract the poor girl.

“Does that mean you’re not going to try too hard?”

“Well, it’s not a ball, but it doesn’t mean I won’t do my best to look decent.” Hermione insisted. “I can’t look worse than him. That’s like starting chess with only half the pawns.”

At the very least, she had already known that Hermione was competitive.

“Don’t worry. I’ll hide out in the supply room and then listen to your commentary afterwards.”

‘-

“Your books, Miss Curie.”

“Thanks, but I have no idea where to place them.”

He was helpful, she had to give him that. The moment their polite greetings were done, Tom Riddle had assessed the side table and a faint line grew on his brow. Apparently, the side table was dismissed under grounds of inadequacy. He shifted the screen to her right away from her bed, and then placed the spare bed on that side right next to hers. He laid the library books there. With a rather complicated wand movement, the bed was transformed into a short bookshelf. It was just the
right height for someone on the bed to use.

“Now you do. You would have to be careful and avoid casting finite anywhere near it, but it will serve.”

“That’s amazing,” it came out breathier than she’d liked. Still, Hermione wasn’t lying—that was some fine spellwork, especially the height adjustment factor. She had a feeling that if the bed was of a different height, the height of the shelves would follow. If she could detect the slightest smugness in his polite smile, she wasn’t going to call him out on it. She was that interested.

“Where did you find the spell?”

“It’ll take a while for me to find the book, but I’m sure I can teach you myself.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Hermione said, ignoring his surprise easily. “Ah, where are my manners! Please, sit and rest for a while after lugging around all those books here. It must be annoying to have to run errands like that.”

She changed her usual visitor’s chair into a wing-back chair while he murmured something polite about how it wasn’t a problem at all. She chose dark green for the new chair’s leather. To his credit, when she gave him a dry, unconvinced look for those pleasantries, he did return it with an amused smile that was more genuine.

Wait, it wasn’t exactly a genuine smile. It was more of a genuine smirk.

“Well, your company is interesting.”

“Why, thank you.”

He did not hide his appraising glance as the spell finished and he sat down on the chair. Hermione used a modified accio to first pull the food trolley towards her at normal speed across the floor before she manually summoned the tray with tea and cakes there.

They landed on the footed tray over her thighs as light as a feather.

She knew he was watching her wand under hooded eyes, with occasional glimpses sent her way. Spells that require fine control like these were more finesse than brute magical power, and she had dexterity in spades. It wasn’t a problem even for her recovering self.

He took his tea with a spot of milk, and she had begun to memorise it out of habit, the way she did for people she frequently had tea with. Hers was slightly more liberal with the milk and sugar, and she endured the good-natured ribbing about how she was drowning out all the tea’s flavour as she offered him the cakes and took the ones she wanted.

“I have heard all arguments on it before and I stand my ground. This is the perfect way to drink tea. In fact, I think you’re not adventurous enough,” she insisted with mock seriousness. “My drawing room, my rules.”

“As the lady wishes.” His reply was edging between polite and dry.

If she wasn’t used to having Slytherin friends who can use words to wound as easily as a dagger, she wouldn’t notice.

But she did, and Hermione couldn’t help but chuckle. It was probably all those times of being a perfect student in front of Slughorn that sharpened his passive-aggressive edge. Not that she cared
if he let it flare once in a while.

“I’m sorry, it’s just… Please tell me when I’m being a dictator. My friends say I’m bossy and they tend to help me rein that side in.”

“You have been the perfect host,” he assured her, but he did not deny her claims. “I just have one question.”

She placed her cup down. “Yes?”

“Who attacked you?”

Her jaws tightened as she looked down. Was she defending the Department of Mysteries, room from room, perhaps with Malina or Luna? No, her gut feeling told her that it wasn’t it. She had not been with both of them. Was she with Ron and Harry on a major raid, like that one where Daphne joined in? No, something still felt slightly off either.

“I’m sorry, if I’m too forward—”

Tom Riddle’s voice cut through the haze of confusion. She met his gaze, her eyes dry, and shook her head. His statement was said out of sheer politeness, she could see that, but Hermione didn’t care whether he actually cared or not. He was already interested in her mystery, she could tell. Knowing his stubbornness and intelligence, she wouldn’t mind if he might somehow find the clues before she could.

“It’s alright. It’s just…my memories. They’re not all there. The attack, for example. I can’t remember how the attack happened. Is it a straight-on fight? Is it an ambush? Was I kidnapped from my bed in the middle of the night? There’s no memory. No gut feeling or emotional reaction to one idea or the other. How many people did I leave behind? How many people I might fail to save?” She could feel her voice rising and she stopped before she started yelling at the budding dark lord. Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath, once, twice, before she opened her eyes again.

He didn’t manage to successfully hide the glimmer of his disappointment before he was once more looking appropriately sympathetic.

Hermione couldn’t help it. She tried, truly tried to hold it back. Yet the absurdity of trying to be friends with Tom Riddle, no matter how casually and accidentally, and having tea with a budding dark lord hit her in full right then.

She laughed. It was not an elegant tittering by any means. She didn’t let it go on for long, but she had laughed freely without much cares all the same.

“It’s alright, Mr. Riddle,” she said, before he could say anything, still smiling at him. “I know I wasn’t any useful to you, you don’t need to hide your disappointment at that. I am even more interested than you are to find out how one can apparate into Hogwarts.”

He seemed to have decided to ignore her breach of propriety for now, but there was an increased awareness in his eyes. A hunter concerned that a beast might be unpredictable.

“No one can apparate into Hogwarts. The wards would not allow it.”

“And yet the very first clear memory I have after the attack is waking up at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. My wounds are such that I’m sure I could not have walked all the way there from the entrance, while the ground around me is undisturbed that it could not be the location of a
fight. My conclusion? I was dropped there.”

She watched the interest quietly flare back into life in his eyes, the reluctant acknowledgement that he could find no fault in her arguments.

“I’ve also read parts of Hogwarts: A History, and I know it’s not possible to apparate on Hogwarts’ grounds. But the question of my arrival remains. It’s even more ridiculous if we suppose that it was a portkey—it would imply that someone had entered Hogwarts sometime before and left it in the forest, unnoticed.” Hermione sighed.

“If they were someone trying to save you, why leave the portkey in the forest instead of entrusting it to Dumbledore? If it was someone trying to harm you—well, that’s the second most idiotic thing they could do.” Tom concluded.

She nodded, before realizing what he’d said.

“What’s the most idiotic thing they could do?”

“To leave you at St. Mungo’s with a note of apology pinned on your clothes.” He stated flatly.

Hermione let out a surprised chuckle, unexpectedly appreciating his biting sense of humour. She thought she could see glimpses of the same half-wondering expression on his face before he tuned them out, as if he’d never thought her company could be something not moronic.

“So, I would like to be able to track down who did it and make them pay, but unfortunately, I’ve told you most of what I know about it. It’s not much, is it?”

His blue eyes were fixed on hers.

“You will ‘make them pay’? Indulging in vigilantism, is it, Miss Curie?” It sounded like concern, like a patronising almost-advice given to a weak-minded female and probably reflective of the era. Yet his eyes didn’t reflect the words at all, dark and endless. It did not scare her.

It made her smile.

“Well, I’m sure if the Aurors can make them pay, I’ll turn them in.”

“If, you say?” He leaned forward.

Hermione poured them both more tea, her more ordered curls slipping over her left shoulder as she did so. She did his tea the way she’d just memorised and did hers to her own preference.

“Oh, you know how it is. Sometimes, some cases slip through the cracks, or the government had cut the law enforcement’s budget again, or, I don’t know, maybe a foreign power has placed a puppet as the head of the government.” The Wizarding Wireless allowed her to listen to European news, and she followed news about her hypothetical origin country Norway with interest. Well, sometimes the news just made her want to rage (Quisling should just go jump off a cliff), but her curiosity got the better of her.

Her smile was still the one perfect for tea parties that Daphne had imparted to her. Her eyes were as unemotional as glass, and just as suited to a high society party as a result.

“Sometimes, the law needs a little helping hand, don’t you think?”

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It would be easy to play the dutiful student once more, never neglecting her classes or any of her other responsibilities. She still had a rough memory of how the old Hermione was like, and it was no hardship to become her once more. Yet that young woman that she was once was also painfully naïve, blind in some ways to how the world worked.

She’d had enough secrets already, things she couldn’t tell to anyone else at the risk of being thought crazy.

Hermione didn’t care if one of the people who would see her quirks ended up being Tom Riddle. She really didn’t want to be the good student a lot more often than necessary, and once she was healthy enough to attend classes regularly, she was sure that she wouldn’t hide who she was from the other students as well. His opinion of her had been carefully changing from just ‘unknown stellar student’ into something decidedly stranger throughout their tea, and she was just waiting for him to react.

“The law is there for a reason, Miss Curie.” His reply was kind.

There. There goes his opening salvo. Ever the voice of reason, the good prefect, aren’t you, Mr. Riddle? She hid her smile.

“Of course. The rules are there for a reason, but sometimes they do get in the way of doing what’s right, what’s decent,” she replied nonchalantly. Young Hermione was going to get a heart attack about what she was saying, but well, she’d changed, hadn’t she? What was the use of following the rules in a school run by the Carrows? Would she stay back at the great hall now if she heard that a troll, a basilisk ran loose?

No. Just…no, with extreme prejudice. She’d actually had enough skills to take care of it and she’d certainly set out to do so. She’d really rather get more people to stay alive than stick to an inflexible set of rules.

“I do think that it’s important the we don’t kill people willy-nilly, that it’s bad, and that hurting people is also bad. Those rules are there for a reason. But sometimes, it’s a friend who wants to buy a birthday present for his girlfriend, and maybe he’d really forgotten it until the last minute. What’s the harm in accompanying him to the owlery past curfew to send an owl-order?”

“As a prefect, I’m afraid I’d have to disagree with your decision.”

For all his textbook reply, Tom’s expression as he said this was knowing.

Hermione allowed a small smile to rise. “I know. I’ll be serious in watching out the rule breakers if I was a prefect as well. It would be my responsibility, after all. It would also serve the sloppiest of them to either start getting subtler or stop sneaking out after curfew. Incompetent rule breaking is just embarrassing in its lack of common sense. It’s better that they’re stopped now and that they learn their lesson before they move to something bigger only to fail spectacularly.”

“It would be a public service to teach them, really. Who knows how many people they’ll drag down with them when they go down if they’re not careful?” She insisted.

Like trying to be a mad dark lord. The actions of one just boggles common sense.

She sipped her tea. “So, the general principle would be the same. I wouldn’t be enforcing harshly the sorts of rules that has too many different applications.”

“So, now we know what type of prefect you’d be,” he mused.
“My deepest secrets,” she said sarcastically, one hand laid upon her brow. “I’m afraid my chances would be ruined if you leak them to the head girl. I beg you to keep this to yourself.”

She got a snort out of him and Hermione stared Tom Riddle for another two seconds. That was… she’d managed to make him do something so inelegant. It had to be some sort of weird achievement—probably the sort of thing that would earn her the ire of his admirers.

Hermione paused, considering something.

Well, why not? Why shouldn’t she make him that offer?

“Well, why not? Why shouldn’t she make him that offer?”

She had gracefully elided on the exact nature of the hunt, but it wasn’t hard to miss for someone as sharp as Riddle.

It was also a convenient test. The secret wasn’t anything significant that she risked losing (as if she even knew who attacked her, or whether they were from this time), yet it allowed her to show him a part of her true nature. She was not harmless, and she’d pursue justice for people she knew even when the legal means have failed. If he’d ever seriously considered going full-on, mad dark lord now, he’d be aware that she’d also be there to go after him.

It doubled as a convenient stealth warning too.

“Vigilantism is not condoned by the Ministry of Magic, Miss Curie.” His tone was mildly disapproving. A careful observation told her that no emotion of any sort touched his dark blue eyes. Hermione solemnly nodded in agreement, even if she couldn’t always control the amused twitch of her lips.

“Of course, Mr. Riddle.”

“With that said, I think any friend of yours would not mind accompanying you on a hunt.”

She nodded. “Thank you for your advice.”

On the second day that Hogwarts’ mysterious transfer student had arrived after she had been mysteriously attacked, Professor Slughorn sought him out.

It was an annoyance, of course, as it required him to take a detour from his day-to-day routine. What Tom Riddle did was to smile at Slughorn at the request, before assuring his Head of House that it would be done and he need not concern himself with it. He wondered whether she was as special as Slughorn seemed to think she was, but what he said was to ask about her academic records, how challenging her previous school was, and the like.

Because Tom Riddle the Responsible Prefect would certainly worry about whether a fellow student would be able to keep up with classes if she was about to be bedridden for a while.

Slughorn, however, did the unexpected thing of drawing him back to his office and invited him over. He started a kettle once he was there to prepare tea. Tom went to one of the cupboards to ready the cups and teapot himself because he already knew where they are, accepting Slughorn’s quick thanks easily.
“She’s clever, Tom. So, very clever! The child of British expatriates born in London, she’d already taken the Norwegian equivalent of OWLs and passed with flying colours! She insisted on knowing how bad her wounds are, and it was clear that she’d studied not a little medicine.”

Tom did his best not to let his brows rise far, but apparently Slughorn saw it still the same.

“No, it’s true. She had already guessed that her kidneys were bruised from the dull pain she felt when she arrived, and that it wasn’t much better yet because she can still see blood in her urine.”

Not a squeamish miss, he surmised with a modicum of respect. Perhaps she would not be a complete bore either. Slughorn, however, seemed to have lost his enthusiasm at this point, his gaze distant.

“But then, we have to keep in mind the saddest truth about her, Tom.”

Tom’s brows creased slightly; his confusion wasn’t faked. Slughorn turned to him again.

“The only reason she’d gotten quite a grounding in the medical arts at her age is most probably the same reason that Albus and I had to stabilise her condition when she first came to us. She had been badly attacked by dark magic back then.” He paused, his usually easy expression uncommonly grave.

“I have no doubt that she had been in the middle of a war for a while. I know I might sound preposterous of me, Tom, but please, I need to hear your assurance. It might just be the worry of an old man. Please do your utmost care that she feels comfortable and safe at Hogwarts.”

Tom nodded. The seriousness of the request really allowed for no other socially-acceptable reply.

“Of course, Professor. I’ll be very careful.”

“Thank you. Who knows, she might be more inclined towards Slytherin House to choose it as hers when the time comes! Ha! Especially if she found you so charming!”

Tom ducked in faux-embarrassment because he couldn’t help but smirk as Slughorn’s ambition came to the fore again. There was the Head of Slytherin that he was familiar with. His previous comments on caring and concern was mildly annoying because Tom couldn’t quite fathom the reason why, and this return to his old habits was comfortable. They talked a little more over tea, Slughorn feeling no compunction at all at divulging her scores because he knew Tom would not gossip about it.

“It’s not as if the dear girl had anything to be embarrassed about—a perfect set of scores! Why, if I was her father, I’d shout it to the rafters. In fact, I’ll do it myself once she’s out of the infirmary and we can talk with her over tea. I consider myself a guardian of hers, because did you know that she was orphaned by the war? It’s such terrible shame.’ Slughorn prattled.

Tom’s smile had become a little more fixed at this point. A perfect set of scores? What a pitiful orphan? Such a nice, brilliant girl? Why does that sound familiar?

Why, certainly. Because that is the persona that he wore like a second skin right now.

He truly needed to see her personally and take her measure. He will have to find her idiosyncrasies, her loves, her hates, and weave a web out of them. The more he heard about her that seemed to pile up into this image of a nice, brilliant girl who loves to learn with an unfortunate fate hanging over her, the more concerned he was that she was another viper slinking into the nest.
There was only enough space for one, after all.

Chapter End Notes

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Crinoline:** (history, fashion), a stiff underskirt or petticoat with a bell shape worn under a full skirt to expand its shape. Can also mean a hoop skirt.

**Quisling, Vidkun:** (history, Norway) Norwegian politician who lead the Nazi collaborator government after the German invaded Norway in 1940. By this year (1942) on the 13th of March, he restored the old “Jewish paragraph” in the Norwegian constitution (it says that Jews were forbidden to enter or settle in Norway). Note that this paragraph was already abolished in 1851.

There was, of course, the Norwegian Government-in-Exile in London, led by King Haakon VII and Prime Minister Johan Nygaardsvold.

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04 A Sorting to Sing to

Chapter Summary

Hermione wants to return to school as quickly as she can. The sorting, at last, as witnessed by the four Heads of Houses. Tom Riddle drops in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

04 A Sorting to Sing to

Hermione was beginning to have the unexpected regret that she was such a good student.

She remembered the outlines of her classes well once she'd read all the syllabi (it was among the rolls of parchment that Tom Riddle brought her, along with the text books). There wasn’t much difference there, though she did notice that several magical advances had yet to make it to the Hogwarts curriculum. Yet all this only made it more apparent that she didn’t even need to read through the books that Slughorn and gotten Tom Riddle to bring to her. The words were so familiar that she only needed to skim to refresh her memory. She went over all five of them lightly, quickly, with the ease of a young girl dancing over stepping stones to cross a river and she was done in no time.

Two days. She still slept a lot, because the potions did their work best that way, but even with the limited number of waking hours that she had, it still only took her two days to find the books stale.

“I need to know what my class assignments are, Nurse Edelstein.”

The nurse stared at her in disbelief.
“I know, I need rest and all, but I am resting. I’m in my bed, see? The farthest I walk is to the loo, as you well know, and you’ve never stopped plying me with food from the kitchens to make sure I have enough energy to recover.” Hermione sighed. “But if I’m going to sit around with nothing to do, I’ll mope. You don’t want to see me mope, do you? It’s the most pathetic thing in the universe.”

She gave Maggie her best, puppy-eyed look. The nurse poked her cheek with a huff, but didn’t deny it.

“I swear, you are the most boring student that I know.”

“Hey!” She pouted.

“How is your beau, anyway? Why aren’t you telling me more about him? You should ask him to visit more often.” Maggie tried a different tack.

Hermione tapped her chin with a careful consideration. “Why, if delivering six books makes him my beau, I should find a man who would lend me his library. Surely that means we should be married!”

The nurse threw her hands up in defeat.

“You are incorrigible.”

“No, I am completely logical,” Hermione said easily. “I am merely following the social implications you’ve set.”

Maggie snorted. “With that cheekiness, I question whose social implications you’ve been following.”

Hermione was unperturbed, her smile positively brimming with innocence.

“Well, if we’re not trying to get me married off to the first man with a library, how do I go about finding what homework are given for my classes?” She asked.

Maggie Edelstein let out a long, exasperated sigh as she sat down on the chair next to Hermione’s bed. It really was a bright morning, what with the sun shining brightly through the windows. If she had to be at Hogwarts again, she longed to be able to sit on the grass beside the lake, enjoying the sun and wind with a cosy book at hand.

“You just don’t give up, do you?” Maggie muttered.

“Well, we can do this for another half an hour, if you want? You know, so you can try valiantly dissuading me from my bookworm ways?” The brunette said, easily.

“Try?” Her voice rose up in disbelief.

Hermione shrugged. “Well, I know that you’re not going to succeed, so I believe the operative word here is ‘try’.”

She was being evil, she knew. Hermione squashed down the teeny, tiny amount of guilt with a bite of her lip as she heard the frustrated grumbles coming out of the throat of Maggie Edelstein. But she couldn’t help it. She’d always wished she could let loose, when she was younger, to not hold back all the quips she felt like saying because she was a prefect, and mature, and thus above all that. She knew now that she’d envied Draco when she was a student for being able to let his sharp
tongue loose, even if she didn’t envy his foolishness at all.

Well, she’d saved the wizarding world at least once. She was allowed her little indulgences now, surely?

“Oh, alright. But don’t come crying to me if the professors start asking you to turn them in on time.” The nurse finally said in defeat.

“I’m sure I can manage, Nurse Edelstein.”

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“My dear girl, how has this happened?”

Hermione looked up, surprised to see a concerned Slughorn making his way through the rows of beds. The sun was low in the sky, its rays long in the infirmary. He did pause for a moment at the book shelf that Tom Riddle had transfigured from a bed with an interested look on his face before he shook it away and proceeded to make his way to the chair next to hers. She turned the chair into a comfortable couch, the sort that she remembered he’d kept at his office that he loved to sink into. He gave her a fond and admiring look for her spellcraft.

“I’m sorry, Professor, but what do you mean?”

“Madam Edelstein has informed me that you are eager to begin your studies…and then we ran into the issue of determining which homework you would get, based on the classes you follow. But we’ve only realised just now that there are no particular classes that you follow yet, because you’re not even Sorted!”

She blinked. “Um, Nurse Edelstein contacted you? I thought this is the headmaster’s responsibility?”

“She contacted me because I’ve asked her to keep me up to date on your condition, and that she shouldn’t hesitate to contact me if there was anything that you need. Besides, the headmaster is busy enough with his office that I am always happy to assist him in any manner required.” He beamed at her, all helpful productivity and she was struck with the oddest feeling of finding him endearing. Not that she’d doubt his social meddling would annoy her in some way, sooner or later, it was just…something she hadn’t thought she’d feel about him.

Or perhaps she was more than a tad nostalgic for familiar old Hogwarts too.

“Oh yes, I’ve brought the issue up today. He did say that perhaps we should wait until you recover, but when I pointed out that you would most likely stay even more behind in your classes if we don’t even know which ones you were supposed to be in, well, that changed the situation.” Slughorn said. “We will bring the Sorting Hat to the infirmary this evening, don’t worry about it.”

His beefy hand patted her shoulder with a delicacy most would not expect out of a man his size. That was foolish, of course, Hermione always knew—he could not have been a great Potion Master without finesse.

“Professor Slughorn? Thank you.”

“It’s no trouble at all!”
“If I don’t end up in your House, Professor, then know that it’s certainly would not be because of you. Even if I were to placed somewhere else, I’m always glad to know you.”

Slughorn’s grin was like a boy given a lollipop the size of his head, oddly enough it didn’t look out of place in a wizard his age. He was buzzing with so much energy that he looked as if he would bounce around the room any time now. Hermione had to smother a grin. In a way, it was nice to interact with him. He was just so predictable that she didn’t need to overthink her reaction.

“Me too, Hermione, me too. Never be afraid to look me up—the doors of my office are always open for you.” He insisted.

She could hear the infirmary door opening, the hushed voices of the visitor conversing with Nurse Edelstein. The nurse was trying to determine whether the person had any right to disturb Hermione. To this measure, she’d raised the screens around her bed again, though only behind her new bookshelf to remove her from the line of sight from the door. Maggie’s zealotness no longer surprised her after the last time Headmaster Dippet came—he was absentminded enough to drop in after dinner, and Nurse Edelstein was livid with his intrusion into Hermione’s sleeping schedule and firmly ushered him out.

It was entertaining to see the headmaster herded away by the shorter woman, and Hermione was holding back her giggles, but Maggie Edelstein on the warpath wasn’t something you’d want to cross.

Hermione looked up when the footsteps seemed to approach her instead of going out again. A wizard stood before her, his coat respectable under his robes. His face was long, hair a pale dishwater blond and even for all its length, it was tied up neatly in a queue. Add his penchant for dark and sombre clothing actually gave her the impression that he would fit better as a clerk or lawyer at London or Manchester than a wizard.

His bright blue eyes, paler than Dumbledore’s, changed that impression. It was as welcoming as his smile.

“Good evening, Miss Curie.”

“Good evening, um, Professor.”

He nodded, before taking a seat himself. “I’m Professor Orphne—Orpheus, Dexter, I teach Astronomy at Hogwarts and I’m also the Head of Ravenclaw House.”

“Pleased to meet you, Professor.”

“Likewise. I’m glad that you seem to be doing well.”

Hermione’s smile was rueful. “Well, it’s still not as fast as I’d like.”

“Recovery is rarely as fast as we like, Miss Curie. Most unfortunate, I know.”

“True. Um, what brings you here, Professor?”

The approaching sunset washed the room in a warm glow. Unlike Slughorn, Professor Dexter was not a naturally exuberant man, and this was made clear as he chose his words carefully.

“I wish to welcome you to Hogwarts, though I’m aware that I’m far from the first professor to do
so as to render it far from a necessity,” he said with self-deprecation. “But as Head of Ravenclaw House, it would be remiss of me to fail to greet someone with such love of knowledge, such zeal for academia. After all, it is the great ideal of my House.”

“There’s no need to trouble yourself,” Hermione started.

“Nonsense. And lose again to Dumbledore and Slughorn? I’m afraid you’ll find that even us teachers can be a little competitive.” His expression was one of slight embarrassment.

“I’m flattered by your interest, Professor.”

“You should also join the duelling club, run by Galatea.” He recommended, quite suddenly. Hermione tried to figure out who Galatea was and remembered from the various syllabi that she’d been handed with that she was the DADA teacher.

“Professor Merrythought? Pardon me, but why?”

He paused, pale eyes observing her for a while before he seemed to come to a decision.

“Well, I’m sure for someone whose life is under the Aegis of Mars, you would not mind any and all assistance that you can get?” He asked. “We, at Hogwarts, promise to keep you safe while you’re with us. It’s the least we can do, and we sincerely wish for you to know that.”

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Professor Dexter, it would seem, was still more British than Slughorn.

Even as their conversation moved on, it was clear that there was some other topic that he wished to address but had yet to do so. Yet he did not quite reach it even until the end, their time taken by many interesting walks through not only astronomy, but also charms and transfiguration. It was not hard to see why he was in Ravenclaw; his academic interest was such that she was certain he had a good grasp of the foundations of all magical branches. He seemed to be quite widely read on muggle books too, and it was relaxing in a homesick way, as Hermione was having flashbacks to her discussions with her father. Professor Dexter wished her well once more at the end and taken his leave. Yet it was only when she was eating her supper that the impression of his still having words unsaid crossed her mind.

He had not said a word about Ravenclaw House or even tried recommending it to her. That must’ve been the source of his awkward reluctance.

Frustratingly, he hadn’t been too specific about whatever it was he’d read in the stars in relation to her. Other than the first statement about the ‘Aegis of Mars’, he didn’t explain further, only that it’s never fruitful to try to read details into it, because the portents were most effective in the broad brush.

In a way, it was helpful and unhelpful at once. Helpful because it confirmed that yes, her life was certainly tied to one war or the other, and even the stars know it. On the other hand, it was unhelpful as it really didn’t give further information she can work with.

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Hermione had finished supper and Headmaster Dippet had arrived with his entourage so to speak.

“Is all this ceremony really necessary?”
It was Professor Dexter who asked that as he stood not far from one end of Hermione’s bed. Headmaster Dippet was directing Professor Dumbledore to find a stool, and he did so by transfiguring a foot stool he’d found. The headmaster was carefully rearranging the Sorting Hat on the stool.

“Well, you came all the same,” Slughorn said.

“If I hadn’t, you would still be filling Miss Curie’s head with the so-called virtues of Slytherin House.” Dexter sounded resigned but determined.

“So-called?” He asked, in mock outrage.

“Personally, I prefer to call them ‘follies’ than ‘virtues’,” a woman whose curves could easily make her the representation of any earth goddess smiled at Hermione, ignoring Slughorn’s protests. “Phyllida Spore, Herbology Professor and Head of Hufflepuff. I’m sorry dear. If the boys weren’t so eager to one-up each other, all four of us could have met you at the same time and then you’d be left to rest afterwards, instead of having to bear their repeated visits and intrusions to your peaceful rest.”

“It’s alright, Professor Spore. The talks with the professors have been…illuminating.” Hermione said, completely unwilling to get in the middle of the Head of Houses easy ribbing at each other.

“And completely in Slytherin and Gryffindor’s favour, I’d wager.” Professor Spore concluded.

“My dear Phyllida, I’m saddened that you’d believe I would try such underhanded tactics,” Dumbledore said this, but his eyes were twinkling. Her reply was almost sweet. Almost.

“I know you won’t, Albus. I’m sure you much preferred being ham-handed, after all.”

There was a snort in the direction of Dexter. Yikes. Dippet seemed to fail to notice that anything unusual had been going on. He merely fake-coughed into his hand a few times to catch their attention, and when some semblance of order had been restored, he started speaking.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we gather here at the most Fortunate Occasion of the Sorting of a new Hogwarts student. Now, we all know that it is customary to sort our students as first-years when they first arrive at Hogwarts, but this certainly does not apply to the occasional transfer student that we have. Since these students are usually older, we have a slightly different protocol for this.”

Dexter was very politely clearing his throat twice, thrice, probably trying to get Dippet to just move on. Dumbledore seemed content to stand at the edge for some reason, eyes bright as if he was privy to some great joke that no one else knew. Slughorn was bouncing on the balls of his feet, at least until Spore placed her hand on his arm to keep him still.

“…there is the tradition for the first-years to absorb the philosophies, the meanings of the houses in the form of the Sorting Hat’s song. Unfortunately, this great tradition is not one that is always available to all transfer students, as not all of them were fortunate enough to be able to begin their schooling at the beginning of the academic year…”

“Oh, for goodness’ sakes,” Dexter muttered under his breath, but loud enough to her ears.

“Wait for it,” Dumbledore said lightly.

“Why are we even here, by the way?” The blond professor asked with some confusion.

Dumbledore’s answering smile was a little unsettling.
Spore was impatient enough to start tapping her foot, and she didn’t bother to stop Slughorn from tapping his hand impatiently over his thigh.

“…but it has always been an important tradition! And we are proud of it, and we will do our best to shepherd each new member of our flock—”

“Who let him binge read King James Bible, again?” Spore hissed to Slughorn.

“—to the best of our ability, for they will not walk alone through the valley of the shadow of death —”

“That’s absolutely the wrong context!” Dexter hissed, appalled. “Does he even know what he’s saying? He’s rambling!”

“Oh, I know.” Dumbledore nodded in agreement.

Hermione had to look down and cover her face in her hands lest she burst into a sudden laughter.

“And so, to that purpose, we will begin the Sorting—”

“Thank Morgana,” Spore muttered a bit too loudly.

“Finally.” Dexter agreed.

“—by taking the responsibility for this tradition into our hands. Gentlemen, Lady, let us sing this year’s Sorting Hat song! Albus has kindly transcribed it for us, and we can sing it together!”

Two sets of murderous glares were sent in Dumbledore’s direction as he joyfully distributed the copies of the lyrics he’d written down—where he’d kept them so far, Hermione had no idea. Slughorn just seemed baffled. Dumbledore took his sudden position of chorale head with ease. His wand was held like a conductor’s baton.

“Now, I’ll take a middle voice so everyone can follow, just listen to it. One, two, one, two, three, four—”

Then, the singing started. Hermione’s face must have been quite red, because she was determined to hold back any sign of laughter, something that wasn’t helped by Dumbledore’s eyes, madly twinkling in conspiracy or the surprisingly murderous look from someone as phlegmatic as Dexter. Spore’s expression was already promising retribution. It didn’t help that Dumbledore always stepped in when he felt that people weren’t ‘enthusiastic’ enough, trying to get everyone to express more joy and school spirit.

And that was how Hermione was treated to a private viewing of the Sorting Hat song.

When the Sorting Hat was finally placed on her head, it was almost anticlimactic. The darkness was comfortable instead of worrying, and now she could feel what she supposed was the Hat wandering around the foyer of her mind. It did not feel like the intrusion of a person practising legilimency, because it barely had any will or destination of its own. It did not wish to root out secret; it was content standing on the porch, knocking on the door and asking you out to play.

It wanted a conversation, not an invasion.

_Hullo_,

_Hi, Hermione said. I’m Hermione._
Ooh, we’ve met before, haven’t we? You have the memories right here. What brings you back to Hogwarts, Miss Curie?

I don’t know. Time, I supposed. She replied dryly.

Ah, a brave Gryffindor you’d been. So certain in your knowledge and determined in using them for your crusades. And you have a lot of crusades, don’t you?

I wouldn’t know all of that, Hermione muttered.

The holes in your memories, yes, I see them. They don’t take away from who you are, though. You are still the person you had been, at the heart. Perhaps with less jadedness and tiredness that came with age and the weight of memories. In a way, it is a good thing for your current time, isn’t it? A world of opportunities is open to you once more, no need to let the old regrets hold you down.

But I don’t want to forget the people I know.

Maybe you don’t need to remember what they used to be.

Eh?

They’re coming around again, remember? And they don’t need you to impose memories of people long past over their present self and current future.

Oh, I’ve...I’ve never thought about it that way. It could easily be a baggage, couldn’t it? She mused.

It’s alright. It’s hard to see things that are too close to us, especially when they have profound sentimental value. Have you decided on a House?

Well.

You can be a Gryffindor again, but it will hinder your current efforts significantly.

Hermione frowned. Why?

Gryffindor is just as specific in its alignments as the Slytherins that they tend to turn away certain types of people too. Didn’t you notice?

She shook her head trying to focus on the more pressing question. What current efforts? I don’t even know there’s something I’m doing here.

Oh, there is. You might not quite consciously decide upon it yet, but it has been brewing at the back of your mind now. It is not my place to tell, only to report on its existence.

That’s not helpful, she groused.

The price of self-enlightenment is paid during the search. Its currency is the various self-doubt you have, the Hat graciously replied. Hermione sighed, ignoring the chatter that had started to pick up among the adults in the outside world.

You can flourish in Hufflepuff, the Hat offered.

But? I sense a ‘but’ coming.

But I feel that your journey will often be one you take alone, or at least only with a few people
because the skill, the knowledge required is not slight. Yet they are too loyal to let you face the
danger alone. You will worry too much about the people around you, though their friendship will
be good for your heart.

It’s down to Slytherin or Ravenclaw, then.

Yes. The other two Houses are conveniently more anti-social than Hufflepuff for your purposes. On
the other hand, being in Slytherin places challenges to your socialisation efforts as being in
Gryffindor does, slightly more so. This is especially true when you are not part of the Sacred 28.

Hermione huffed. Why don’t you just give me Ravenclaw from the beginning, then?

Because you are not a first-year, Miss Hermione. Or are you saying that you do not find our
conversation illuminating?

Hermione couldn’t exactly say no there. It wasn’t too bad at all.

Even if I have no specific memory, I still know that it’s been a while since I had a fulfilling
conversation.

Alright, it wasn’t too bad. I think the teachers are worried, though.

Let them. They know that the rules state that there are no limits on the time I would take. It is my
prerogative to enjoy the rare intelligent conversation when I have them.

She nodded. Alright. Thanks for giving me the rundown about the Hhouses situation right now.

You’re welcome.

Hermione could almost feel the Hat giving her a mental nod in return, before it bellowed its final
choice.

“RAVENCLAW!”

’-

She did not know how she managed to wake up in the morning this once, when the sky outside the
window was still dark.

Usually, she was only awake around nine or ten, and she still needed a nap in the afternoon. All in
all, she always ended up sleeping for around eighteen hours a day. This change was a welcome
one; it gave her hints that her body was on the mend. She decided to have her breakfast early,
surprising Nurse Edelstein with her activity when she arrived mid-breakfast.

“You are looking better. This is a good thing!”

“And I still have all those disgusting potions to drink.”

The nurse’s expression was sympathetic, but it didn’t stop her from bringing Hermione the
collection of potions that she needed to drink at nine. The brunette witch sighed and placed them in
a line by the side table. She knew it was necessary. It didn’t mean that she had to like it. Nurse
Edelstein checked her bandages. Hermione was thrilled to find out that the one around her head
was declared extraneous and had been removed completely. The ones around her arms had been
reduced by a half too.

It was around the time where she knew most of Hogwarts were probably having their breakfast that
there was a knock on the infirmary door. Nurse Edelstein sprung across the infirmary like a gazelle, on guard as usual.

She had expected Slughorn or Dumbledore (Dexter didn’t strike her as someone that shameless to intrude on someone at breakfast). What she didn’t expect was to hear Tom Riddle’s voice conversing politely with Maggie. His steps were soon heard approaching her bed, and in no time at all she could see his presence fully as he passed the screen by her side.

“Good morning, Mr. Riddle.”

“Good morning, Ms. Curie.”

The etiquette of the era got to her a little, but she dutifully confirmed that yes, Tom Riddle has had breakfast and thus was not inconveniencing himself when he visited her. He seemed to have sensed how rote her few questions on that front were, as the left side of his smile was starting to curl upward.

“Not that I’m not glad to have you visit, considering that I’m bored out of my wits with nothing to do, but what brought you to my humble ward?”

At the mock-serious clearing of throat from halfway across the infirmary, Hermione grinned in the nurse’s direction before turning back to Riddle.

“Oh, my apologies, Madam Edelstein’s ward. I am also a mere guest here.” The brunette clarified.

“Professor Slughorn voluntarily shared the results of your Sorting with me last night—congratulations on entering Ravenclaw, by the way. He also confirmed your official class placements last night. I have your extraordinarily packed schedule here with me.”

“By ‘voluntarily share’, you mean he ‘accosted you with much fanfare after you finished your prefect rounds’, don’t you? Then he gives you a bag of orders to do the next day without first asking whether you already have your own plans.” She asked shrewdly as she accepted his documents, shelving them casually on the bookshelf next to her—there were still a lot of space there.

“I’m sure I have no idea about what you’re talking about, Miss Curie,” he demurred, all smiles, but the wicked glint in his dark blue eyes told her of something different.

She sighed.

“I know. I’m really glad for all the things he’s done since I’ve arrived, but Professor Slughorn could be more than a little overwhelming. Look, if he’s asking you to go around to all my classes, ask for all the homework, you don’t have to do it, really. I’m sure I can ask Professor Dexter about it and he’ll find a Ravenclaw student that share classes with me—and it’s his responsibility anyway as my Head of House.”

He might seem to be the perfect student, but it didn’t mean he was one. The last thing Hermione wanted was for Tom Riddle to resent her for something as ridiculous as Slughorn’s urge to mollycoddle her.

Tom Riddle gazed at her with those dark, placid eyes that she could not easily read.

“It really is no trouble at all, Miss Curie. If I can help you feel more at home at Hogwarts after everything you’ve been through, it would be my pleasure.” He was all polite kindness.
Was he pretending still? Or was he speaking the truth for once? She felt like pulling her hair out, but it would achieve nothing. She did not care if it was Tom Riddle or just some other Hogwarts students she didn’t know, she did not like forcing people to do things for her, to bind them with no choice. It was probably why the use of house elves rankled her so much when she first heard about it, at least until she’d investigated further and found out about their odd symbiosis with wizards and witches.

Hermione pulled her covers aside, instead, pulling her legs down from the bed. It seemed to genuinely surprise the Slytherin prefect, who had moved in sync to her left side, too ready to support her if she tried to stand.

“Mr. Riddle, I know I’m peculiar, but I like to think it’s my prerogative for managing not to die after all the crap I’ve faced in my life,” she said casually. “I’d like to ask you to promise me one thing. If Slughorn is inconveniencing you in any way in my name or to my benefit, please be honest with me. I am not completely unable to relieve you from them.”

Hermione calmly looked up at him, focusing only on his eyes and not his cheekbones or lips.

“I promise.”

“That you’ll tell me when Slughorn is inconveniencing you in my name,” she insisted.

He chuckled. It was warm and reminded her too much of dark chocolate. *Did he practise it in his room, or what? No one has a casual laughter that perfect.*

“Yes. You are stubborn.” He did not hide his curiosity as he said this, or his amusement.

“Well, it’s always good to be specific,” she said. “I’m more surprised that you agreed so easily. You look like you’re too used to being the perfect prefect to admit that any discomfort affects you.”

“You speak of some ideal that is not me. I’m not perfect,” he replied, still with that perfect smile.

“Oh, of course you’re not. I know that. You don’t have any pity,” Hermione said with ease, curls moving with the tilt of her head. She ignored the slightest flicker of the muscles of his jaw, something she wouldn’t see if she hadn’t been watching for it. “I’ll be honest, now. I have a large weakness too. I’m usually a quite forgiving person until people start with the betrayals. I hate it when people go back on their promises and their given word, especially when it ends up with my friends and family getting hurt. Then? Then, I start taking inspirations from Greek tragedies and people start paying in the form of blood rain, for starters.”

Hermione waited, then, to see what he’d take from her casual admittance of what she is (for she knew what she is, a better person would have turned Rita Skeeter to the Aurors. A better person would not execute a plan involving the hunt of centaurs with a smile on her face). She still would not let these sides of her stop her from fighting on the side of good, for trying to make the wizarding world a better place day-by-day.

As she’d said, she had grown up and the world wasn’t such a simple place. Perhaps that was why she had felt that honestly talking to Tom Riddle was a normal thing to do.

He wasn’t Voldemort yet. It had to mean something, right?

“You’ve given me such a terrible weakness,” he commented, apparently deciding to see where she’d take this. “No pity, Miss Curie? ‘The merciless’ sounds like a title fit for a dictator.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” She said, almost as surprised as he was by the answer.
“And I’m sure the damsel in distress would swoon at the idea of a rescue by ‘Matt the Merciless’ instead of being scared to death. Of course.” He was still too polite to be sarcastic, but Hermione could read his disbelief easily.

“It could have easily turned into something like ‘the Just’ or ‘the Fair’. Being without pity also means that you’re not easily swayed by emotional appeals or people trying to manipulate your heartstrings.”

Was he aware his mask was down? Because he looked incredulous. Yet for all his incredulity his attention was hyper-focused on her. If she’d thought his dark eyes were distracting before, now they were positively mesmerising. She had to look away to be able to speak easily.

“Almost every other human is like that, you know? It’s in the high ninety percent range of the population. I know how important emotions are in human relationships and perhaps up to the village or district level, but when it comes for ordering society on a higher stage, it becomes a distinct weakness. The human mind stumbles at prioritizing the good of 10,000 people over 1,000. It’s why a single tragic death in a newspaper can raise funds faster and to larger quantities than say, a story of a bad building code that affects three blocks and has allowed the quick spread of several diseases through the apartment complexes because of it. People’s heart strings are not tugged by numbers, even when they represent the absolute scale of the tragedy.”

“Yet isn’t the last case far crueler since far more people suffered?” She asked back.

He was listening carefully, his curiosity clear. Perhaps she was merely a butterfly he was observing under his magnifying glass, but she didn’t care. He was paying attention, and that was enough. She lost herself in her thoughts again as she spoke.

“What does it say about human empathy that it didn’t decrease our numbness to the sufferings of the many? That it is too sensitive to the suffering of the few? Even worse, it is noticeable that our first reaction, our gut feeling is always to sympathise more with people who look like us and to care less of those who differ more.”

“Is blind feeling, empathy, pity always such a good thing to lead our decisions with, then?”

The brunette only dared to glance back at him to check, but had to hurriedly look away again because now, he was staring at her like a man who’d seen a fairy princess ride at night. Enthralled and compelled, he suddenly decides that there is nothing worth looking at in the mortal world and single-mindedly seeks her even if it meant crossing half the world and more.

Hermione kept her voice determinedly cheerful.

“Well! Uh, I think I’ve gone on one of my rants again. I’ll just have to warn you right now that I tend to do that—don’t ask me about house elves if you don’t want to get occupied for at least an hour. And I think you have…classes? Yes. Classes. To go to. I hope I’m not holding you up or anything.”

Hermione looked up, he had moved from her side to standing in front of her, folding a piece of paper in his hand. Origami? It looked like a simple flower. When he slipped it behind her left ear, she caught the fragrant scent of a damask rose, the single petal of vivid pink falling on her lap confirming it. She didn’t even hear the spell being cast; he must have done it silently. The back of his thumb slid for a few seconds too long over her cheek and she stifled a shiver.

When she stared at him in annoyance (she was annoyed more at her own unsettled feeling than anything), his eyes were as fathomless as the wine-dark sea.
“Are you free to receive visitors this afternoon? Perhaps sometime around tea?” He asked. She didn’t know how he could be entirely too normal about this.

“I…yes.”

“I’ll return with the specifics from your classes by then. I will be taking your advice and leave for classes for the time being. Goodbye, Miss Curie.”

He took his leave by casually kissing the back of her hand. It was only the manners that Daphne and Draco helped drill into her that allowed her to come up with a smooth answer in time.

“Goodbye, Mr. Riddle.”

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“So!” Nurse Edelstein had cheerfully returned from her morning routine of checking the inventory. Her hazel eyes widened the moment she saw Hermione.

“Don’t say it!”

“I was only going to admire that beautiful rose you have in your hair.” Maggie said, blinking innocently. “Where did you get it from?”

Hermione sighed. There really was no avoiding it. “Tom Riddle transfigured it from a paper flower.”

The sounds that Maggie made was high enough in pitch to send dogs into hiding, and maybe bats would start bumping into things too if any of them happened to be around. The brunette witch winced.

“And you were so impressed with his skill that you decided to wear it on your hair?” The nurse asked.

Hermione didn’t know whether telling her the truth that he placed it there himself would be worse or not, so she merely smiled awkwardly and said nothing.

“Aww, don’t be shy. There’s nothing wrong about appreciating a wizard’s hard work, especially if the wizard has looks like that one.”

Well, she’d always thought that appreciating a dark lord’s hard work usually involved wearing her dragon leather long coat and refreshing a lot of offensive hexes in her mind. Not that she can say that to Nurse Edelstein.

“I think you’d have that beau all the same, Hermione.” Maggie commented. Hermione made non-committal sounds from the back of her throat as she carefully pulled the blossom out of her hair. It was harder than putting it in, because another petal had fallen. “No, no! Let me. I think that direction is going to make it worse.”

She sighed and let the nurse try to do her best disentangling it.

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Well, do you have a spare small bottle? I think I’ll cast a preservation charm and move it inside while I find a more permanent means of preserving it.”

“Aww, you do care!”
She shrugged. “This *is* the first gift I’ve received since I came to Hogwarts, and I don’t even have much stuff in the first place. I think that’s an important enough milestone on its own to keep.”

Hermione deliberately ignored the look of pity in the nurse’s eyes. One simple trip later and the nurse handed her the small bottle. Preserving the rose and then moving it inside the bottle without going through the neck wasn’t difficult.

“So, is he?”

“Is he what?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, don’t be dense. Is he your beau?”

She scrunched her forehead in thought. “He’s my…friend, I think.”

“Well, that’s a good first step to romance,” Maggie concluded, ignoring any and all sounds of protests coming from Hermione’s direction.

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Chapter End Notes

Don’t mind Nurse Edelstein. Waiting in the Hogwarts infirmary is a boring job. She has to get her entertainment from somewhere.

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**Additional trivia:**

**Orpheus Dexter (OC):** Flitwick seemed a tad too new in this time period (if he’s already teaching) to already be granted the title of Head of Ravenclaw, so I had to find someone else. His last name is a nod to JK Rowling’s in-joke to the Astronomy professor’s last name in the HP books (Sinistra is Latin for ‘left’, while Dextra or Dexter, to use the Anglicised version, is ‘right’). His first name is also a nod to that (Aurora means ‘dawn’, while Orpheus is thought to have originated from Orphne*, meaning ‘the darkness of the night’).

*Technically, his name is actually Orphne, it’s just that people keep mishearing it as Orpheus that the poor man doesn’t bother to correct them anymore and even introduces himself as Orpheus.

Yes, I’m either OCD when it came to these things, or I have too much time on my hands. I can’t decide.

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“The death of one man is a tragedy, the death of millions is a statistic.” This is a quote usually misattributed to Josef Stalin. The one that is attributable to someone is from Kurt Tucholsky, a German journalist born at the end of the 19th century and died just before World War II. His quote is:

“*Der Tod eines Menschen: das ist eine Katastrophe. Hunderttausend Tote: das ist eine
Statistik!

“The death of one man: that is a catastrophe. One hundred thousand deaths: that is a statistic!”

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Chapter Summary

Teatime with Tom Marvolo Riddle. In which Hermione is tired of pretending she was a normal transfer student. Hermione chooses free will. Nurse Edelstein makes her own conclusions. Professor Dexter gives Hermione an overview of classes.

Chapter Notes

Again, don't expect the current update speed to last, folks. It's going to be on a weekly/biweekly basis after this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

05 Wounded Bird in a Gilded Cage

Hermione was having tea with Tom Riddle.

He had arrived at the exact same time as yesterday with a pile of parchments under one arm, his gaze distracted for approximately two seconds when he saw the damask rose in stasis in a glass bottle before he greeted her as if nothing was amiss. She prepared his tea with a spot of milk, and hers with more milk and sugar. The house elves had brought her fresh baked cookies in tins yesterday, so she could have an assortment of them today. It was her good luck that they both preferred a thick brew, otherwise, the tea would’ve been steeped midway between their preferences out of necessity, which might have been fair but would leave no one happy.
Right now, she was too busy reading the unrolled scroll in front of her that she even forgot she’d been holding a half-bitten chocolate chip cookie.

Hermione didn’t know how Riddle did it, but it was clear that he was a miracle worker.

She had to wonder whether he’d have to be a dark lord in the first place. With his organisation skills, he could’ve easily taken over the world as Minister of Magic. It had only been a day, and somehow, he’d found out all the homework given in her classes. The information had been compiled on one parchment, written in his elegant handwriting. She didn’t bother hiding her surprise.

“I…this is incredible.”

Was she gushing at the budding dark lord? Yes, she was gushing at the budding dark lord and she didn’t care.

“The references are comprehensive. You’re incredible.” She continued to mutter distractedly.

There were cross-references to books that were only on the recommended reading list and not on the must-read list, and how they might also somehow relate to different assignments. Wait, no, there were some titles that she didn’t recognise to be on any reading list. He was providing a much larger pool of reference.

“You made a bibliography of books that are even the slightest bit related for each class and well-organised by subject and themes. You labelled the major and minor subjects.” He was meticulous to a fault.

She looked up when she thought he’d been quiet for a while.

Tom was sitting on the chair that had been transfigured once more into a wing-back chair, his brows higher than usual. Apparently, he hadn’t expected this sort of reaction from her.

“You’re welcome, Miss Curie.” That trace of bafflement was also in his voice.

“However did you manage all this in a day? This is…you can run the Ministry of Magic on administrative skills of this level.” Hermione said.

When he scanned her face, she could feel that he was looking for something. Since she had no idea, she merely waited until he figured out whatever it was he was searching. Steam rose up from his teacup.

“Delegation is a well-known skill.” He pointed out before sipping his tea.

She felt her cheeks warming. It really should have been obvious to her. He can order people around. Whether the Death Eaters were already there or not, he already had power in Slytherin House and he can certainly wield it if he chooses. Hermione ignored the increased amusement in his expression.

“It doesn’t explain how this scroll came to exist this afternoon. It was…how many inches again? Fifteen? Fifteen inches of collated information in your handwriting.”

“Copy-quills can be trained to write in a facsimile of any handwriting, provided that you have reams of handwriting to train it with.” He replied, with a polite smile that she knew he hid a smirk behind. It confused her more than it illuminates. Not many people even knew that copy-quills could take on one handwriting or another, or what was needed to ensure it does.
Oh, it wasn’t the technique. He was cunning, that was certain. He had the knowledge of how to make people and magic do exactly what he wanted and quickly. What she didn’t understand was what had compelled him to tell her this, to take her backstage and see the wizard. Wouldn’t he wish to keep the audience beguiled? Enthralled to the wonders the magician wrought?

“*The dense cross-reference to so many other books?*” She asked again.

“*It was mine,*” he replied, with humility that was tissue-paper thin. “*I had to contribute something visible than just being the one who organises the effort.*”

She snorted and ignored his raised eyebrow.

No, his part was not such a small undertaking either. Yet clearly, it was no hardship to him, because they were only acquaintances at this stage, and Hermione couldn’t imagine Tom Riddle slaving over an errand for a mere year-mate. It had been easy for him, that was the simplest conclusion she could take. It was at this moment that she couldn’t help but quietly contemplate the rising young wizard in front of her, of his crisp white shirt and tailored blazer, the well-groomed waves of his black hair. His smile could put people at ease and from what little she knew of him now, he could be a fine speaker if he so chooses. She was sure he was a prodigy of his own, with many bright, future paths he could choose at his leisure.

Why then, did he end up taking the most destructive one that ends with his death? What reason for the extended swan song that took out a good chunk of the people of Wizarding Britain with him?

“*You are looking at me,*” he said softly, “*as if I am a mystery.*”

“*You are.*” Hermione confirmed without doubt.

“How so?”

“*You are undoubtedly the most brilliant person I know who is close to my age. You have so much potential. And yet…*”

“And yet?” He cajoled her.

Hermione shook her head, out of words to describe it and chose to drink her tea to stall, the sweetness calming to her. She was surprised that she felt a loss at the thought that Tom Riddle would die—did die—for Voldemort to rise from his ashes. He certainly could have been someone. She knew that at the very least, he was someone who wouldn’t have burned the world down.

He was someone who can change the world. And he threw it all away.

It was the tragedy akin to someone burning a Renoir out of spite.

“It’s nothing.” She stated.

“It’s not. I can see that for you, it’s not a passing fancy.” He replied, unwavering from the trail of her strange melancholy that he’d caught.

Hermione tilted her head to the side, trying to find a way to explain it. Anything she could say would only sound absurd to him, but she didn’t have anything else. Was this how Luna felt? It would explain so many things if Luna turned out to be able to see the future.

“I see something of you,” she said. “*But it’s not important. It is not the present. It’s not real.*”
His gaze sharpened and she thought she could see the real Tom Riddle.

“Not the present?”

“We all make our futures day by day, Mr. Riddle,” she replied. Based on the way she could feel magic starting to gather around him, her answer was apparently a little too quick, a little too pat.

“You can see the future.”

“I can see some futures and of some people. No telling which ones are true and which ones are just a passing dream. I’ve gotten used to ignoring them.” Having to face down the Wizengamot for several years really sharpened her ability to speak legalese and to hint things more than explain. It was convenient that he’d latched on to an explanation that did not involve time-travel.

(He couldn’t remember when that happened. She couldn’t remember why she needed to face the Wizengamot for several years. She couldn’t. Why can’t she—)

“Tell me.” He insisted, snapping her out of her hopelessness.

“Why should I?” She replied. She put enough warning in her voice. His tone was too close to commanding and Hermione really disliked people ordering her around without asking.

That was when their gazes lock, enough for a semi-serious legilimency, but the front rooms of her mind were a shifting quicksand of several Dadaist landscapes. She’d always been too staid to be able to manage a strange defence that Luna excelled in, and somehow it had become easier with the ragged edges of her poorly put-together memories and the new, inchoate nightmares. The first layer of her mind was now a desert on the surface of a Klein bottle.

She did not shy away from the opportunity to push back, to see what he had. It was a hostile landscape, the land cracked and harsh and the wind biting with magic that wishes for her to get out. The ground around her was covered with thorny brambles, its spikes stabbing into her sole. She left footsteps of blood as she walked. It reminded her of Mordor.

He broke the contact because he was moving closer, standing beside her bed now.

“Who are you, Miss Curie?” His even voice should have been non-threatening, but his magic churned around him chaotically with the potential for violence, most certainly urging him to lift his wand against her and cast something. Hermione rubbed her forehead stave off an impending migraine.

“Do not attack me, Tom Marvolo Riddle. We can talk. You can ask your questions and I might even answer them for you, but hex me, harm me, and you are no longer a possible friend but a potential enemy. It would cost you dearly to be my enemy.”

Hermione looked up at him, unconcerned about their height difference. She knew he would have remembered that he never gave her his middle name.

“You would easily declare me as your potential enemy?” He asked, not quite believing that she dared.

She knew what he was looking at. A pale girl still recovering from a serious illness bandaged in many places. She was lying on a hospital bed, her curls wild around her head. It was possibly the most unthreatening thing she could be apart from kittens.

“You were the serpent that consumed the world. You might say that you took over it to be king of
all you survey. I’ll say that you destroyed it, and I destroyed you for that. For when one earns the vorpal sword, why not slay the Jabberwock?” Hermione said, with the same ease she’d told him of what cookies they had today. “I assure you that I have been a dragonslayer. Will be, well, this thing about knowing futures can be a touch confusing.”

She watched the non-existent flinch (he controls himself so well that sometimes she really can’t tell).

“Of course, many people I know had died too. It’s not a nice world.” She said, in a quieter voice.

(It rang with truth, with loss, painfully in her breast. For that fleeting moment, Hermione does not want to know about her missing memories and missing griefs).

“I’d rather we not go there, if it’s all the same to you.”

“And if I kill you now and lose myself of my murderer?” He asked, curious. This time, his eyes were obsidian black, the perfect surgical blade to stab into her soul.

Hermione laughed. I do not fear death, she thought, relishing the freedom that the realisation had given her, continue to give her.

“Then I hope you enjoy living your life before you crash and burn and die. And you won’t even know what mistakes you’ve made to lead to that death—perhaps you’ll dance the exact steps I’ve seen. It will be the ultimate irony.” She gave him an enigmatic smile and she knew she had him then.

“Besides, did you think that I single-handedly killed you? But of course, it really didn’t have to be me,” she said easily, enjoying playing the oracle more than she thought she would as she fashioned the words into something deadlier than the truth: fear.

“Did you know what actually killed you? Madness.”

She spat the word out as if it was something too rotten to taste.

Some part of her felt guilt, knowing that she deliberately used his fears of a loss of control against him. (Oh, she knew he was a control freak. No one who wasn’t would have their handwriting stop at exactly two centimetres to the right and left edges of the parchment, and ensured it was consistent all the way down). She could see his jaws tightening but his expression remained the cold and commanding one he’d had before.

Hermione stared him down, challenging him to look into her eyes. “Go on. I can show you of that monster you’ve become. I can’t even recognise you the first time I meet you, you know? Because that monster? I think…I think he is no longer you in the most important ways.”

His fist was clenched too tight and he was gathering so much magic but not channelling it into any spell that she was feeling slightly suffocated. Beads of sweat gathered over her temples, her breath coming in short gasps. She reached out to his wand hand just to break him out of it.

“But you’re not him.” She said, firmly.

“You do not even believe that.” He remarked, his eyes darker than the thunderclouds. She closed her eyes, holding herself against the turbulence of his magic.

“You’re not him. Not yet. It was merely the most probable. You always have a gamut of futures to choose from, Riddle. We all do.”
“Tom,” he corrected her, to her surprise.

“Pardon?”

“If we might have tried to kill each other in some future, we can dispense with the formalities,” He said, dryly. “I’m sure I wouldn’t have asked for permission before throwing the killing curse.”

She laughed. The way he viewed the world was probably very alien to her, but sometimes his observations were very incisive. Her laughter amused him, and she could feel the magical pressure front easing away with his smirk. It was certainly a lot easier on her chest.

“*There,*” she declared, triumphantly. He furrowed his brows.

“Excuse me?”

“That knowing, annoying grin. That’s *you,* the real you, not the perfect prefect and student that you project to the whole world.” She would bet that she had a similarly annoying grin on her face—a know-it-all grin that Young Hermione had always sported after she answered questions in class with explanations that was sourced from two books at the very least.

“It’s the type of grin that can drive people bonkers because they’d keep wondering ‘what does this man know that I don’t?’” She finished. “And you’ll keep it on you even as you stab them in the gut.”

“And yet for all the apparent terribleness of the expression, you seem unusually pleased with yourself.” Tom said, not quite comprehending the reason for her joy.

“I *definitely* am,” she nodded, all certainty.

“I’ve been trying to get you to drop your façade from the beginning. It really is rather annoying to deal with a simulation of a person than the real thing.” Hermione said.

He raised a single, elegant eyebrow. “I threatened to kill you.”

Her answer was as straightforward as her smile. “*Threatened* is the operative word here, *threatened.* If you actually tried to kill me, one of us isn’t leaving this room alive.”

The brunette witch noticed that his eyes were still on her, completely dedicated to tracking her minute details as if he wasn’t sure she’d still be here if he took his eyes off. Colouring all that was some strain of disbelief. She was feeling rather like a rare creature caught on camera for National Geographic and he the obsessed photographer.

“I certainly would live, whatever happens in this room.” He stated.

“Ah, your first immortality clause.” She said with ease, ignoring the way he tensed.

This was her, who’d picked up enough field medicine to recognise when people was hurting, see their tender spots. She’d found his. Hermione smiled at him, all warm brown eyes and girl-next-door charm.

“Let me tell you a little secret. It’s not death I’m afraid of, it’s senility. I’d hate to live immortally as someone who’d lost her mind, someone *who doesn’t even remember who she’d been.*”

This was her, pushing her hands into the cavity of his chest because she saw it was cracking and then tearing it open. When one can heal better, one can also kill better. She let him think it through,
let him try to breathe through suffocation of the mental blow she’d just delivered.

She leaned forward, her voice was soft, so soft.

“I’d rather die. Don’t you?”

Hermione wouldn’t even have thought of doing this if he was not one Tom Marvolo Riddle.

At first, it would seem that he was merely patiently waiting. It wasn’t unusual and Hermione simply took the opportunity to refill their cups. The next time she’d turned to him, he was still lost in thoughts. She didn’t break him, did she? She hoped she didn’t. It was discomfiting enough that she felt any sort of guilt for some incarnation of Voldemort. His dark blue eyes as distant as the sea once more. She envied him his long, coal-black eyelashes that contrasted against his pale skin.

They were nose to nose now.

“Tom?”

He blinked, and suddenly those dark eyes were alive again instead of merely holes on the physical shell. Now, he was looking at her. She leaned back against the piles of plumped pillows.

“It would seem that we have many conversations ahead of us, Hermione.”

“I’d talk to you only if there are no attempted homicide on me. No attacks,” she warned.

“As you’ve put it yourself, mere threats against life and limb don’t really count.” His reply was dry.

Hermione chuckled again, and oddly enough finding herself sharing a smile with him. A part of her thought it was ridiculous, that he already had a horcrux, possibly from killing his father. Some part of her thought that he’d walk that path of darkness all the same. Her easiest path would be to escape, to find a way home. This did not need to be her fight anymore. She’d done her part. She knew she’d done more than that, even with only her partial memories at hand. Let her past self and her past friends tear him apart in the future, decades from now.

(Time travel, she found, was hell on tenses).

Another part of her believes in free will, in choices freely made in light of new knowledge, new information. This part always shone brighter.

“Tom?”

“Yes, Hermione?”

“I don’t like the idea of euthanising you. Please don’t make me euthanise you.” The ease with which she said it belied the other side of the coin of her statement. But I will. If I have to, I will. If I can’t manage, I’m sure I can find someone else capable of finishing the task.

“I share your sentiments. It would seem that our interests converge.”

“I almost stepped out,” Nurse Edelstein said. Her copper bun gleamed with warmth under the light of the setting sun.

Hermione cocked her head, frowning. “Almost? What do you mean ‘almost’?”
“I heard you raising your voice, Hermione. If that prat tries anything, I’d be hexing him right out
the door.” Nurse Edelstein was also polishing a kidney tray in a threatening manner. From the
perplexed expression on her face, it was clear that Hermione has no idea how that is managed.
From the way she kept staring, it was clear that she was fascinated and impressed.

The brunette student had a bemused smile now. “He’s a prat now, is he? I thought you were
convinced he was my beau.”

“That was before he started distressing you. I don’t take kindly to people who trouble my patients.”

“That is so sweet. And scary. But thank you all the same.” Hermione said drolly.

“You don’t seem distressed at all.”

The young patient dismissed it with a wave of her hand. “Oh, you know. What’s a few threats of
murder among friends?”

“Hermione,” Maggie’s warning tone was obvious. “I know you’re not serious, but please tell me
what’s actually going on. I heard you raising your voice but I also heard you laughing often.”

Hermione only grinned. Nurse Edelstein knew that the younger witch didn’t lie—she was
agonisingly bad at it. That was why if she could sit there calmly and not react after making that
statement, there was enough of the truth than Maggie cared about in what she’d said. It meant that
actual threats were involved. There weren’t many things that worried Maggie Edelstein about
Hermione Curie, but…

“Melusine,” Maggie breathed out, eyes wide. “You’re making this up to worry me.”

“Why would I want to do that when the truth would suffice just fine?” Hermione replied without an
ounce of self-consciousness. She belatedly remembered that they did have to increase her
painkillers slightly. Maggie had followed the mediwitch’s recommendation that they now try a
heavier regiment of potions now that they’re certain Hermione’s kidneys were in a better shape. It
would explain why her patient was decidedly chipper.

“Well, then I’d say that you have a questionable taste in men,” Maggie insisted.

To her surprise, Hermione laughed, as if she’d just remembered something. When she looked back,
there was that maturity that Maggie glimpsed on occasion from the young witch, no doubt it was
why they’ve gotten along with each other so easily.

“Oh, Maggie dearest, that’s nothing new. I always knew that I have questionable taste in men.”

“This is all just a misunderstanding, right? Tell me it’s all just a misunderstanding.”

“It’s all just a misunderstanding,” she parroted back, earning her a well-deserved black look.

“It’s fine. Look, he’s just unsettled that I can pull apart his mask quickly, you know? Pity the poor
guy too. I just get so tired of speaking to the perfect student. I know he’s more than that. It is no
surprise that he lashed out. Don’t worry, I lashed out too and stuck my metaphorical knife even
deeper. We’re even, and what do you know?”

Hermione beamed, hands clasped together. “We’re really friends now!”

“How does that even happen?”
Maggie’s voice was not shrewish. No, she was positively sure. She was just...worried. Yes, that’s it, worried. Hermione was twirling her wand with uncommon deftness that was either innocent, or had a subtext of intimidation. Nurse Edelstein can’t quite decide which.

“Well, he starts with that subtle menacing aura—probably an instinctive reaction that came out without much thought. It was an atavistic drawing of magic in the face of possible threat, e.g., me. Of course, I don’t back down and laid out the ways of how he’s going to be in a worse position than I am. When I take calculated risks without flinching, it shows that my threats aren’t empty either. Actual talks can then proceed from that point.”

The brunette explained all this happily, as if she was merely describing the life cycle of a mushroom she observed on a walk one fine morning as opposed to her sudden and unpleasant introduction to the underbelly of Hogwarts social life. She seemed to consider that the exchange of threats was a necessary and perfectly acceptable phase to pass before one becomes friends—the laughter the nurse had overheard hadn’t been fake at all, this she knew.

Maggie thought about it all with a dawning sense of dread.

Hermione furrowed her brows, completely oblivious to the nurse’s thoughts. She tapped her chin and her voice was contemplative when she spoke up again.

“Do you know that any competitive interaction always comes down to a chicken game with a good chunk of the Slytherins? Yes, I was surprised too when I figured it out—I thought as a house that values cunning, they’d have more finesse, and maybe less of a thug-like mentality.”

The brunette shrugged, visibly shelving her curiosity for some later time.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter for now. I only state what I see, though. If that’s what I get from them, that’s how I’ll work them.”

A cute, whip-smart young woman with no sense of danger, Nurse Edelstein thought in despair. Merlin help the boys of Hogwarts, because Hermione Curie was going to drive them off a cliff. Probably because they were following her there in the first place.

Professor Dexter arrived an hour before supper time to check on her.

“I had heard that you were eager to start on your assignments if you cannot attend classes yet. I’ll say, that’s a wonderful dedication to your studies, and I’d be glad to assist you in that direction.”

The blond wizard said.

Hermione wondered if there was any way to put this in delicately.

“Thank you, Professor. I didn’t think that you need to help me personally with this, but I’m touched that you do. Professor Slughorn had assigned a Slytherin prefect to compile the assignments from all my classes, though, and so I’m completely updated with my classes.”

“That quickly?” He asked. She thought she heard something close to ‘damn you, Horace’ muttered under his breath too, but she couldn’t be sure. “Who was the prefect?”

“Tom Riddle.”

He sighed in his seat. “If it was anyone but him… never mind. Highly efficient, that one. He would have made a good Ravenclaw too.”
There was a wistfulness to his expression that Hermione thought was a bit unwarranted considering they were talking about Tom Riddle, but she let the man dream.

“Perhaps you can sign my Hogsmeade permission slip? I know it requires a guardian, but I… well…”

“Oh, of course, Miss Curie! It’s no hardship at all.”

Well, that was one thing she had well in hand for now. Not bad.

“Now that you’ve begun to read our textbooks and you have your syllabi at hand, what do you think of your classes?”

Professor Dexter was a wealth of institutional knowledge that was not always obvious in the texts. The advanced classes like the ones Hermione was taking almost always has a flexible curriculum. What the class focuses on changes subtly depending on the Houses of the majority of the students taking it. The first half of any class usually laid some advanced groundwork, but the second half had more practical applications.

Advanced Ancient Runes was a good example. Ravenclaws tend to be more interested in studying and erecting wards with those runes, while Gryffindors and Slytherins tend to pull the class towards curse-breaking and ward-breaking.

(“Of course, nobody calls it ward-breaking, because it sounds so criminal. The Board might get their knickers in a twist, and where would we be?” Professor Dexter dryly noted. “It’s probably under the heading of ‘safety protocols of ancient ruin exploration’ or something similar. No need to worry about the professor—Honoria is quite well-rounded in her field. I’m confident that she can guide you in any personal projects.”)

The Hufflepuff was more of a mix bag, but it’s usually not hard to predict where they’d fall either, at least according to him. (“What departments are expanding in the Ministry of Magic? Is Gringotts recruiting this year or next year? What about other notable exploration companies? What skills they’re looking for? That’s usually where the ‘Puffs go. Very grounded, the ‘Puffs.” There was even sincere admiration in his tone.)

Advanced Herbology was another one that the Head of the Ravenclaw House had strong opinions on.

(“The class always ends up as an auxiliary class to Advanced Potions when many Slytherins are taking it. Always. It would be about how matching the plant’s seasonal pattern makes it easier to find its almost-perfect ingredient substitutes in a potion. Or when is the best time in a plant’s life cycle to pick it to ensure the most potent potion. It’s probably because most of the House had aspirations to being a serial poisoner. What better way to clear up a spot for promotion?” He commented idly.)

The Gryffindors are the ones that are a bit of a mixed bag when it comes to Herbology, because they usually take it out of personal interest and those are varied. It was the same with the Ravenclaws. Hufflepuff, however, was always practical and useful.

(“It’s usually an encyclopaedic overview of the herbs and plants native to Britain and their distribution, along with the usual focus on efficacy, uses and all that. Sometimes they do it by region. It does free you from relying overly-much on store-bought herbs.” The professor’s pale eyes lit up in remembrance and longing. “Oh, and there’s usually also recipes! Phyllida has a wealth of them. Personally, I always enjoy the herb breads that the students start baking from the
middle of the second half of the class.”)

She made a mental note to herself to remember that Dexter seemed to like herb breads.

(“We’ve had a new professor for Charms since two years ago. A good fellow, Filius, he’s also a fellow Ravenclaw, so he’s very understanding of students wanting to ask him things in his office that are further afield than the material in the class. He might not look like it, but he’s also a champion dueller—in fact, he went straight into the duelling circuit out of Hogwarts. Now that he’s here, he and Galatea are always trying to one-up each other.”)

Hermione was struck with the strange realisation that Flitwick was young. It answered the question why he wasn’t the head of Ravenclaw in 1942. She wondered when Dexter was going to resign from Hogwarts and for what reason.

She hoped he wasn’t a casualty of the wizarding war. She shook off the disagreeable reminder of her more violent past (future).

It was a pleasant surprise to Hermione that the head of her House was truly providing valuable advice, that he was being helpful. She tried to remember how it was like the last time she was in Hogwarts and in fifth year…and then she remembered the whole mess that was Umbridge taking over the school and mentally shuddered. She was too busy with the DA to be truly creative in class or explore new things. McGonagall was…hmm. McGonagall was probably too busy trying to manage the school and make sure that Umbridge’s meddling would not harm the school or the students in the long run.

Hermione bid the professor a warm goodbye at the end of his visit, musing if she should expect the other shoe to drop any time now because wonder of wonders, she was enjoying this. She knew her class schedule was rigorous (crazy). The only way she managed it was because she had special dispensation for almost all her classes to only attend a third of the time (four-fifths of her classes conflict with each other), if and only if she can keep the quality of her assignments up and her contributions in class, with maybe a few extra assignments thrown in here and there. Otherwise she’d have to start dropping some classes.

Headmaster Dippet actually made a useful compromise with the entire Hogwarts faculty for her.

Come to think of it, why exactly did Dumbledore think that it was worth lending a time-turner to a student, just so she can attend all her classes at once? Wasn’t that overkill?

The more she thought about it, though, the more it stayed as a persistent itch at the back of her brain.

‘-

Chapter End Notes

Hermione considers the whole ‘eliminating the threat of Voldemort’ thing as a team effort. It’s because it’s not just about the final killing, but things like destroying the horcruxes first so Voldemort doesn’t pull his undead arse from yet another corner of Albania. And before that, there’s all the research to do.

So yes, she knew she’s glossing over the details when she said ‘I destroyed you’ as
opposed to ‘we destroyed you’. She even alludes to this later when she says, “You did not think that I single-handedly killed you, did you?” Still, she can say it easily as her statements still hold the truth within it. You know, as opposed to the statement ‘he killed your father’ suddenly meaning that ‘well, he is your father, but he’d changed so much that we can consider him as a new guy who killed your father, right?’.

Yeah, kernels of truth matter, people.

**On tea:** You have tea with biscuits. That's obvious (to me). But then I realise that US-based readers would have a different image, so I end up using the word 'cookies'.

**On advanced classes:** If anyone is wondering about what the heck are the advanced classes, I wrote a note for that at the end of Chapter 6 in my effort to rationalise some of Hogwarts' education system. Please direct any comments about it there.

Unrelated topic: apparently, I compulsively make end notes. I have no explanation for this other than habits beaten into my head in the academia. You really don’t need to read it unless you’re that curious about stuff I mentioned.

**List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:**

**Chicken Game:** (Game Theory) also known as Hawk-Dove Game or Snowdrift Game, is a model of conflict for two players in game theory.

The easiest way for me to describe an example of it is to use two guys from different biker gangs, on their motorcycles, racing headlong to a head-to-head collision. If both swerves away far before the collision, they both get branded as cowards (lose-lose situation). If they both keep on going until they crash, they both either die or get wounded fatally (also lose-lose, this time MAD—Mutually Assured Destruction).

The optimum scenario is when one continues head on and the other swerves away (win-lose): the challenge here is in figuring out which one your opponent is. Is he a mad man with no fear? If he is, the surviving strategy is to swerve away once you’re close enough, let him survive and fall into an accident with someone else that’s not you. Is he a reasonably sane gang member? Then the successful strategy is to bluff him and keep riding on until he swerves first because he tries to avoid the apparent madman (you, this time), and you win.

Did you notice me using the term MAD up there? Well, you will find that a lot of international relations, including nuclear brinkmanship, can also be described in terms of the Chicken Game (Or Hawk-Dove, or Snowdrift, whatever you call it, it's the same zero-sum game).

**Klein Bottle:** (Geometry) A 3D geometric object that exists in four-dimensional space. No, we’re not talking about the last dimension being time, it’s just mundane space that we’re concerned with here, only that it has four dimensions. The simplest way to explain it is that it’s an analogue of Möbius strip, only with one more additional dimension involved. A Möbius strip, after all, is a 2D geometric object that exists in three-dimensional space.
Additional Trivia:

“For when one earns the vorpal sword, why not slay the Jabberwock?”: The vorpal sword and the Jabberwock are both from the nonsense poem “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll, the author of Alice in Wonderland. He made up both words—it’s called a nonsense poem for a reason. The illustrator was asked to draw something for the poem came up with a dragon-like beast for the Jabberwock (flying lizard with leathery wings), so that’s what it ends up represented as all the way to the present.

Carroll has inspired so many modern fantasy writers that I’m sure if you search into Google for ‘vorpal sword’, I’m sure you’d get a hundred and one sword from various different games.
06 Cessation of Hostilities

Chapter Summary

_The acquaintanceship of one Hermione Granger and Tom Riddle over two weeks stay in the infirmary. Dreams and memories._

Chapter Notes

This chapter happened when I reread all that I’ve written so far and found a narrative gap that I needed to plug. Urgh, not really happy with how it turned out, but I don’t think it’s going to get any better even if I keep hacking at it. Let’s hope the next chapter isn’t as stubborn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daphne had always told Hermione that the point of learning etiquette is not about memorising empty words or gestures; it is to acquire grace under pressure. No matter how unexpected or unusual the situation, one can glide through it instead of making a scene.

The Slytherin witch must have managed to beat something into her head, more than Hermione can remember, because the next time Tom Riddle visited, she didn’t say ‘I was serious when I said you’ll die maddened by dark magic if you don’t let up’. That had been the foremost thing in her mind. What she said was simply,
“Good afternoon, Tom.”

“Good afternoon, Hermione.”

Tom Riddle greeted her before he sat at the green wing-backed chair that she’d transfigured the available visitor’s chair to. Their gazes locked for three seconds—he did not seem overly concerned about her predictions of his death right now, so she decided not to be too concerned about his threats against her life. The house elves had kindly prepared the tea trolley again, and she performed as the hostess once more with an unflappable calm that any pureblood etiquette mistress would approve.

(She has no exact memory associated with it, but her gut instinct told her that Daphne probably cajoled her to become good at it, with who knows what combination of blackmail and bribes. It amused her a little that she didn’t have that many memories of Daphne yet there was a gut feeling of rightness about her devious methods—Draco was an amateur compared to her.)

The Slytherin laid his book bag and took several scrolls out without much thought.

“What are those?”

“Since Slughorn asked me to assist you with the classes you’re currently missing, these are copies of my notes.” He answered. For all that he was a budding dark lord, it would seem that he was also a consummate professional in his responsibilities.

“What class do you think I should go through first?” She asked.

“I suggest Advanced Potions, while it’s still fresh in my mind.”

They happened to share many classes, which was not surprising considering her recorded OWL scores and what she knew of his academic reputation. She nodded in agreement.

Tom skimmed his notes quickly and started explaining the basics of ingredients selection for advanced potionmaking that Slughorn had just covered this week. Hermione made the occasional sound of understanding to show that she’d been listening or asked him to skip parts that she’d already mastered, courtesy of the potionmaking side of the research she did in the Department of Mysteries. Mostly, she treated it as a refresher than to learn things from scratch. It was why she picked it up again quickly.

If Tom was surprised at the speed of her comprehension, he didn’t show it.

Soon, they fell into an intense discussion of how, if the phases of the moon affected the potency and particular effects of various potion ingredients, then why not try to account for other celestial objects? After all, astronomy (in the wizarding sense) is a method of augury by reading the skies about what will happen on earth, that the connection exists in the first place must hint at something.

Tom, however, was not convinced of the relevance of something as distant as Jupiter or Saturn on the life cycle of plants and animals. At the very least, the moon affects the tides as well as exerting its own force for being so near, but the same cannot be said of other objects.

“If we were talking about the most influential celestial object, why, we’ve taken account of it by the turning of the seasons—some plants are only available in autumn, others during spring or summer. The seasons are the changes in the earth’s position from the sun is, after all.” He said.

Hermione agreed with the point that the sun and the moon are certainly the most significant
celestial objects to affect earth. However, she did not think that passing meteor showers can be ignored.

“The physical effects may be ignored easily as the bombardment of earth with small-sized space rocks and dust barely disturbs anything. The magical effect is a different matter, isn’t it? Because it is not often that earth accepts foreign objects into itself—literally extra-terrestrial in this case. So, potions that needs to rely on that empathic principle, on the acceptance of a foreign body into a host, might possibly work better with components whose growth or potency peaked during meteor showers.”

He could not deny her point and he didn’t try. She wasn’t sure if the time he took thinking before clearly accepting her point was merely to mull over it or also time that he needed to accept that she was a serious student of various subjects. On the other hand, she did grudgingly admit that she couldn’t imagine Pluto being capable of affecting anything on earth, as it was so small and distant. She also had no idea of the strength of Neptune and Uranus’ possible influence and she wasn’t optimistic on that front either.

An hour passed quicker than either of them expected. Hermione wasn’t the only one who stared at Tom in surprise after he checked out the time with a quick Tempus, she could see the slightly puzzled expression on his face too. They’d been too engrossed in arguing the finer points of the idea.

“I suppose you have other things to do,” Hermione said.

“Yes, a prefect meeting.” He might be polite, but he certainly wasn’t enthusiastic about his own answer.

“Ah.”

He did not rush in tidying up, picking each scroll and rolling them up manually before tying up with a ribbon. When he bid her goodbye and left, it did not take her long to regret it. At least when he was around, she had someone to talk to. Now, she was already getting bored. Again.

The only person who found their whole conversation off-putting and incomprehensible was oddly enough, Nurse Edelstein. She had been puttering in the background and doing some boring administrative stuff while the two students had talked, and the nurse made her opinion known when Tom had left the infirmary.

“You said that he threatened you with violence yesterday,” Maggie cut straight to the point.

“And I threatened him with visions of his death.” Hermione answered easily, summoning the tea trolley over. The Nurse had already reached her side to take the tea tray from her and return it to the trolley. “Thank you, Nurse Edelstein. I came up with some very good visions, you know?”

The nurse was still concerned.

“Why are you doing this? Is he forcing you to accept his company?”

“Of course not. Being able to chat is certainly a lot less boring than just reading books all day. At least I get to pick his brain—he does know his subjects, I’ll give him that.” She said, leaning back on her pile of pillows. Maggie was still staring uncertainly at her and Hermione felt the urge to clarify.

“No, really. He’s interesting.”
“Interesting,” she echoed.

“Yes.”

“Because he threatened you?” Now the nurse sounded even more weirded out. Hermione almost chuckled before she decided that it would give the impression that she became unhinged due to all her trauma.

“You didn’t miss the fact that I threatened him back, right? We’re at a more-or-less equal position right now.”

“You can’t even go to the toilet without tiring.”

Her reply was glib. “Good thing that he’s understanding enough to approach me at my bedside then even when he’s threatening me. I don’t even need to move to listen to him. See? What a nice young man.”

“Hermione.”

“Maggie, please, don’t worry about me.” She said it carelessly with a wave of her hand.

“Hello?”

Hermione was still in the grey robes of the Unspeakable. Something drew her to this side alley of Diagon when she was on the way home. She waited even when it seemed that there was nothing of interest to her other than abandoned crates and pieces of garbage.

A frightened meow came from one of the destroyed crates. Crouching down, Hermione tried to find some kitty kibble from her bag. With care, she made a trail towards her.

“Are you lost, little guy?” She kept her voice soft, non-threatening.

She could do a decent imitation of friendly meows too, and she did that from time to time. Never too much to be noisy to intimidate or annoy the cat, but just enough for the cat to know that she wasn’t leaving but also wasn’t aggressive. Her patience paid off after some time. The shaggy black cat stepped out slowly, eating the closest kibble while keeping a wary eye at her before moving on to the next one. He had no collar and was somewhere between a kitten and an adult cat—five months old would be her guess. Half way down the trail, he seemed to finally believe that she wasn’t a danger and ate at a faster pace.

She tried stroking him when he was close enough. Oh, she didn’t dare to use a hand, not yet. It began with one finger, just the lightest touch at his forehead. When he didn’t seem to notice, she stroked him slightly longer. Then, she lingered and added another finger. It was with this sort of glacial pace that she’d finally managed to stroke it.

The cat had a thicker tail than usual—it wasn’t simply fur due to its long hair. When it didn’t seem to be the least bit concerned when she pulled out her wand, leaving a light trail of sparks as she cast, she guessed it was more of a kneazle than a cat. He purred when she scratched his chin and even lifted his head so she could reach farther. She smiled and carefully picked him up; his long and thick fur made her feel as if she’d just picked up a particularly fluffy rug.

Hermione sneezed when his long tail swished upwards and too close to her nose. Well, perhaps a dusty rug in need of a washing would be more accurate.
“Alright, let’s get you home.”

When she apparated to her house with the cat, Malina—roommate and co-worker—stared at her in disbelief.

“That’s why you’re late by one hour?”

“Oh, has it been that long?” She was genuinely surprised. Malina raised one dark eyebrow.

“Don’t tell me you’re keeping this one too.”

“Well, why not? You don’t see me complaining about your half-jarveys, or the birds, or the—”

“Oh, you have a point.” The Scottish witch sighed before Hermione listed all her pets.

There was a good reason why they ended up sharing a house with each other than anyone else—they both had a tendency to pick up strays. Malina was even more broad-ranging when it comes to the species of her rescues, compared to Hermione’s kneazle-cats.

Hermione woke up with her right hand stroking her sheets instead of a new pet, the infirmary still dark and the sky outside still studded with stars.

*That’s the time I first met Othello.*

She sighed as she remembered the rest of her cats (well, cats, kneazles, and everything in between). It didn’t sound like a bad idea to find the opportunity to visit the Diagon Alley shelter and adopt a cat-kneazle hybrid that would bond with her now.

*Wait, is it already there now?*

Even if there wasn’t, she was sure she could wander around the alleys for a while and find a stray kitty or two to adopt. She turned around, pulled the blanket higher and slept again.

She hoped her next dream was just as peaceful as the last one.

*If there was something Hermione appreciated about the past, it was the fact that the male Hogwarts uniform was still a three-piece suit. Tom might be a would-be megalomaniac, but his waistcoat fitted him like a glove, flattering his lean form. It was a good thing that Nurse Edelstein lent her dresses, or else she was hopelessly outmatched in the charm offensive. She stared him two seconds longer than was polite before her gaze returned to the teapot. Even if he’d noticed that, he’d thankfully said nothing.*

She served the tea, too glad that her muscle memory carried her all the way. His touch was so light that the porcelain cup and saucer didn’t even make a sound when he picked it up—a part of her envied his effortless grace.

Hermione asked the question that had been in her mind for a while

“You do realise that I’ve foretold your method of death two days ago, right?”

“Does it have one hundred percent probability of passing?” He asked.
“I don’t think so.”

“Then it’s still possible to avoid it.” He answered, before going back to read through a scroll of his Advanced Transfigurations notes. She couldn’t help but gape at the ease he got over his shock.

“That’s it?”

He seemed vaguely amused and she couldn’t help but feel irritated at his equanimity. His next question did have some sense.

“You’d rather I start with the death threats again?”

“Well, no, a thousand times no. I just thought you’d find it more interesting than the…” she read the upside-down title of his scroll. “…foundations of transfiguration.”

Tom rolled the scroll up, his dark gaze fixed on her. There was not the slightest pretence of kindness there. It was how she knew she wasn’t seeing the dutiful prefect or the perfect student anymore. This was his true self, all driving ambition and ruthlessness.

“If I kill you, then I won’t even find out what are the things I need to avoid to prevent that death.”

“Of course.” She nodded.

“Then obviously, I can’t kill you yet, then.” He concluded this easily, clearly showing no particular preference to whether she lived or died. Hermione bristled, affronted, until she wondered just why she was affronted. A few moments of thought allowed her to find that it was due to the ease of his declaration, as if she’d die that easily once he decided to kill her. It was rather weird to realise that she didn’t actually give a tuppence about the death threat (she can vaguely recall that she’d gotten more than her share of it during the war as well as after that—the Gryffindor Three had been too involved).

“You talk about killing people so easily,” she said.

“It’s a bit late for you to pretend you don’t, isn’t it?” His smile was a shade too sinister even if it was still compelling. It was one well-suited for the Heir of Slytherin.

“I don’t kill people at will.”

“You can.” He pointed out easily. “Particularly, if you think they’re dark lords. Isn’t that right, Miss Vigilante?”

Hermione couldn’t even deny that outright.

“Dark lords aren’t exactly most people, is it?” The witch shot back.

“I suppose not. But the fact that there are types of people that you can kill with no compunctions outside of simple reasons such as anger or revenge…well. That’s already one trait that you share with me that most of the Hogwarts populace don’t.”

She did not need to be a legilimens to recognise the truth when he spoke it. Hermione did not survive years past Voldemort’s fall and through the rise and fall of new threats by denying reality.

Her fingertip traced the rim of her teacup.

“So, have you ever read that article about how visualising platonic ideals is the first step in transfiguring objects into their more ‘perfect’ form? The one that is almost without any flaws?”
The smile on Tom’s face did not falter in the slightest, but he allowed her to change the subject and followed the new direction of their discussion.

“Has anyone actually ever managed to get that to work to improve artworks, or at the very least, decorative pieces?” Tom asked.

“Hmm, never heard of it, but you’ve raised an interesting possibility…”

Hermione realised later on what had surprised her about how he answered her probing question. It was his resilience. Tom certainly considered her vision of his future to be a threat, but he seemed to be less obsessed by it than she vaguely remembered Voldemort to be about Harry’s prophecy. Hermione frowned for a while, trying to figure out the oddest thing she felt throughout their chats.

Ah, he sounded *sane*. Yes, that was it. She had some doubts about Voldemort’s sanity when she was fighting him in the middle of the War.

*I wonder where that line was? Where his sanity was frayed past the point where he could return?*

When did it happen? She mused.

When did the dashing prefect who cut a fine figure in his suit jacket was replaced with the shouting madman?

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*She was gripping a wizard’s hand hard, her eyesight blurring through the tears. He was still forcing himself to smile even after he took that hex that was meant for her.*

“I can’t do much, but at least I can do this for you.” *His breath was raspy, not there.*

“Shut up. Save your breath.” She pressed her ear against his chest, checking.

“Live, Hermione. Live.”

“I said, shut up!” *Her voice was breaking. How dare he ask her that when he’s fucking drifting out, and maybe, probably, (definitely) not going to—*

Hermione woke up and cursed out loud. She couldn’t even see who it was or even knew what happened. It was still night again. Her sleep was getting restless but she dared not to ask for potion of dreamless sleep. She knew the risks it carried too well as someone who’d studied the healing arts, and she had a feeling she already had to drank more of it than she wished for medical purposes throughout her distinctly not peaceful life. She simply sighed and laid down, staring at the spots on the ceiling as she tried to sleep again.

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*The white cat sank its teeth into her hand before running away to the corner. She winced as she watched blood seep out but barely reacted.*

“Ouch,” Malina commented from the door.

“It’s not his fault,” Hermione said, “he’s still afraid.”

“Oh, I can see that. I’m just saying that you’d need to clean your hand and then seal the wound
quickly if you want to look presentable for your date.”

“My date?”

The dark-haired witch stared at her oddly. “Uh, yes? Date? I thought you said something on Tuesday about how Ginny Weasley said she had a friend she wanted you to meet?”

Hermione yelped as she stood up, the memory coming belatedly. She hadn’t taken a bath, her hair was a mess, and she didn’t know what to wear. “I have a date!”

“Yeah, that was what I said.”

“But…” the brunette crouched back down so her profile wouldn’t present a threat to the newly taken-in stray. “He’s still not comfortable here, yet.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“Malina—”

Malina was still in her dressing gown, which was normal for a Saturday afternoon. She shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal. “You took care of Helen and Paris when I couldn’t, it’s the least I could do.”

They were her hybrid of African Grey Parrots and a magical bird species called the Grey Mimics. Most people considered them to be a handful as pets because they were highly intelligent and could open cages and some locks with no problem. Hermione ended up diverting them with games like thimblerig, where she hid a pea under one of three cups, or training their memory by challenging them to find matching cards among a table surface filled with face-down picture cards.

“Thank you.”

When she ate breakfast, she realised that she remembered Helen and Paris even if she couldn’t come up with a fixed number for her age. Most of her memories gave her the imprecise feeling of early twenties, even if there were a few others that seemed to contradict that. Yet she remembered what the Sorting Hat said and simply gave up for now. It would either come back to her, or it wouldn’t. There was nothing she could do about it.

She could recall the feeling of soft feathers Helen and Paris butting their heads against her hands repeatedly whenever they were bored and wanted her to play a game with them.

“Play card game!” Helen would squawk.

“No! Play cup game!”

“Card game!”

“Cup game!”

Hermione usually left Malina to mediate the birds squabbling like toddlers. That was, if some of her cats wasn’t running around her legs, asking to play hunt or chase. She could recall the scratches she’d had to heal whenever she was trying to domesticate yet another scared feral cat.

For all of her friends’ complaints that she was turning into a crazy cat lady, they resigned
themselves to being used as perches and pillows by her cats whenever there was a meeting held at her house. She had to hold back from laughing the first time she walked into her living room and saw Harry contentedly stroking Othello in his lap—the black kneazle was so big he was practically functioning as a purring blanket. Draco, on the other chair, was running his hands to groom Snowflake’s long and pristine white fur. His thinking face looked too similar to the frown of a judgemental pureblood; add the white cat’s expression of similar disdain and he looked positively like a Bond villain. The reddish-coloured Miss Havisham lounged over the headrest of the couch Daphne was sitting in, looking so much like a fur trim on the collar of her fashionable coat. Their position was of mutual ignorance and it worked well for them.

That was another thing that suddenly struck her. She was well and truly alone now. There’d be no discussions on the best spell combinations with Harry, no tinkering with a project she took home with Luna or Malina. There would be no people watching with Daphne or Ginny, and no arguments on Wizengamot Acts with Draco or disputes on strategy with Ron. She wouldn’t be able to randomly drop in on Neville and garden with him.

Never again. Even if they were to be born once more, they would be slightly different people here who did not share many histories with her.

She missed them all so much.

Hermione didn’t even notice the tears dropping on her breakfast tray.

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It was just after she asked him what the class was working on in Advanced Charms and he said that it was mostly the beginning of the history of charms and several basic ways to create one. If she had been the one to outright ask him about what he thought of her portents of death, this time, he was the one to break their illusion of normalcy. He timed it well, only speaking when they’ve gotten into the rhythm of their charms conversation and discussion.

“You’re not going to tell me anything even if I threaten you with death, would you?” He asked, testing the waters.

Hermione knew immediately what he meant. She laughed. It was one of her real laughters, not the polite titters ladies make during tea. He had that unreadable blank face again, which she was beginning to recognise as the natural expression he’d make whenever she confounded him.

“Really, why would I care about death threats?” She asked back.

“Because you’d be dead?”

“Come, come thou bleak December wind,
And blow the dry leaves from the tree!
Flash, like a Love-thought, thro’ me, Death
And take a Life that wearies me.”

The brunette witch did not remember many poems. Yet this errant piece, this fragment of Coleridge’s found lonely and alone, without context or title, had stuck with her when she first read it. It only took her a few more readings for it to stay in her memory. He had not expected that, she saw. As a result, he was observing her quietly with an intensity that he did not often show, one that was becoming familiar to her.

“It’s not that I wish for death, really. It’s just that I don’t see the need to fuss or fear it.”
The brunette witch saw that hers was not a position he could understand easily, and she could see why. He was filled with purpose, he was galvanised into activity. There were probably a hundred and one things he wished to do before breakfast. Glimpses of this particular character of his were visible in the various appointments that pulled him away from her bedside, even if she could see his reluctance more than once in the speed that he left. At least she knew she wasn’t the only one who had unwittingly enjoyed their discussion.

“Why?” Tom asked.

“Why what?”

“You could be anything you wish. Those words would be truer for you than for most Hogwarts students. You are not,” he paused in thought, as if the next word had personally offended him, “ordinary.”

“I’ve seen what someone grasping for the whole world gained—destruction. Doesn’t seem exactly worth all that effort just to live in a world ending in fire.” She said, dryly.

“If you’ve seen where the pitfalls are, that only meant you could do it better.”

It was her turn to be amused. “Are you _trying_ to get me to compete with you?”

He chuckled at her question as he realised what his exhortations to her sounded like.

“Oh, by all means, stand aside. I couldn’t be happier if you do.”

She shook her head slowly, so as to not trigger a new wave of migraine. Hermione never stared at her own hands for long, for their paleness still unsettled her.

“Ah, unfortunately, that is not possible.”

“Whyever not?”

“For bad men to achieve their ends, they require not more than good men seeing them and doing nothing.”

He was staring at her longer than was polite, more intent than was proper, with a distant, detached focus of a pathologist making a Y-incision on a chest. She bore it well, the same way she had borne a barrage of curses and jinxes supporting Harry in whatever field he needed her to be. Without too much thought she picked up a fruit tart from the table.

“I think you _do_ have a purpose in life, even if you’d deny it,” he finally said, lightly. Her eyebrows rose in curiosity.

“Really? Do tell.”

“To be as vexatious as possible to anyone with the slightest bit of ambition.”

Hermione smiled a little. “Ah, but a life too smooth is so _dreadfully_ boring. People get careless if everything comes too easily to them—a challenge or two keeps you alert. You can consider me doing you a favour this way.”

She could see the slight twitch at the corner of his eyes and a cold and unamused expression that would’ve intimidated most people. What he gained was a small laugh from her.

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There was a row of hospital beds filled with too-young Aurors.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have sent them out yet,” Hermione said, her voice was wavering. Harry shook his head.

“They’re already more prepared than the intake before them, or the one before that. We can’t cooped them up forever.”

“But—”

He sighed. His voice sounded older than their years.

“We don’t have enough people in the field otherwise, Hermione.”

“Right.” She did her best not to say it through gritted teeth. She walked out because she couldn’t bear seeing them for too long and feeling that she was somewhat responsible for them being there —

Hermione woke up, the faint dots in the distance slowly focusing as her eyes adjusted properly. The spots had some sort of vague clustering to it. Ceiling. I’m staring at the ceiling.

The brunette witch sat up slowly with a sigh, rubbing her forehead. I’m still at the Hogwarts infirmary.

After ten minutes awake, the rest of the dream’s details melted away (she’d only known that Harry was in it because no one else she knew back then chose to stick with their glasses). Every time she closed her eyes she could see young Aurors on hospital beds, some looking deathly pale, others with even worse spell damage.

She hated that she didn’t even know the why or how.

Hermione was in a funk, but she suspected that her dreams would always leave her in a bad mood if she let it, so she tried to push it out of her mind the whole day. Tom arrived with his usual punctuality and his Astronomy sketches drew her attention. She had never before considered that staring at the features of the red planet could be calming.

She flipped through the planetary sketches he’d made for Advanced Astronomy class. It was hard to not be impressed by the accuracy of the details, as well as a certain fluidity in the artist’s hand. In the midst of one of their more sedate conversations, he brought forth an unrelated question.

“Would you tell me how to avoid that future if I torture you?” He asked, curious.

There wasn’t a hint of guilt or reluctance in his dark blue eyes, his tone was exactly the same as when he’d asked her whether she wanted more cake. She had the odd realisation that he was as beautiful as a fae prince and as inhuman as one.

Hermione forced herself to stay calm. She met his gaze easily.

“Didn’t we have this conversation before? About how I’m not going to take it lying down if you try to harm me?” She warned him.

Tom waved it away with a confident expression. “Ah, but you were open to a few threats or so, didn’t you say that yourself?”
Hermione had to roll her eyes. Yes, she did say that, but most people wouldn’t have taken that literally, or take it as an opening to exploit.

“Why on earth would torturing me gain you anything? Of course not. That’s such a…” no, he did not care for being nice. *Think like a Slytherin, Hermione. Come on, you’ve practised this often enough with Daphne and Draco.* She found a different word.

“It’s such an impolite way of asking when you’re the one who needs a favour, isn’t it?”

“Yet I have a feeling that you’re not open to being bribed,” he said with a sigh, as if she was being such a great difficulty by not being morally flexible, and that it was really her fault that he was resorting to torture.

“Have you tried asking politely?” She asked sardonically.

Hermione was getting used to ignoring his vexed looks and his cold glances by now. This was how she poured his tea and added a spot of milk with ease. She could almost hear Daphne’s voice again. *Very good, Hermione. See? I was right. Nothing’s too hard for you if you set your mind to it.*

“Would you please tell me how to avoid the misfortune that you’ve seen?”

For all his exasperation, his tone was perfectly polite.

“I don’t know,” she pretended to think hard about it, ignoring his sceptical expression. “Would you tell me why Professor Dexter was determined to get the class to sketch Mars?”

“I…excuse me?”

Hermione ignored his bafflement and continued. “Why Mars, out of any other planet? Why not, say, the easier one such as the surface of the moon? Or maybe even the sun and its sunspots—”

He’d stilled for a moment before he cut her off.

“If this is your idea of a joke, I would say—”

“Tom,” her voice was level. She spoke slowly, like an explorer accidentally cornering predator in the jungle. “Is answering my questions about any subject, is us studying together for everything even after I’m out of the infirmary, really too expensive a price to pay for you to find out more about how to avoid treading the same path that lead to that future?”

His eyes were as dark as a moonless night and hid as much danger as one, for the nights of the new moon were a perfect cover for smugglers to make their way ashore and for highwaymen to ply their trade. She could see the twitch of his jaw as he restrained himself from expressing his disbelief. Hermione only placed her cup gently on the tray and folded her hands on her lap to ensure that they were visible to him, and then she waited.

“You’re serious.” He finally said when she didn’t budge.

“Very serious,” she answered him, never wavering, never expressing doubt. It was not hard because she had no doubt about this and it was truly the best path she could see at the spur of the moment.

“This is…”

She could see him glancing at her again, trying to gauge her reasoning and failing as he lost any
grasp he’d had on her logic. If he had less self-control, he would be wearing a hole on the infirmary floor by pacing. But all she had was his occasional frustrated glare and she said nothing else, biting back further words to let the silence add a subtle pressure for him to reply.

He was shaking his head. “I’ll think about it.”

Dammit. Apparently, Tom knew enough to withdraw when the field became unfavourable than to charge ahead carelessly.

Unlike his usual habit of carefully tidying up his notes, he pulled them all into his bag with a wordless flick of his wand. Some sort of mass Accio, she thought. He walked out without even closing his bag at all.

Usually, he’d spend one or one-and-a-half hour in her company before he left. Yet they’d only passed the half hour mark just now. She let out a sigh.

“That went well.”

Actually, she’d gladly help him out of her volition to stay away from Voldemort’s path, no questions asked. But as one of her non-magical friends she’d encountered at Oxford said (Howard was a marketing major), people don’t always appreciate what they get for free compared to something that they paid for. Ergo, she could not provide assistance to him without asking for something in return, especially when he didn’t know her very well yet at the moment.

Whatever his faults are, Tom Riddle was still an observant student and a conscientious scholar—she did feel that he helped her catch up with her classes faster than if she were to do it on her own. His notes were even more systematic than one of her longer-lasting study partners in Hogwarts, Terry Boot, and Terry was pretty OCD even for a Ravenclaw. So, why not make him promise to study with her? It was also a good reason as any to keep in touch with him and monitor him at a closer, more personal range. She thought she’d found a good solution.

Three birds, one stone.

Hermione sighed again and rubbed her forehead.

Yet as she thought over it now, she supposed it would seem a highly unbalanced transaction to him; interpretation of future visions exchanged for homework assist. It unnerved him because he probably couldn’t come up with any idea about what else she gained from it, and why she thought mere studying together was enough. It probably seemed too good to be true. But then, that was the best she came up with on the spot in response to his question.

Never mind, she assured herself. He can think for as long as he wants, but he’ll still be back. She still had to stay in the infirmary for a while and Slughorn had asked him to help her with classes.

Tom did come again the next day. Not a hair was out of place, as if there had been nothing different between them and he even brought fresh flowers for the vase at the side table—a refreshing burst of blue consisting of irises and bittersweet. She didn’t let his even expression fool her.

Hermione did not fall back to the simple interaction they had when they were studying. She needed him off guard until he answered.

“Have you come to a decision?” She asked directly in lieu of a greeting.
To be so short and to insist talking about Business was definitely not in line with pureblood etiquette, but it wasn’t as if either of them cared right now.

“There will not be a time limit to your aid.” He stated.

She shrugged as if she couldn’t care less, even though his wishes fitted her interest very well. The movement drew attention to her shoulders and the scoop-collared dress she was wearing—her bruises had faded enough that she can show a little more skin without looking like exhibit number one for battered women.

“You keep your end of the agreement, and I’ll keep mine. You have my word.”

He stared her down, but she remained undeterred. Her voice was almost cheerful when she spoke, realising that he couldn’t come up with any objections to her idea himself.

“Thank you for the flowers. Would you like some tea?”

The part of her that spoke with Daphne’s voice had suggested that she wore something green today. Nurse Edelstein had gifted her one dress—this one. She changed the colour to Slytherin green solely for today.

“Yes, please.” He replied casually, as if he’d only ever intended to drop in for a social visit.

Tom Riddle sat in the chair she’d always transformed into a leather wing-backed one whenever he came to visit the infirmary.

‘-

For some reason, the copies of his notes that he passed to her doubled in length, in two separate scrolls. She realised that one was the more mundane class notes with some addition, while the second was some sort of summary of his independent study that was certainly beyond most class material. If he thought that it would deter her, then he didn’t know her at all.

If it was a test, well, Hermione was always game trying to pass one.

Oddly enough, after they’ve reached that odd agreement, he didn’t bring up anything more esoteric than, say, old charms from the era of Roman Britain that had fallen out of use and the plausible reasons as to why they were no longer popular. She saw no reason to start talking about his plans (or lack thereof) to become a mad dark lord. The next time they argued about one of the uses of dragon blood, everything was mundane and normal again.

She almost believed that they were merely two highly-driven students who happened to be studying partners.

‘-

They were currently on the first floor of a run-down mansion, chasing down a small cult. Some of the cult members seemed to have been lying in wait, though it was haphazard rather than threatening. It still ended with the three of them hunkering down in a room for a while. Harry’s team was going to come blazing in some time, and even if not immediately, he’d be distracting them with his team’s frontal assault.

There was a rather large gash from Ron’s left shoulder down to his torso, going down at an angle. The witch didn’t like the way his breath was short as he leaned back against the wall. Draco was about to cast a healing spell by reflex before Hermione placed her hand over his wrist, shaking her
“You’re going to cast Episkey?” Hermione asked.

“What else? It needs to be closed.”

“Find one that slows blood flow instead.”

If they were at her apartment, he would’ve argued and asked for an explanation. Since she was clearly the healer here, he didn’t. Which was a good thing. After Harry lost his eye and she studied field healing, she was a lot more aware of the intricacies of curses and hexes. Closing this one immediately meant leaving the curse in.

“Right. I’ve got to clean your wound first, Ron, and this is going to hurt a lot. No painkillers for you because I need you conscious.” And she didn’t carry her full complement of potions this time.

He groaned. “Your bedside manner needs working on.”

Even as he complained, he had pulled his clothes open. Her only concern was to see the length of the cut and how deep it had gone. She hoped it didn’t reach any bone, because what little she’d started to read on dark curses lodging in bone did not fill her with optimism.

Draco passed him a flask of whisky which he accepted gratefully.

…

Draco was limping beside her. She couldn’t see how bad the wound was, on account of his robes and all.

“Draco?”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. Sit down and open your trousers.”

He laughed, “well, this is not exactly how it happened in my dreams.”

Her blush was late to follow and she rolled her eyes. “You either open it yourself and let me check out your thigh, or you’ll have another dress trousers shredded. Not that I care, but you do keep on whining about it whenever you lose another one.”

“Why wouldn’t I protest their loss? Formal dinners shouldn’t end up with assassination attempts, dammit! I demand a different entertainment!”

At least the wound couldn’t have been that bad if he could still joke and complain.

…

Hermione jerked awake, the unnamed archipelagos of age-old water stains greeted her on the ceiling yet again, inviting her to trace imaginary trade routes between them. A faint sterile smell met her and she knew she was in the Hogwarts infirmary still. Another old memory, she thought sourly. It wasn’t the memories that she disliked, it was because they wouldn’t even stay beyond a fleeting image or two and the uncomfortable emotions she felt inside it.

Almost all of them would leave a shade of worry or fear to hang over her.
The details of the dream faded quickly from her mind, no matter how desperately she grasped them…

A sigh escaped her. It seemed that she wouldn’t manage to remember this one either, except for the part where she had to clean Ron’s wound before she’d even think of using Episkey, or the dressing she did for Draco’s wound since she didn’t want to close any rot in an unknown hex inside his flesh. The hospital beds to her right and those in the row across hers made her antsy now, their emptiness closer to a gaping hole of presence that was supposed to be there.  

(Holes left by dead people.)

Her throat felt too tight, the images would not leave. She had to get out of there.

A downward glance told her that she was still in her pyjamas. There was still the faint echo of weakness in her limbs, but wasn’t she supposed to be well enough to return to her classes in a few days? Monday, to be precise. Well, that meant she was strong enough to take a little walk today, right? The trolley was nearby. All she had to do was get it over here and ring the small bell left there so the house elf would bring her food (breakfast). Right. That’s it.

It was not long after she finished breakfast when she heard the infirmary door open. A familiar figure strode through.

“What brings you here so early?”

From the flicker of surprise in Tom’s expression, he hadn’t quite expected it either. She was far from the well-turned-out and calm invalid he’d seen in the last week and more. Well, this is quite a pickle.

“In case you didn’t notice, this is Saturday.” He answered.

Oh, of course. She still didn’t think he had any particular reason to suddenly visit in the morning as opposed to his usual afternoon schedule.

“If it’s inconvenient—”

“Could you hand me—”

They both paused after speaking at the same time. Hermione tilted her head in the direction of a tray filled with potions on a rather distant tray. He picked it up before she even needed to say anything and laid it on the side table. That was perceptive of him.

“Ah, thank you.”

“Your medications?”

She nodded and started emptying the bottles one by one. Some had a refreshing taste, while for others, the faster she could pour it down her gullet, the better. She’d even developed a particular order by now—she drank them from the most disgusting tasting to the more pleasant.

“Is Madam Edelstein in her office right now?” She asked. Tom glanced over to the infirmary office, listening.

“I don’t think so, but I can check if you’d like.”

“Please. Please do.”
From the way his eyes found her again, contemplating, she knew she hadn’t successfully covered the desperation in her voice. Tom didn’t ask any questions as she expected him to and only proceeded to do just as he’d suggested. She pulled the bed covers down and threw her legs over the side, still sitting. At least she was wearing proper pyjamas instead of those hospital robes that gapes at the back. It was also a good thing that Dippet was kind enough to provide and advance of her school funds so Maggie could drop in at Diagon Alley and procure some basic essentials quickly.

Standing up carefully, she walked to the bedside table. It was more like a side cabinet, with a little cupboard space beneath its two drawers. She took some clothes out and laid them on the bed, unbuttoning several buttons of the top without bothering to do it for all the buttons. She’d picked a blouse and a long, flaring skirt that wartime Britain would’ve seen as a luxury item. Hermione couldn’t help her snort.

Even with all their ‘fabric shortages’ the wizarding world still had far more than the non-magical one.

“She’s not at the office.” Tom had returned.

Hermione nodded, unsurprised. Nurse Edelstein used mornings to do work that would require her to go out of the infirmary or run errands, unless there was a first year flying class scheduled. It was the quietest hours of the infirmary, barring the night. She came up with the plan in a moment. Her hands had been flying down the buttons of her pyjama top in no time, pulling it off quickly as she had a camisole underneath.

She pulled the blouse over her head quickly and did the buttons. It was only when she met Tom’s gaze that she noticed there was colour high over his cheekbones regardless of how calm he seemed. Something about the depth of his gaze in the moments before he made himself look away warmed her skin. She couldn’t help but look down inside her blouse to make sure she was wearing a simple cotton camisole instead of somehow magically procuring some lingerie for herself.

Why…oh.

“I had expected that you’d at least ask me to turn around.” His tone was wry.

Heat rose to her cheeks and she was rather annoyed that she couldn’t help feel self-conscious now when she noticed it. Hermione felt like slapping her forehead.

Dammit. This is the 1940s, Hermione! Not the 21st century!

The young witch almost wished she could pretend that she didn’t care, but embarrassment was a contagious state that her sensibilities tried to get over very, very quickly, in the best tradition of British avoidance and understatement. At least she wasn’t actually a young Hermione—she’d have been mortified speechless that a wizard had been stupefied because he thought she was about to outright strip in front of him.

“I don’t have time to be missish when I need to check an open wound and treat it,” she said quickly, by way of explanation as she pulled the skirt over her pyjama bottoms. “The other way around also applies. Articles of clothing sometimes need to be opened and taken off because I have a wound that has to be treated immediately. I have wizards as friends and not just witches. So…”

Hermione trailed away. He realised what she was about to do quickly and did her the rather belated courtesy of giving his back to her. She pulled her pyjama trousers down quickly. The pyjamas were folded haphazardly on the corner of the bed, left to be picked up by whoever the house elf on duty was. A quick tap of her wand at her hair was enough to smooth it down a little and she tied it at the
nape of her neck with a ribbon.

She cut a piece of scroll with a flick of her wand and wrote a short message on it.

*Out for a walk.* There. At least Nurse Edelstein wouldn’t start sending search teams after her.

“So!” She said with a forced cheerfulness as she fervently wished her blush to disappear as she stood next to him. “Why don’t you give me a brief tour of the castle on this fine morning.”

He offered her his arm. She stared at two seconds before she figured out what he’d expected her to do and took it. *Alright, this is odd.*

“And I presume that Madam Edelstein is not privy to this plan of yours?”

“I’ll be discharged soon, preferably tomorrow, and a little walk the day before that isn’t going to kill me.”

“I noticed that you haven’t answered my question.”

“I noticed that we’re still heading towards the door.”

“Yes, but when a man is pulled to be an accessory to a crime, it is natural to wonder what exactly he’s getting into.”

“It’s not a crime to take a walk around the castle, and maybe a little stroll on the grounds. Last time I checked, this isn’t the Tower of London.”

“I’d rather not have Madam Edelstein blaming me if you fall down.”

She snorted as Tom opened the infirmary door for her. It was too easy to forget that gentlemanly behaviour was still expected in this time.

“I won’t fall down. Don’t pretend that I can’t see you’re not the slightest bit concerned. You can always say that I was too stubborn for you to stop, short of knocking me down unconscious, and that you finally accompanied me because you’re worried.”

He pretended to mull over her suggestions. “Knocking you unconscious does have a certain appeal.”

“No, it doesn’t, not now. I don’t think you want to be seen carrying an unconscious witch in the Hogwarts corridors, do you?” She smiled, sweet and unconvincingly nonthreatening.

“I’ll just say she’d recently fainted.”

“And I’ll be very cross with you that I’ll keep our conversations on school subjects for a while.”

They were at an impasse. For all his protestations, she knew that he had no problem at all with accompanying her on this little jaunt. He was merely concerned if it was going to land him in hot water with Nurse Edelstein. What she needed to do was to find a way to push his doubts back.

They’d gone down several levels and he was showing her the way to the Potions class and labs. She was not embarrassed to admit that she did lean on him significantly several times. If he was here as her guide and crutch, she might as well use him for support—her ego was not so fragile that she couldn’t even admit that she was still recovering.

“You know what a bad plan is?” She asked.
Hermione could say with confidence that he was stronger than he looked, since even when he was supporting more than half of her body weight, his steps didn’t falter.

His eyes flicked to her quickly, but otherwise, there was no change in his expression.

“What?”

“When it requires you to make a plan to be resurrected.”

“Wouldn’t that be a brilliant plan if you can manage it? To be able to live again?”

Hermione shook her head. “No, because it involved dying in the first place. So, no. Not a good idea. A better one would be to strengthen yourself to be less prone to a sudden case of death.”

Tom made a non-committal sound, but she knew he was laying down the pieces of the puzzle she’d just given him carefully in his mind.

“Oh dear, maybe I misjudged my strength after all. If you were to knock me out now and drag me back to the infirmary, I absolutely don’t mind.” She said with mock despair. Though the tone of his voice was even, the side glance he gave her was sceptical.

“Yet you wouldn’t know how to get to the library, would you?”

She brightened at the prospect. Even if she already knew how to get there, she needed to find a way to explain how she gained the knowledge. This was really convenient for her purpose.

“You’re right, I almost forgot! Let’s go to the library.”

It was only as they slowly made their way there that she realised he had begun to gain an understanding of her character the same way she’d picked and unravelled his habits and particularities in her mind. She couldn’t decide whether it was a good thing or a bad thing.

Chapter End Notes

On Hogwarts’ class, schedule and related addendum (just skip if you don’t really care about or notice these details):

On Advanced Classes: The reason why I even considered that Hogwarts has advanced classes is because it’s the premier institution of magical education in the UK, and is practically the only school of its level. As such, I don’t think they’d make the decision to expel anyone easily, unless for truly extreme behaviour, so they can’t make their curriculum too hard.

So, what’s the solution for many rich, inbred pureblood spawn that just wants the ‘Hogwarts graduate’ stamp of approval on their forehead? Make classes that go on a casual pace, of course, and call that the ‘normal’ classes (God forbid the parents find out that their kids were going to be shuffled to a class that gives training wheels by default, or seemed to be easy). The ones who have enough brains and common sense to work through a normal curriculum can take ‘Advanced’ classes by fifth year. Those who worked hard and wanted to stretch themselves further (like poor scholarship kids),
can start taking ‘Advanced II’ classes by sixth year.

I guess what I was trying to say is taking several classes with ‘Advanced’ tacked on its name when you’re fifth year or above isn’t a sign that you’re a certified genius. There’s a good component of smoke and mirrors involved here, ladies and gents. Smokes and mirrors. It’s not as if we get many details of the classes for the upper years in the books itself as Harry was busier trying to stay alive.

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List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Grey Parrot** or **African Grey Parrot**: *Psittacus erithacus*, a medium-sized, black-billed and predominantly grey parrot. The numbers are dwindling in the wild, so *don’t* buy one if you don’t know where he/she came from, since there are already breeders around the world. A highly intelligent species and one among the most often used as an example of nonhuman intelligence, they’ve been shown to perform at the cognitive level of 4 - 6 year-olds.

Add a magical species into their line and you can imagine just how they could become even smarter. Their intelligence meant they’re also prone to behavioural problems if their owners can’t stimulate that intelligence.

'-'
07 Agreements: Trust, or Lack Thereof I

Chapter Summary

In which Hermione manages to escape to the library but doesn't quite get the peace she was looking for. Tom Riddle does not actually like riddles. Hermione answers some random questions about the future.

Chapter Notes

So, I was still hacking through a critical scene in this chapter when I saw that it kept getting longer and longer. This is why I decided to just split it into two. Then, I realised that it meant I can certainly upload this one this week, even if the second part isn't done yet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once they reached the library, Hermione had carried several books with her and Tom took one or two for his own perusal too. He saw her lean against a bookshelf once, and she’d even hung onto him a few times when she felt her limbs weakening. He did not complain, even if she would swear that he regarded her with the same attention to detail that Charles Darwin gave to a new finch species—right up to the point where he might even be considering to preserve her carcass as an interesting specimen, complete with an ankle tag.

She ignored it since it wasn’t as if he meant to act upon it.
Frankly, she had gotten really good at ignoring anything short of outright physical or mental attacks after she constructed and cast the howler screening charm at her apartment and office.

Where an actual concerned prefect would’ve asked her if she wanted to go back, and perhaps ask her if she wasn’t too tired already, he had simply watched her struggles with an even composure.

There was not an inch of sympathy in it. Surprisingly, it suited Hermione just fine.

She was tired of constantly being asked about how she was doing whenever one of the professors happened to drop in, or even from Nurse Edelstein herself. The discussions she entered with them were nice, goodness knows she’d go spare from the boredom otherwise, but she could do without the almost-smothering concerned looks.

For all the holes in her memories, her gut feeling told her that she’d survived worse.

This was how they found themselves in one of the private study carrels in the library, sitting at right angles to each other. Hermione lowered the book she was reading to give Tom a flat stare.

“Would you please stop that?”

“Stop what?”

He had the gall to seem mildly befuddled.

“You’ve been staring at me for a while whenever you think I’m not looking. Don’t say you don’t, since I know what I see. Since I’d rather cut to the chase, you can just ask me whatever’s on your mind right now. Go on.”

Hermione might’ve taken the bait if she was less experienced—like, say, her exposure to the wizarding world had only been the idealistic Hogwarts. She had found out that the real world was filled with people with murky motivations and accepting things at face value did not serve her well.

(“Whoever told you that you could learn politics from a book needs to get Avada-ed. Yes, this applies to office politics too, Granger.” Draco said it in exasperation. Another flash of memory that she could not place. She recognised the harried look in his face and hers from the reflection at Florean Fortescue’s window—they’d both had only entered the Ministry recently, both of them still overworked junior peons.)

His curiosity was clearly larger than the consideration to act normal.

“You’ve expressed your interest in assisting me.” He said.

“You didn’t suddenly forget the deal we agreed to, did you?” She raised one eyebrow.

“Just like that.”

It was a simple statement, but a hundred questions lurked behind it. His eyes as fathomless and cold as the polar seas and he had a predatory stillness to him that most people could only aspire to. He did not fidget or tap his foot. A snake in the grass, she thought. How fitting.

“Well, I chose so. Why shouldn’t I?” She asked.

“It seems too easy.”

“It’s the last thing from easy,” she disagreed. “Any agreement that lasts beyond a single goal or a
simple task is one that is constantly renegotiated whether implicitly or explicitly, simply because
the future is never that predictable.”

“True,” he conceded, “and yet you still play me as a fool.”

“Oh, trust me, you’re one of the very few people I take utterly seriously here. Really, what is your
problem?” She had almost thrown her hands in the air at this point. Curse the Slytherins and their
paranoia to the depths of Moria.

“If you would swear fealty to me—”

“I am not one of your underlings, Tom, and I’ll never be one.” She warned.

“Bold words for a half-dead witch.” He pointed out.

“Oh, I don’t care about death. What do I actually have to lose if I fight you? I can kill you and
remove a potential dark lord early if I’m lucky, and if I’m not, perhaps I’ll finally see my family
and friends from home again if I died. Who knows? The way I see it, I win either way.” She
smiled, the way her cats bared their canines at overly-confident rodents trying to sneak into the
kitchen and steal food.

“Wouldn’t you have failed if I lived, then?” He asked. To his credit, she could barely discern his
tension in his perfectly-even voice.

She shrugged. “Oh, no, it’s just a delay. You heard what I’ve said, didn’t you? You’ll get mad and
it would make an unexpectedly high number of people to band together and take you out. Sooner or
later, you’d die an ignoble death all the same if you keep in your current path. Right now, your
death and fall is just a matter of when, not if.”

“If I were to bind you with blood, we would have already dispensed with these tiring arguments,”
he murmured.

Most would think he was only referring to blood oaths, but her memories provided a darker
meaning; the use of blood magic to subjugate her will under his. It was less powerful than an
Imperius as you could only define the terms at the beginning and it could not be too general, yet it
was harder to detect.

One of the often-confiscated heirloom by the Aurors that get handed off to the Unspeakables is the
wedding ring that binds the wearer under anyone who wore the other ring. Some of those rings
have teeth on the inside.

Their gazes locked against each other, appraising each other—his, calmly observant while hers
was a stern warning, telling him that she knew exactly what he was referring to.

The only reason peace was kept was because they could see each other’s hands on the table.

*For now.*

She was frank with her answer. “As if I would ever agree to enchain myself to someone else. Are
you going to fight me now? If you are, it would be to the death.”

Hermione herself had doubts about her ability to kill in cold blood, but he didn’t need to know.
There was also a good chance that her survival instinct would win out once he started sending dark
curses and hexes in her direction.
His lips curved upwards without a concern.

She smiled back just as easily even if it didn’t reach her eyes.

There was a reason that Harry (and her, and a couple of others) signed an open letter to be circulated in their office—under no reason should any of the people who signed it should be given a surprise birthday party, or a surprise event anything. Ron had blown a poor delivery boy through his apartment door and down the hall once because his then-girlfriend was foolish enough to send him a surprise gift by giving the deliverer access to his apartment. Was it a surprise that he thought it was an intruder?

(And I thought he couldn’t have done worse than Lavender, a mature voice mused in her head, a rapidly-vanishing figment.)

She could feel magic gathering around him as the intent to cast was probably at the forefront of his mind right now. She didn’t blink or look away but merely did the same, her fingertips sliding against her wand point. Several spells that would work in closed areas came to mind—she had to take a moment to come up with them since she’d specialised with wide-area spells whenever she supported Harry or Ron’s Aurors in the field.

The witch didn’t know what convinced him to hold back for now, whether it was how she held up under pressure, or if it was something else she had no idea of. When he didn’t act rashly in the next minute Hermione huffed, out of both boredom and annoyance.

“Damn it, Riddle! If you want to back out, just say so, and I’ll go my own way.”

“And then you’ll leave me alone?”

“Who said anything about leaving you alone? I’ll keep watch—I can’t stand actual people-killing and people-torturing dark lords, remember? But I won’t interfere in your life otherwise.” She made a long exhale yet again before pushing the book she’d been reading forward as she drew back.

“Sheesh, the one time I try to help someone and it blows up completely. Why do I even bother? Really, maybe I should just…”

The brunette witch was murmuring mostly to herself as she stood up, but Tom had stood up just as quickly and barred her path. She only folded her arms in front of her chest and gave him a jaded look.

“Don’t leave.”

“Is that an order or a request? Because I won’t listen to the first, and if it’s the second, you’re missing a magic word.”

“Please.”

It was said with completely insincere flatness, but she supposed he never did get enough practice at saying it for real instead of faking it.

“Alright. Talk.”

“You can swear an oath not to reveal my secrets.”

She didn’t hold back from the urge to slap her forehead. “And who would decide what is a ‘secret’ and what is not? Good grief, Tom! What do I get from agreeing to an oath that binding? You’re
not gifting me the bloody British Library to be able to ask that much of me! Could you, I don’t know, start actually negotiating instead of just demanding things?"

“I can bind all the people under me with an oath to never make an attempt at your life.”

“Isn’t that something that most people in a civilised society take for granted? You know, to not have people suddenly trying to kill them?” Hermione asked, incredulous. Not to mention that he’d conveniently exempted himself from such an oath so he could still try to kill her if the mood struck him.

She sat back down once it seemed that the Slytherin was actually going to try to talk to her for a while. Well, she wasn’t too eager to test the limits of her current endurance either, so there’s also that. Tom returned to his previous seat as well.

“An oath of loyalty for an oath of protection against anyone from the continent trying to kill you.” Tom said.

He was getting better at this—at least it started to sound like a deal than a one-sided command. She shook her head. “First, Hogwarts has fantastic, dense weave of wards that’s been layered by more than one generation, as Hogwarts: A History has kindly informed me. Secondly, I can defend myself just fine, and if that’s not enough, I can always go to ground.”

Compared to most wizards, she does know how to live in the muggle world and lay low.

She raised a hand to stop him from speaking up just yet.

“Lastly, I don’t give an oath of loyalty to anyone. Not even if it was to, say, a hypothetical someone who happened to be both my best friend and hero of the wizarding world. I protect my family because I love them. I’ll stand by my friends for the same reason, and because I respect the people that they are. If that respect is ever lost, if…”

Her throat felt dry. Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes for a moment as she pulled herself together.

“If any one of them suddenly became a dark lord or dark lady, trust me, I’ll be the first to go after them.”

At the very least, I need to hear the explanation from their own lips. And she wanted to see their apparent evil and destruction personally, to allow no room for her doubt or love to drag her feet.

She saw curiosity flaring up in his eyes, his attention completely on her.

“Even if they’re your friends?”

She bit her lip. “I hope it never comes to that, but yes.”

Harry was the one who’d asked her about it, actually. She wasn’t actually surprised that the memory was seared into her mind stronger than other details about her own life.

(“If there’s ever a dark artefact that takes over the soul and turns me into some sort of a monster, promise me that you’ll take me out, Hermione.”)

“You’re the only one who I know can do it and would actually do it.”)

“This would be simpler if I were to just kill you,” Tom broke the silence. His slight sigh passed for
other people’s irritated looks.

She chuckled with relief, because she didn’t want to even try to remember what made Harry said that. Something ominous hung in the back of her mind; a burning night sky, grass the colour of blood. Even if she couldn’t remember a thing about it beyond the weird flashes of images and Harry’s words, there was a sense of uneasiness blanketing everything associated with that event.

Tom had just given her a convenient distraction.

“Well, it would also be easier if I choose to just to kill you and act on it. Yet a life worth living isn’t made of easy choices.”

It was the strangest thing; Hermione felt more drained by the conversation than the walk to the library. “Look, if you decide that you can’t trust me enough to let me advise you and be your friend, then *walk away*.”

“We’re not done yet.” His tone brooked no disagreement.

“Then make up your damned mind!”

His wand was against her throat in a flash, but hers was pointed right over his heart in a blink. Really, she’d gotten very good with the CPR spell—it came to her mind’s eye in a second. It is *very unadvised* to add an additional electric current to a heart that’s already working normally. One might just cause the cardiac muscles to seize up, after all.

And the Living Heart Spell was just one of many she had already come up with in the two seconds.

“Well, this is awkward,” Tom said, the smoothness of his voice at odds with his own words.

“No, this is just…what would a pureblood etiquette instructor call it? Ah, *inconvenient*. This is only a little *inconvenience*.” The chipper tone that she used was one she learned from Daphne whenever she had to herd stubborn wizards.

Tom seemed completely unconcerned by the threat she posed. Hermione was still slightly numbed by what little memory she could still recall and by the loss of a world that she feared she’d left behind permanently that she couldn’t care less about it. She hadn’t lied to him—she was still rather apathetic towards life and death right now, though she hoped it would improve with time.

“You have to understand my position. You’re a threat, Hermione.” He trailed his wand very delicately down her jugular, towards her clavicle. She cleared her throat. There was something unnerving about it to her, and not in the mortal danger sense.

“I’m not a threat to you, unless you make me.”

“Ah, but you’re a force of *good*, didn’t you say that? I’m sure you’d easily mark someone like me as *not* good, isn’t it? And then where would we be?” He sounded so reasonable. If only he wasn’t tapping the tip if his wand lightly against her collarbone.

*He’d be a fantastic jazz singer*, a completely random thought crossed her mind. *That voice was made to croon.*

“Yet what is good, what is evil?” She asked, quickly pulling herself from that brain glitch.

Tom was staring at her with mild disbelief.
“Are we truly going to delve into ontology, right now?”

“I don’t have that much patience for most philosophy either,” she answered, slowly shifting the arithmancy book on the table to support her right hand—she was going to cramp after five minutes if she had to keep her wand up all the time. It was still pressed right over his heart. “But you think I’m a threat precisely because you have an idea of what ‘good’ is like, and you feel you don’t fit them, and therefore I’d be opposed to you. Yet you didn’t even consider that my definition of ‘good’ might not actually be that similar with what you think ‘good’ is.”

“You did mention your aversion to killing and torturing.”

“Well, are you going to collect some number of young people to kill in a blood sacrifice to give you more power?” She bluntly asked. He actually thought over her question.

“Hmm, I don’t think I’ve read of any such rituals that don’t have a questionable success rate or side effects, so not yet, unfortunately.”

Hermione glared at him for baiting her, but said nothing. The innocence in his answering smile could shame a seraph, dark blue eyes glittering with humour. His wand was still at the base of her neck.

“Truly, Tom, if you want power, you’re not someone who would even need to risk their souls, their very selves, with dodgy rituals.”

“But magic is such a potent source of power.” He idly mused.

“Not all risks are worth their rewards—there are other, less dangerous paths for someone of your intelligence. You could be king of all wizarding world for all I care as long as you don’t start with the senseless killing, torturing and what have you.” She let out an annoyed sigh. “Look, can we just both bring our wands down? We can do it slowly if you like, but I’m getting a cramp.”

She didn’t have a cramp yet, but it was a pre-emptive move as she wasn’t looking to having one. He nodded, and Hermione lifted her wand slowly, moving it downwards. He followed suit. Both of their wands were on the table now. It probably only made for a second or two of difference if either of them decided to hex the other and started a fight right then and there, but it was certainly more comfortable.

“Yet we have a Minister of Magic, Hermione, unlike say, one of the magical German kingdoms, or one of the under-kingdoms of Italy.”

It was odd to remember that the sovereign borders in the magical world and the non-magical one did not always match until very recently, as the borders of nation states stabilised and the long arm of state bureaucracy reached everywhere, even the magical nations.

“A king in power does not always have to be a king in name,” was her answer to him.

“A king…really?”

His gaze was dark, mesmerising and she met him head on. Hermione didn’t even care if he picked up slightly more than her surface thoughts, because her thoughts on it was that she really didn’t care. She was sure that her friends thought the same. What she wanted was for the Aurors to have the budget they needed to keep themselves in fighting fit and be able to take on the people aspiring to be dark lords (unlike say, Fudge’s gutting of the corps). She wanted the Wizengamot to be monitored enough to ensure there it could not be sabotaged and used to act as a kangaroo court like in Sirius’ case. She wanted the Unspeakables to not be ignored whenever they issued a warning
about some esoteric branch of magic or some strange artefact. She wanted people’s complaints and dissatisfaction in the wizarding world to be heard and responded to by the Ministry…

Everything else after that was mostly details.

Your priorities change when you’ve been hunting wannabe dark lords for a while and see the sort of chaos they sow in society. She just wanted peace.

“A King, a Prime Minister, a Minister of Magic—all positions have their limits, and all that goes up can go down.” Hermione said this with ease.

She had walked in on Harry and Ron in the Potter family home once, wargaming a scenario where their teams actually had to take down a Minister of Magic that had become a dark lord’s puppet, along with a few other people they trusted from the Auror corps. She didn’t even blink when they froze up at her arrival, only asking them all what everyone wanted for lunch because she might as well order for everyone while she was at it. The only sign that she heard the relieved sighs going around the room was the slight upward quirk of her lips.

He did not reply to her immediately, only observing her for a while with that unreadable stare.

“Ah I see. You wanted to be a kingmaker.”

Hermione rubbed her face with her left hand, holding back a groan of frustration. Speaking of the one-track mind of many Slytherins about ambition… She lifted her head—she was about to say that she couldn’t care less about whether she had any position or not when she saw his expression was more thoughtful instead of the confident one she’d seen before. He might’ve made that erroneous conclusion some moments ago, but he could read the emotions clearly on her face and had revised his opinion immediately.

“You are a puzzle, Hermione.” He mused, his right hand lightly tapping the hilt of his wand. “And I don’t like riddles.”

His reply had more than one layer to it. She cracked a small grin at that.

“I’m really not. I’m just very different from most people you know that you need to adjust your assumptions—I assume most of the people around you are very ambitious Slytherins.”

“It would be a lie if you said that you have no ambition. You are driven in your foolishness.”

She nodded, acceding his point about her stubbornness, even if she knew that they had very different opinions as to what constitutes foolishness or not. He might think her having and maintaining her conscience is one, while she considered his splitting his soul to be just that.

“And so are you. Yet I don’t believe in destroying my rivals to get ahead or unnecessary violence.”

He tilted his head slightly to the left. “You believe that some violence is necessary.”

It was hard not to grimace at the ease he read between her lines, and she was sure that he noticed even the aborted twitch of her face. She sighed.

“If only it wasn’t so, but the world isn’t as nice as I wish it to be.”

The tension and wariness between them was not as high as it had been during their first confrontation, but she could feel that they hadn’t exactly bypassed the possibility of a fight yet. Their apparent ease right now was simply the canniness of two experienced predators, constantly...
watching each other for weaknesses, just in case the other decided to go for the jugular.

“I still don’t know you enough. You would not swear an oath to me, which would easily remove any doubt that I may have. You believe in the meddling force of Good, from which I’ve actually seen little good from.”

Hermione had to suppress the reflex to defend that just because he didn’t have a good experience with Dumbledore meant he had to paint everyone else who wanted to preserve what goodness still exist in the world with the same brush. She had to admit that at least they were still talking instead of fighting.

“If you’d let me peel back your surface appearance with judicious use of pain, so I can see who you are underneath the shell of civilisation, I would’ve trusted you more.”

She sniffed. “Well I think it’s an overly expensive price for me to pay for something with a shoddy return policy.”

“Do you know just how much more sensitive the hands are compared to most other surface of the body? I’ve just read about how many nerve endings they have, the reason why our sense of touch there is very acute. It’s interesting. No wonder there are so many methods of torture that applies to the hands. It’s hard not to appreciate the elegance of whoever came up with driving needles under the nails—such exquisite pain. Of course, the downside of such physical torture is that you are also destroying the body as you do it, possibly also destroying the nerves and making it hurt less the next time you try it again.”

The young witch didn’t bother hiding her wince, or the glare she sent him. She had a feeling that she was going to regret telling him that mere threats were nothing as long as neither of them actually tried to kill the other. Hermione was starting to sympathise with the criminal psychologists whose books she’d read, especially those who had to interview more than one psychopath in maximum security prisons again and again to build their set of criminal profiles.

“Ha, ha. You’re currently not very amusing at all, Tom.”

“Are you withdrawing your offer to assist me?” He leaned forward slightly. The grace in his movements, the efficiency of his actions didn’t change. He reminded her of a lounging panther.

“If you do accept my offer in good faith—and none of this talk of oaths to you or paying a blood price—I’d do it. Right now.” Hermione answered. She’d known that doing the right thing would not always be easy. “It doesn’t mean I won’t just walk away for the moment if you’re being an annoying arse like you currently are.”

“I’ve been customising the Cruciatas Curse to create a version that can localise the pain to select areas so as to not burn out and numb the nerves too fast.” He said, as remorseless and relentless as the rising tide. He was raising her hackles and she snapped back before she could think about it.

“You could try casting that at me, and I’ll show you just how many medical spells can easily inflict harm as they can heal. You wouldn’t want me to cut out a section of your colon from the rest and leave it inside to rot you from the gut out.” That was a spell to take out a damaged section while automatically reconnecting the remaining ones together. She just skipped the logical next step of casting another spell to take the cut piece out of the body. Hermione regretted the threat the moment she’d said it because it was a nasty and painful way to die, and she’d never wish that on anyone.

Pieces of memories pass by her mind in seconds. (The black kneazle Othello gave a warning growl
to the new white cat that had just scratched her.)

Even with the too-sharp gaze that never left her, the threat actually earned her an impromptu smile from him, while the magic they’ve both gathered churned the air with volatile crackles as they buffeted each other.

“Ah, and here I was wondering whether you’d been underestimating me or not.”

Another memory fluttered by like an old photograph flying in a snowstorm. (Snowflake bared his canines at her and hissed, even when she was approaching him with a bowl of food. Othello was giving the new cat a dead-eyed stare, disliking this unwanted interloper to his mistress’ domain.)

“I could never underestimate you, burner of cities,” her answer was filled with exasperation. He was...satisfied? It boggled her mind. Why on earth should he be satisfied with what she said?

“Yet you’re still reckless in your lack of fear that I can’t help but think that a lesson or three in pain might not be amiss.”

Other people might say it like a threat. To Tom Riddle, it was merely an observation of the same tone as ‘excuse me, your shoelaces are untied’.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to decline the offer,” she replied sarcastically.

“If you would not show me what makes your mind tick, I’ll have to take you apart myself.” He warned.

The threat of violence roiled the invisible nimbus of magic that had gathered around himself, and she was almost tempted to strike first just to dissipate the discomfiting charge that had built up around both of them. Perhaps they’d get their duel after all and it would finally end this uncomfortable détente.

“You could always walk away.” She said this as calm as she could manage when she had to push out the words between gritted teeth.

“Only a fool leaves their back open to a strike by a known threat.”

(Snowflake bit her hand when she placed the food bowl a little too close to him before he ran away. He growled at her from a safe distance.)

“I’m not going to backstab you for no good reason! I’ve told you that already.” She snapped, annoyed both at him and her glitching memories.

“As they say in Slytherin, it costs nothing to speak with a forked tongue.”

Hermione was beginning to think that she’d needed a break to also sort through the annoying images she kept seeing of Snowflake, of all things, that would not quit when a flash of insight illuminated her mind. Tom’s words had been the last piece of the puzzle. Her brown eyes widened. *Fear.*

It was very easy to channel fear to aggression. It would ease your own fears to attack first instead of waiting warily for an attack that may or may not come. It was also one of the oldest reason that groups of humans warred against each other—the apparent threat the other poses, regardless of whether or not that threat was real or merely imagined. Fear was an extraordinary spur that can drive species to migrate, for mothers to fight back ferociously against predators to as they fear the
death of their young. There were good odds that it was one of the oldest emotions from the first creature that swam in the oceans, as it was the foundation of any species’ survival.

(Snowflake’s fur was half-standing the first time she entered his cage at the shelter, all-too-ready to fight).

He had more in common with her ex-feral cats than she’d realised, and her subconscious had been trying to tell her something. She unsettled him—she was not an average Hogwarts student who would either accept his charms at face value or buckle under his intimidation, and he knew that her skills were far from mediocre that he couldn’t ignore her. Tom bared his fangs at her because he considered her a threat. Hermione had the weirdest urge to extend an open palm slowly in his direction to show that she meant no harm, and oh-so-gently pat his cheek.

“Oh my God,” she blurted out, “I can’t believe some part of you is cute.”

She clapped her hands to her mouth. Hermione turned beet red at the verbal vomit she just did, intensely mortified. The gathering magic between the two of them collapsed immediately between her embarrassment and his bafflement. She was sure that none of the people in his house had seen him at such loss for words. Instead of mortal peril, there was this weird awkwardness rising and she was desperately wishing that the threats against her life was back.

Yes, really, she would like to duel him right there, right now, even with a partially-recovered body that might mean there’s larger odds than winning a coin toss that she’d be the one dead—

“Did you just say—”

“I mean, I can’t believe your fans, um, admirers would think you’re cute. They’d have been very disappointed if they can see you for who you are right now!” She spoke rapidly.

From the way he was still staring at her with the uncertainty of a man who just saw a flying unicorn stop right in front of him in broad daylight, she had her doubts on how much he bought her insistence that he didn’t hear what he thought he heard.

“My…admirers.” He said, slowly. To her eternal regret, he’d suddenly recovered his common sense and was clearly unwilling to fulfil her strongest wish to fight right there and then.

“Yes. Your admirers.” Hermione firmly insisted.

“How would you even know I have any? You haven’t even attended any classes.”

She bit her lip before she answered with, ‘I’m sick, not blind.’

“Witches have a sixth sense about these things, don’t you know?” she said instead, hoping to hell and back that her know-it-all tone would’ve stopped any argument short. He only nodded slowly instead.

“Of course,” he replied, and she didn’t miss his disbelief.

“I need some fresh air. It’s too easy to deplete the oxygen levels in closed spaces like this.” Hermione said all this at the same time that she stood up. Tom stood up at the same time.

“And I’m sure that none of the Founders could even come up with a decent Circulation Charm to cast here. Such a terrible shame. Would someone please think of the fainting ladies.” his reply was droll. She pretended not to notice his sarcasm at all.
“Do you think Professor Slughorn wouldn’t mind if I asked him for two of his potion bottles? I promised Nurse Edelstein that I’d show her how a thermos works. It’s a good idea to help preserve potions that would keep better at certain temperatures without having to carry a list of a hundred warming and cooling charms and constantly checking which ones react badly to certain ingredients in the potions.”

He offered her his arm again the moment she was about to walk out. She stared blankly for a few moments before shaking her head and taking it.

They walked out arm-in-arm, the very picture of amiability and courtesy to any student.

Tom let her prattle on about thermoses, vacuum, and the transference of heat (energy) through radiation and how it was much slower than conduction or convection. They made their way out of the carrel and into the library while she had fully entered into her lecture mode that usually earned familiar groans from her friends. From the side-glances he kept sending her when he thought she wasn’t looking, both pondering and perplexed, she knew that he hadn’t forgotten about her careless comment in the slightest.

She just hoped it wouldn’t come back and bit her in the backside later.

Tom did not only escort her all the way to the Potions labs once more, he actually told Slughorn about just why exactly Hermione needed two potion bottles of different sizes and commended her on her brilliant idea of how to preserve certain potions at close to their optimum temperature without resorting to possibly-contaminating magic. The Slytherin easily ignored the confused and suspicious look she was sending him at his inadvertent promotion and compliment.

Slughorn turned his bright eyes on Hermione, giddy with excitement.

“Truly, Hermione? This is fascinating! Are you sure the muggles actually managed to make this work?”

“Hermione can tell you about the details.” Tom said, putting her under the spotlight immediately as he turned to the witch next. “I’m sure you can take the time to recover your strength while you delve into the philosophy of radiation?”

The words ‘recover your strength’ sent Slughorn on a fit of excessive worry and concern as he ushered her to the plushest armchair he had in his office, sprinted off to retrieve a cozy quilted blanket and a pile of pillows before he started barking orders for ‘tea and biccies’ to Tom—the prefect had already seen it coming and had put the kettle on the moment Slughorn sprang into action and was now laying out the potion master’s china tea set (he’d been here so often he knew the location of many things in the cupboard). All of this made her blush and sent annoyed glares in his direction.

Tom, of course, was unrepentant.

“Really, half an hour or so of sitting would not affect your plans for the day, much, isn’t it? Besides, it’s better to err on the side of caution and avoid actually fainting. Nurse Edelstein is going to hang me otherwise.”

“Yes, yes. Very prudent of you, Tom.” Slughorn agreed.

There was no way Hermione could get out from his quarters sooner than half an hour now. Seeing the potion master’s concern, she finally relented to staying put with an explosive sigh. It didn’t stop
her from sending vexed looks in the prefect’s direction that clearly said ‘this is all your fault’.

Tom acted as if he hadn’t noticed that at all while inwardly smirking. It was not long before the kettle boiled and he carried a full tea tray to the table.

“Only two cups, Tom?” Slughorn asked.

“I’ve just remembered that there’s the Advanced Charms study group that I need to at least drop in for a while today. It wouldn’t take me long, Professor. I’ll be back before you know it to escort Hermione around once more.”

“But you’ll miss my explanation,” Hermione started.

He shook his head. “I’m sure you’ll demonstrate exactly the same thing with Madam Edelstein, wouldn’t you? I can listen to you just then. I do have other things to manage.”

She grumped, but knew that she couldn’t exactly argue against all the points he had made even if she hadn’t stopped with her suspicious looks. With that, Tom left them both to it.

He had an entire board to set up.

A little rummaging into his bag gave Tom an old letter-opener with the Nott family crest embossed on the hilt. He used it as the link in the sympathetic locator spell to find its last owner.

Melchior Nott was sitting at one of the library’s reading and studying areas when his liege lord in all but name found him. Melchior might not have known it, but he was doing more-or-less what Tom had predicted him to do—he was working on his Advanced Charms essay when the other Slytherin had arrived.

Like the titans of literature, the Alexanders Pushkin and Dumas (father and son), Melchior could trace a part of his ancestry to the children of the African continent—in his case, it was mostly the progeny of Witch-Kings who experienced such strong wanderlust to explore Europe and ended up marrying into the magical families there when they settled down. It gave him a warm and lively complexion even after spending all these years under the clouded Scottish skies, unlike the ghostly pallor of day-old squid that some of his peers had—the Malfoy heir came to mind, as did the even more unfortunate scion of the Pendleton family.

“Melchior. Just the person I was looking for.”

He looked up in surprise at the unexpected visit. “Morning, Tom. I thought you had other plans for today?”

“I do. I merely happen to have some time to chat, that’s all.”

Melchior did not express further disbelief that Tom happened to meet him in his spare time today, and simply waited for some sort of command or request that he knew was coming.

“Well, do take a seat and stay around for as long as you wish.” Tom would have stayed regardless of what he said, but really, he was a pureblood. Politeness made the gentleman.

“Thank you.”
He turned his chair slightly towards Tom. “So, what brings you my humble presence?”

Tom placed several trinkets on the table. Melchior recognised all of them—a key with the insignia of the Malfoy family on its head, a small measuring beaker with the Starkey family crest embossed on the side, Gallus Rosier’s favourite fountain pen, a finicky technological marvel (well, before Tom asked for it), as well as several others. These were the personal items of many of the Walpurgis Knights.

“Locate as many of them as you can, but no less than two. Borrow the librarian’s fireplace to floo to the Slytherin dorms, and if they’re not there, use a locator spell to find them. You have ten minutes.”

Melchior would’ve asked what this emergency meeting was about if he didn’t know that Tom was completely serious when he said that he only had ten minutes. He was not an ignorant greenhorn anymore and he wasn’t looking forward to finding out what will happen if he failed. Melchior simply swept the trinkets into his bag and nodded.

“Of course.”

“Tom!”

When Tom returned to the Potion Master’s quarters (right next to the potion labs), Hermione gave him a look that was equal parts annoyed and relieved. It was as inexplicable as it was amusing, and he didn’t bother to hide his thoughts on it even if it meant that her glare was getting more pointed.

“Yes, Hermione?” He asked.

“Weren’t you about to show me the rest of Hogwarts?”

“But surely, there’s no need to rush,” Slughorn cajoled, and Hermione’s smile was turning increasingly plastic on her face as she started to make her excuses. Tom assisted her this time, simply because it served his interests too.

“Ah, but the sooner we’re done, the sooner she can return to the infirmary. I’m afraid that despite seeming to the contrary, she’s not fully recovered yet.” The Slytherin prefect said.

“Then a little more rest wouldn’t be amiss, don’t you think?” The professor wondered with not a little concern in his tone. His bushy eyebrows were lowered in thought.

It has to be said that Slughorn’s consideration and care was actually rather genuine, and not just by Slytherin standards. On the other hand, it made extricating themselves from his hospitality to require their combined efforts as the conversation continued for a while. At one point, Hermione outright offered her hand in his direction, a wordless request that Tom answered by pulling her up easily even when she leaned her weight against his arm for support.

“Really, I’ve taken too much of your time, Professor. I’m sure there are other students you’d wish to see, articles and books you want to read…” Hermione started.

It seemed that she’d decided to just make her getaway while fast-talking Slughorn than be stuck here for yet another half an hour.

Hermione stumbled against him and he had stopped himself from stiffening, forcing himself to relax. She was still frail and certainly not a risk to him, but the contact felt alien (a part of him still
reflexively categorised it as threat). He’d never voluntarily let people touch him before. It was not as if he was unaware that he would need to habituate himself to personal contact now—not impossible, merely inconvenient. She glanced up with a puzzled look on her face that he ignored in favour of facing Slughorn.

“Thank you for your time, Professor. I hope you have a good day.”

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Even if he had not known much about Hermione Curie, Tom can conclude that she did face the terrible dangers that her current injury only alluded to, and it was more than a few rare times.

For all that she’d said she saw his future self as a dark lord, she did not seem to display any sort of wariness towards him. Courtesy dictates that he lent her his arm and always try to support her, but there was really no need for her to frankly accept it within a second and keep relying on him like some overly-trusting Hufflepuff. Tom might just decide to throw her over the bannisters near a stair’s landing, for one, or use his left arm to restrain her while his right cast something deadly. Not that he intended to do so (why? What could he possibly gain from doing that?), yet the possibility still stands.

It was only the speed that she’d pointed her wand at his heart in the library that convinced him that she was not careless. The witch simply had that much trust in her own reflexes and had gone through enough similar situations that she did not regard her current situation to be in any way extraordinary. Hence her current ease in walking arm-in-arm with a probable dark lord.

A part of him was vexed that she could even consider him safe to some degree.

“What was the future like, if you’ve seen it?”

“You have to be more specific,” she replied. “I’ve seen it too often that I’ve taken for granted things that might have been extraordinary to others.”

“Have we gone 20,000 leagues under the sea?”

She chuckled. There was unexpected joy in it that surprised him. “I can’t imagine you ever agreeing to be ‘Captain Nobody’. You would’ve taken a more bombastic pseudonym if you could help it. Well, let’s see... Mariana Trench is the deepest place on earth at around eleven thousand metres. Even if we assume that one league is one kilometres—and I know it’s at least twice than that—that’s barely eleven leagues.”

“Not as fantastic as it sounds, then.” He mused.

“Oh, it is fantastic. The sort of life that evolves under immense pressures there is practically alien to us surface-dwellers—if bones are only going to get pulverised under hundreds of tonnes of water, why bother with hard and brittle bones at all? That’s one evolutionary path that many creatures take. Others make their bones light, only to serve as the framework for their organs.”

Her brown eyes sparkled with excitement as she spoke, her left hand becoming animated as she described the strange dwellers of the bottom of the sea beyond even the abyssal depths.

“It’s so dark, the food scarce and the fishes sparse that in several species of anglerfish, the male and female fused together after they first met! All because the odds are low that they’d see other fish from the same species and the opposite gender throughout their lifetime. His skin dissolved and his veins and circulatory system truly linked up to hers and he can even take food and pass his waste products. The female now hunts for both of them while the male is practically her boytoy. Get this,
in some species, the females even *collect* males. It makes sense if you know that in these species, the she’s several times larger than he is.”

If she had expected him to be stunned, she was mistaken. The sexual life of other people (or other species, in this case) was something he barely batted an eyelash at. On the other hand, he had to admit that it was morbidly fascinating.

“That explains the clinginess of one of Abraxas’ ex-girlfriends. Uncertain of her future mating prospects in the abyssal backwardness of her family’s country estate, she’d rather fuse with him.” He added wryly.

It startled her into a laugh.

“Well, aren’t you wondering about whether we’ve reached the centre of the earth or managed flying machines?” Hermione asked back.

“Have we?”

Hermione snorted, apparently unconcerned that it was a markedly inelegant move. “Unfortunately, once you dig beyond the earth’s crust and you’re immediately faced with the magma of the earth’s mantle. Airplanes can carry up to a thousand or so passengers for intercontinental travel, and hundreds of them criss-cross the globe at an average day. The personal flying machine is still nowhere in sight—the magical world is still ahead of the non-magical one in this case.”

“How mundane.”

“Well, at least there are no Martian invaders either.” She finished, noticing that his lips quirked as she said that.

“How about the less fantastic things, then. Let’s see…was there a surprisingly competent and politically savvy Minister of Magic?”

“In your dreams.” She said, not missing a beat. “And only if you were actually high on hallucinogens.”

He nodded sagely. “The perpetuity of death, taxes and incompetent politicians.”

“Or perhaps it needs actual interference to change.” Hermione answered, betraying her convictions and intent in that one sentence.

He noted it down carefully. He had yet to see where her ambition is directed to (he can scarcely believe a young witch, one as accomplished as she was, did not have any), but it occurred to him just now that she might be the type to champion causes.

“Is there a rise of Britain’s wizarding world as a beacon of progress to Europe?” He asked.

“Ha! As if. Men would land on the moon first.” She replied. She did not even notice his sceptical expression as realisation washed through her. “Oh my, I almost forgot the moon landing! Damn. If only I can remember the precise time. I think it was around the sixties, though I’m sure it’s not too early. I think I’ll watch the rockets take off from Cape Canaveral—hmm, it *was* Cape Canaveral, wasn’t it? Never mind, I don't think it would be that hard to check…”

Tom almost blurted out that it was impossible, but he saw that she wouldn’t have cared the slightest. Lost in her own musings and future events that had yet to come to pass, this was not an act that she was putting up for him. She truly was planning on being at the critical places for the
moon landing she could apparently see, one that she seemed certain was a non-magical effort than a magical one.

The implication galled him. Yet it was one of the most disarming things about her; she did not tailor her opinions to his preference, and he suspected she did not do it for anyone else either.

“Surely if you’ve managed to remove an immensely influential and powerful dark lord, it meant that you have managed to unify an astounding number of people and power?”

This time, her grin was stained with bitterness and self-mockery.

“You would think that, wouldn’t you?” Oddly enough, it wasn’t even aimed at him, it was more for herself. “War takes its toll, Tom, especially in a society as small as the wizarding world—do you really not know how many non-magicals are out there? Never mind that for now, I’ll need to check out the exact numbers first, anyway.”

He heard her take a deep breath.

“It’s not just the deaths that are the most visible costs, even less visible is the progress, the ideas that those dead people could have contributed. How much change could they have made, how many new things built, if they were not dead?”

He half-expected her to be in tears, but her eyes were dry. The bone-deep tiredness in her words were unmistakable, though. Perhaps the only reason why she did not break down was because she’d thought over it for too often and now she had no more tears to spend.

“The last great war in Europe made people speak of ‘the lost generation’. Well, I’ll tell you right now that that’s what my generation looked like in that future. Scores of classmates gone: the cunning ones would’ve ditched England altogether the moment everything went to hell, the unlucky ones got stuck in the middle of the conflict and ended up dead. Now, the idealistic ones—the best, the brightest—are the first into the meat grinder. We were that lost generation. Even once the mad version of you was dead, well…”

Her laughter was hollow.

“Victory? What victory? It was all rather pyrrhic from what I can see.”

She smiled at him. He would not admit even under pain of torture that there was something unsettling about it.

“And you know what? That was a better outcome, where ‘good’ won. At least we’re not outright burning things down like the madman that you could become. I suspect the world wouldn’t even last in that particular possible future.”

Chapter End Notes

Hermione occasionally slips and shows her non-magical upbringing. She uses the word ‘God’ the same way a lot of Brits use it—as a curse word. It really doesn’t reflect whether the person using it is a theist or an atheist.
Additional Trivia:

'Captain Nobody': 'Nobody' is the translation of 'Nemo' from Latin. So, Captain Nemo from Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* is literally 'Captain Nobody'. One suspects that it’s not the good captain’s actual name…

Meta notes on my characterisation of Hermione and her friends in the future (Doylist perspective):

Hermione’s über-intelligence is easily explained by seeing her position in canon; Rowling saddles her with any and all skills the trio needs to get things done, and by that measure you can’t argue that she’s not a genius. Harry’s fate-driven combination of bad luck in drawing enemies to him like bees to honey and his good luck to somehow still survive that meant that sooner or later he’d truly be very, very good at fighting as well as surviving, and he would be highly motivated to keep getting better (especially if the future is as unsettled as the one in this AU). He’s the last wizard you’d want to get into a straight up fight with. Sometimes, you don’t even want to try ambushing him because it doesn’t improve your chances against him; it merely ensures that he’s very, very pissed off, looking for a target to vent his wrath, and guess what would happen to the one that was the cause of that?

Now, Ron is a wasted opportunity. I don’t like him as a character, but that doesn’t mean I can’t give him a chance to grow in my story (I pride myself on being at least fair with him). We see the potential for a strategic mind in the first book…and it stays undeveloped through the series. He seems more of a hanger-on of Harry’s in the latter books than anything else, which is a shame. We know that Draco cares for his family more than being a fanatic, and as a pureblood I expect him to have been taught the traditions, skills, knowledge and whatnot required as a scion of the wizarding society’s upper crust family even if we don’t see him enough in the books to know what exactly that he knew or could do.

I developed their characters and skills further based on all this, because I think Rupert Grint and Tom Felton are swell guys who, at the very least, deserved interesting characters to play (in some other dimension, Hermione’s past future in this story is actually the canon HP story and they had a great time fleshing out their characters…well, a writer can dream).
Chapter Summary

_Hermione meets an overzealous prefect. Tripping a Trap. There are two particularly dedicated defence enthusiasts. Tom has a little post-op meeting._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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There was something rather bizarre in having Tom Riddle escort her around Hogwarts.

It was particularly pronounced when he steered her towards the quidditch benches (he had just given her a brief tour of the quidditch pitch), not that either of them cared about which house or houses were currently using the pitch to practice. They weren’t sitting among empty benches to make it obvious that they weren’t there to watch, and therefore instantly gaining the curiosity of everyone else (like those two seventh-years shamelessly making out). Yet they were not close enough to the rowdy crowd of (mostly) wizards watching that Tom had to introduce her to anyone either. She had to admire his social finesse—he gauged the right distance perfectly.

From the green-and-silver scarves, she figured that it was the Slytherin team that had the pitch right now. The rowdiness and the yells about scores so far didn’t sound as if they were talking about the Slytherin team’s practice at all, though—it sounded as if they were talking about an actual, proper game that was ongoing somewhere.

_Somebody probably carried a Wizarding Wireless_, she thought.

Tom took a moment off somewhere. When he returned, he came with two waffle-bowls with a
square of banded ice cream cake and handed it to her. He didn’t say a word on just how he procured them.

“Eat.”

“Um, what?”

“I saw you ate ice cream more than once in the infirmary, so I’m certain you’re not averse to it.”

“Well, no, but…”

His reply was blunt. “You were starting to mope again. It’s rather tiring.”

“I wasn’t moping!” She insisted, but she did start spooning the ice cream with another wedge of ingeniously-shaped waffle that functioned as edible spoon.

“I don’t need to start worrying that you’d be tempted jumping from balconies and open windows once we start going around the towers.”

“How nice of you to worry!” Hermione jabbed back, all saccharine sweetness and annoyance.

“If you wish to do that, do it when I’m far away from you,” he said easily. “That way I won’t be on the list of suspects.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. She should’ve guessed.

The vanilla, chocolate, pistachio and cherry flavoured ice creams were delicious. The colourful stripes were also cheery to see, improving her mood slightly.

“Ha, ha. I’m not suicidal, Riddle,” she grumped even as she spooned more ice cream. “Just morose.”

The brunette mused that she really shouldn’t be surprised that the wizarding world was more cosmopolitan than the non-magical one. When continental travel is just a matter of throwing green powder into the fireplace and stepping in, migration becomes that much easier too. Some enterprising wizard or witch from Italy had probably started spreading the classic Neapolitan ice cream to Britain. The occasional surprised and happy noises she made was enough to make him send the occasional weird look, which she couldn’t care less about. He was right, ice cream was a good idea.

Tom had asked about more mundane things that she’d ‘seen’ in the future, and their conversation was a lot more casual from that point.

(“Did the wizarding world ever become less fanatical about this stupid broom sport?” Hermione grinned. “Quidditch? Guess again. You should see the international attendance for the last World Cup I remember.”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake.” He cursed and she snorted a laughter at his annoyance, but it was good-natured. She could sympathise, really.)

She supposed it was only natural to be curious about the future, but he didn’t even start asking about how she fought his mad future self. It was rather unnerving as she couldn’t help wonder where all these questions were leading to. Did he really needed to know of all the shops she’d seen in Diagon Alley? Or if the Ministry of Magic was still located in the same place? It was only that her curiosity overpowered her vexation that she followed all his seemingly unrelated questions.
There was a reason to his randomness, she was sure. It’s just that she couldn’t see it yet.

The wind that blew still had vestigial summer warmth, but she shivered all the same. Hermione chalked it up to her reduced constitution, but even the knowledge didn’t affect her body’s drive to keep warm as she rubbed her elbows.

What she hadn’t expected was the casual way he draped his jacket over her shoulders. It was still warm from his body heat—the satin lining sliding smoothly over her skin, the shadow of an embrace. She caught a hint of oak with the faint traces of his cologne. The next thing Hermione did was to pinch the bridge of her nose before she started taking a deeper breath trying to identify the scents (and was that really the only thing she was doing?)

The other thing she wanted to prevent was the urge to bang her head on the nearest bench because she wasn’t prepared for a second puberty and the distraction (headache, definitely headache) that it would bring. At all.

When the brunette turned to him, she was still rubbing her forehead.

“What’s this for?” She shrugged awkwardly to refer to the article of clothing currently on her.

“You need it more than I do.”

Her glare only amused him. It wasn’t the answer she was looking for and she had a feeling that he was too good at giving answers that were not. She was not childish enough to toss it back in his direction in a fit of pique—she wouldn’t even pretend she was in the best of health yet. She really should’ve remembered to wear the serge jacket Nurse Edelstein found in the lost and found section and had refitted for her, given that a tour of the entire Hogwarts couldn’t possibly stay completely indoors. Hermione couldn’t tell whether the heat on her face was embarrassment or irritation. Probably both.

Her unamused expression met his. They might have stayed like that for a while if there hadn’t been a ruckus among the quidditch audience not far from them. Voices were being raised. Hermione saw the way heads turned in the crowd, the movement focused in a particular direction—some unwanted visitors, she suspected. Some had started to break away. A few others, she saw, headed in their direction. Tom sighed as he stood up.

“Excuse me for a while. If I don’t see to them right now, they’d disturb our peace unnecessarily.”

“Of course.” She nodded.

What else would she say? It wasn’t as if she was looking forward to having the rest of Hogwarts intrude on her when she was still recovering. Staying low suited her right now.

The brunette witch was unsurprised by the way the wizards seemed glad to see Tom as he met them halfway. Two had started speaking over each other. The third shushed them after a while and took over the telling what their problem was. She might not be able to hear their words at this distance, but she could see their body language. All of them looked up at him, the tableau reminiscent of petitioners before their king in medieval paintings. Each was hanging on to his reply.

When Tom walked in the direction of the commotion, they all unconsciously fell in line behind him.

She did not have much time to muse on just what sort of influence he had when she heard footsteps
approaching her from the other direction. The wizard didn’t falter when he saw her staring, he only nodded and quickened his steps. Even for a young man, he seemed rather gaunt. Add his solemn expression on top of that and he could easily pass as someone older. His Ravenclaw scarf told her of his House affiliation.

“Hello.” Hermione randomly greeted him.

He introduced himself at a rather hurried pace after he gave an obligatory apology for intruding. His name was Jan Verrault and he was a sixth-year prefect. He had guessed that she was the new transfer student, even if he hadn’t known her exact name until she told him.

“We don’t have enough time,” he said, voice heavy with portents. “We can talk further someplace else, but it’s more important to leave right now.”

“I’m sorry?” She blurted.

He sat some distance away from her and leaned forward.

“Come with me. The wizard you’re with is not who he seems.”

Hermione snorted, but managed to bite her lip before she said anything too incriminating. No shit, Sherlock. She decided to ignore the weird invitation and focus on the second part. “You’re talking about Tom Riddle, right?”

“Yes.” He had a most forbidding frown, especially when it didn’t seem like she was going to budge anytime soon. Add his rather beak-like nose, and he gave the impression of a disagreeable vulture.

“I’ll be fine. I know more about him than most people.” She replied.

That only seemed to frustrate the other prefect further as he sent furtive glances in the direction of the large group of Slytherins not far from them, which seemed to still be in the middle of some sort of argument. His prefect pin gleamed under the sun from the lapels of his jacket.

“He’s not—he fools everyone with how he looks. Don’t get taken by his charm.” His words were tinged with frustration.

Hermione sighed. “Tom Riddle is not exactly the nicest person around. I know that. It doesn’t mean he’s not competent—believe me, I was surprised about that too.”

Jan Verrault relented when she shook her head yet again at his offer to take her away from here. He started to speak up.

“I first found traces of his crimes when he was in his first year and I have not given up trying to find enough evidence to bring him to task to the headmaster. If only you’ve heard about the things he’d done…he should’ve been expelled. But he’s always been one step ahead of me.”

Well, that was a rather unusual degree of dedication, she thought.

“Sooner or later he’ll harm you.” Verrault said.

She couldn’t help but chuckle even as she slipped her arms into Tom’s jacket to wear it properly. She might as well. “Oh, that’s merely one possibility out of many, Mr. Verrault. I did tell him that if he ever truly tries to kill me, I’ll kill him. I can take him out even if it would cost me my own life, and I know he’s starting to get a feel for the extent of my abilities to understand this. He loves living more than I do, so it’s not as if he’d try that out anytime soon.”
“As you can see, I’m as safe as anyone can be in these times of war.” Hermione finished with an upbeat note.

Whatever he had thought she would say, it was clear that it was not that. He’d started a sentence only halfway before abandoning it altogether, and then settling back to staring at her yet again.

“He threatened to kill you?” He asked, frowning. “We’ll have to report this to the headmaster.”

She shook her head. “That wouldn’t do. I threatened to kill him too, so we’re actually even right now.”

“You’re only defending yourself—”

Hermione couldn’t help her bark of laughter. Did he just skipped over the part of where she was sure she could take Tom out at the cost of her own life? “And he’s also only defending himself. It’s a chicken and egg problem. If you see a threat, would you stand by and let it loom over you, or would you move first and try to confront it before it did? Wouldn’t that also be self-defence, in a way?”

Her question confounded him because he hadn’t expected it. Hermione’s wand was in her hand with the lightest flick. She tapped his neck with it in a second and smiled, before slipping it back to its holster.

“There. As you can see, I could’ve blasted you apart in that moment. Not that I will, just that I can. Tom can’t understand my restraint at the beginning, so all he could see is a threat.”

She had a feeling that Verrault might have expected to find a damsel in distress only to find a tiger.

“We’re currently working to an understanding, Tom and I.” Hermione said. “Thank you for the warning, but you truly don’t need to worry about me.”

Verrault still seemed dissatisfied.

“He’s not a good man.”

“I don’t need him to be good. I just need him to not be evil.” She replied, pragmatic.

“You don’t know what he’s done. You can’t possibly be thinking of joining his side—”

“I am my own side.” Hermione snapped.

Whatever his reply was, she never heard it, because a smooth voice pulled both of their attention away.

“Now, now, Verrault, what did you say to bother the lady so?”

She saw Verrault tensing, his entire body preparing for a confrontation. Tom had walked back unnoticed in the middle of their intense exchange. He dropped himself to sit on Hermione’s left, all solicitousness when he turned to her.

“Are you alright?”

“I was just telling him that I’m fine. We’re fine.”

“We’re fine?”
Hermione shrugged. “Oh, you know. You’ve threatened my life and I’ve threatened yours. We’re even. It’s really no big deal at this point. Verrault is too worried about nothing.”

Amusement lit his eyes as he gazed at Verrault and then back at her again with interest.

“You were correcting his mistaken assumptions, I assume?” Tom asked.

“Of course, since he misunderstood the situation.” The brunette said this while meeting the eyes of the other Ravenclaw, who was now clenching his jaw because he had to tolerate the presence of someone he probably considered as an outright blackguard. Hermione couldn’t even blame his discomfort because it wasn’t as if she thought he was wrong.

She sighed. “Would it help if I assure you that I’m always ready to hear any of your concerns later? You can find me and we can talk about it and I’ll listen and assuage your worries the best I can.”

He was still entirely too serious and wary that one might suspect that she’d just informed him of some death in the family than actually trying to make him feel better. Verrault shook his head.

“It would not really matter. You would have fallen under his influence by then.”

Hermione huffed and gazed heavenward. And here she thought that the only ‘good’ person she needed to worry about was Dumbledore! “I am my own side.”

“Perhaps we need to clarify something.” Tom suddenly spoke up.

She hadn’t managed to reply in response to that when she saw that his wand had dropped into his hand, his gaze gleaming with intent. Hermione didn’t even need to think before hers was in her grasp. In the next second, he’d pointed his wand at her abdomen while hers was at his throat.

“As you can see, Verrault, she is not the slightest bit unaware. I think we’re both agreed that Hermione doesn’t need to be saved from anything, don’t you think? She can make up her own mind about keeping my company.”

Hermione turned her head slightly to be able to see the other Ravenclaw, but not so much that she lost sight of Tom—not when he had a wand out and aimed at her. The Slytherin did more or less the same thing. Verrault, she found, had only managed to procure his own wand some three seconds later than either of them, his eyes wide. Tom pulled his wand away and slipped it back down his sleeve (and into what she suspected was the holster there). Hermione did the same a moment later.

When Tom offered his hand at her, a charming smile on his face, Hermione couldn’t help but stare with a strange sense of displacement, as if she had woken up and found herself in an alien world. In a way, that was true. She ended up placing her hand in his all the same after that incongruous moment, reminding herself that this was a different time and place. She’d given all the explanations she could give to the Ravenclaw prefect, hadn’t she? What else could be said for now?

“If you’ll excuse us, Hermione still has several other places to see, as I am currently her guide to Hogwarts. See you later, Verrault.” He bid the other prefect goodbye with a friendly greeting. She would not be surprised if he did it on purpose, for it only caused the other prefect’s expression to harden, as if carved from granite. Verrault’s reply was gruff.

“Riddle.”
“See you later, Verrault.” Hermione said, more restrained since she had things on her mind to distract her.

“You too, Curie.”

It was only some distance away, when they’ve both returned to the corridors of Hogwarts that she wasn’t so deep in thought anymore.

“You’re not worried?” She asked him. Indeed, he seemed to be in good humour.

“Of what?”

“That I actually told him about how things stand between us?”

“Not at all. That was actually wonderful. Who would believe it if he told anyone? Threats of murder, really? They would’ve thought him to be overstating the problem. Most would take it to mean that we’ve had our disagreements and we’ve worked on it.”

“Which is not even wrong, in a way,” her reply was dry. “Though I think the phrase ‘we’re working on it’ is more accurate.”

Hermione thought she’d glimpsed a smile from Tom out of all things, but perhaps she was imagining things. His expression was as calm and level as ever, even if his lightened mood is clear.

“Who is he, anyway?” She couldn’t help but ask.

“A wizard of a very suspicious nature, who had been skulking in my shadow since I was in first year. I could mention it when he was around, I suppose, but I’m considerate enough not to embarrass him in front of someone he was trying to befriend.” Tom said.

She couldn’t help but look at him askance. “You? Considerate?”

“Oh, believe me, I was being nice. Back when I was a first-year, he declared loudly that I’ve killed someone based on just his own suspicion—there wasn’t even a dead body. He seems to think that we live in a gothic novel.”

Hermione let out a short, surprised laughter that discomfited her. “Oh, that’s not nice.”

Tom smirked. “Yet I’m not the one laughing at him just now. Admittedly, he does not let his imagination run away with him to that extent these days.”

She could feel her cheeks colouring and had no words to reply except to swat his arm at that.

They made the rounds to several corridors and classes. The brunette had no idea how he always knew a sitting place nearby whenever he thought she was starting to noticeably slow down (and she didn’t even notice her own fatigue that much). He could always find a place to sit, whether from the repurposed landing of some old servant stairway, an unoccupied and unlocked classroom, an open balcony with wooden seats or even the single rare and unexpected sitting room. His only answer was that it always pays to explore Hogwarts in your spare time.

One of these rarely-explored nooks even had a pretty rococo sofa whose pink-and-gold upholstery seems as bright as if they’d just been changed yesterday. She chalked it up to very regular application of preservation charms and dropped onto its plush surface with a contented sigh. Hermione leaned back without much thought of how messy her curls would be if there were trapped between the sofa’s back and her head. Tom sat next to her—not close enough to crowd her,
and not farther enough for her to easily ignore his presence.

She suspected that the latter was more of her problem than his, to be honest.

“I was surprised that you didn’t befriend Verrault immediately.” He said.

“I would have liked that. As you can see, the one who had a problem with that is him, not me.”

She could feel his gaze on her but she didn’t turn around, content to stare on the large painting of a hunt across the hallway. The people were drawn at a distance and were small because of that, but she could almost hear the faint baying of the dogs that the people were trying to restrain even now.

“He could be a useful ally to you,” Tom made a casual comment.

“Really?” She was doubtful on that point.

“I don’t think I know anyone else from any house that is as determined to find evidence of my misconduct than him. He might be able to tell you about things I would be reluctant to tell.”

Hermione did turn to him then. Tom was down to his shirt now, since she was wearing his jacket. She couldn’t recall when was the last time she saw someone out of their Hogwarts uniform and wearing a tie when they weren’t preparing for a job interview. Yet it still suited him just fine. She remembered just now that even Jan Verrault wore a jacket that matched his trousers when he was out of his Hogwarts uniform. *It’s a different time, Hermione.*

“If I wanted to know you better, I’m sure you could tell me about anything I wanted to know better than someone else.”

“You do realise that my account would put myself in the best light, don’t you?” His question was wry. She was surprised that he had that much self-awareness.

It still disturbed her that there were noticeable differences between him and Voldemort.

Hermione shrugged after she’d gotten over her surprise. “We all think the best of ourselves—it’s only human to do so. That’s just something I need to keep in mind at all times and adjust for.”

Quietness fell over them; it was surprisingly not awkward and no one felt the urge to fill it with excessive words. If either of them noticed that it had none of the tension of their earlier argument in the library, neither said anything until Hermione felt she was ready to move again. Tom promptly stood up at her slightest movement to help her up.

(That she felt very flattered about it told her that, even if she can’t remember any of them, none of her boyfriends were ever this attentive).

Hermione would be the first to say of how her years in Hogwarts taught her that all but the largest of the school’s corridors and stairways shifted according to the castle’s whim. That was why the more inquisitive Ravenclaws had devised a chart that determined where any corridor or stairs were according to the phases of the moon and other weird details, and these notes had been passed down to generations, with modifications and errata added as necessary*.

(*one such example can be found on the notes for the Northeast Spiral Stairs; changes follow schedule except on night with blue moon. Then, it would be close to where the Central Stairway is located**)
**Except if it looks like it’s blue and made of Gorgonzola cheese. Use the position farthest from its predicted one in this case**.

Predictably, most of the Gryffindors and a good half of the Hufflepuffs never considered it necessary to know the movements in such detail. As long as you know four ways to get to any particular place, you’ll get there. You just have to adjust according to which corridors and stairs were near to you at any given time.

Hermione would admit that even then, she didn’t expect to turn around a corner and find herself in a rather good simulation of a jungle. The muggy and warm air wrapped her face like a wet towel. The sound of insects filled the air while trees with creepers and vines could be seen to their right and left. The hair at the back of her neck stood.

“Um.” She said. She closed her mouth before she said how she expected this corridor to lead to the transfiguration classes’ corridor and it certainly doesn’t have indoor trees.

Tom tackled her down and rolled them to the side; instead of stone floor, her back fell against soft earth. The spot that they’ve been standing on before sprung upwards, and Hermione saw a net closing up. It wasn’t easy to spot with all the grass and fallen leaves covering it. When projectiles seem to come from her right, she rolled them over yet again and sent two Blasting Curse in retaliation, the explosive fireballs singed trees and burned leaves where it passes.

The brunette yelped and ducked when the first fireball swallowed an oncoming projectile and exploded. It didn’t take long for her to notice that it only splattered paint all over them as she sat up, and when some of it had dripped into her mouth, she noticed it was jam.

“Why cranberry?” She asked no one in particular, though Tom was looking at her peculiarly, even as he sat up. “Why not raspberry? I like raspberries.”

“Not that I mind where we are, but are we truly going to have this conversation here?”

His left hand was holding her elbow, but she merely raised an eyebrow at him. Hermione didn’t think that one spot in the jungle corridor was going to be any different than any other until she heard footsteps approaching them. Her wand arm whipped out against the new threat—Tom leaned back fast enough to avoid getting jabbed in the eye with her wand.

A redheaded wizard lifted both of his hands to show that he was unarmed, his eyebrows high on his forehead.

“Peace, lady! You’ve proven yourself well enough with the speed of your defence.”

“Hullo, Riddle.” Another redhead walked up few steps behind the first while looking around at their jam-spattered surroundings. “If we could trouble you to move from your very comfortable position, could you tell us how you noticed the net? We’ve gotten four people before you already—you’re the first we’ve missed.”

She noticed that they were twins as the stepped closer, their clothes identical even up to their bright red waistcoats. It was the brothers’ highly interested looks sent in their direction that made her realise she’d been sitting on Tom’s lap for a while, or that even if his expression was as placid as ever, he was not entirely unaffected. Hermione stood up as fast as she could without making it seem that she was hurriedly scrambling away. Tom stood up at a more leisurely pace and she made a point of not meeting his side glance.

“Ah, good morning Prewett, and Prewett.” He nodded to both of them in turn. “Allow me to
introduce Hermione Curie, fifth-year transfer to Hogwarts and Ravenclaw. Hermione, this is Paul and Peter Prewett, sixth-year Gryffindors.”

The first twin (Paul?) accepted her proffered hand. To her surprise, he bowed over it instead of shaking it, a chagrined expression on his face. His brother followed suit quickly.

“Just when we found someone good at duelling and you’re not in Gryffindor!”

“Ah, sorry.” She rubbed the back of her neck only to wince when her left hand came out with more jam. Tom cast a cleaning charm over her that she noticed wasn’t Scourgify—it was something more obscure. On the plus side, it didn’t dry her hair excessively and cause it to frizz.

“Never mind my brother. We’re simply too glad that at least someone’s going to pull the standards of practical Defence class up.” Peter added.

He shot a look at Tom as he said this. Tom, for his part, looked too innocent to be true.

“I have no idea what you mean.” The Slytherin said.

“The first and only time you got caught in one of our obstacle courses, you didn’t even get hit!” The other twin (Paul?) complained.

“The fact that I have to clean jam off my robes spoke differently.”

“Merely excess splatter,” he dismissed Tom’s statement as his attention returned to Hermione in mock whisper. “Imagine our disappointment when we heard from Merrythought that he never duelled seriously in class. Never.”

“Riddle? A mere dilettante? Say it ain’t so!” Peter looked appropriately horrified.

Paul shook his head sombrely. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, brother, but ‘tis true. Even our famously serious and scholarly student sought not to show the mediocre what superior spellwork and situational awareness in Defence Arts look like!”

His twin sighed. “As always, it comes down to us again to enlighten the masses, doesn’t it?”

“But we will prevail!”

As Paul raised one fist with determination into the air, like a man challenging the gods with his determination, Tom cleared his throat before Hermione could think about doing the same. And here she was wondering if she could slowly back away…

“Now, if you defence fanatics are done with the histrionics, we’ll just be on our way.” Tom said dryly.

Paul stood up straight and nodded to them as if he hadn’t just pulled weird faces a moment ago.

“Very well. It’s good to meet you, Curie.”

“Um, likewise?” Hermione answered, still slightly confused.

“Oh, and make sure you get him to fight you! And then tell us how it goes! Nobody has challenged Riddle enough for him to take it seriously that we don’t have enough records on his abilities.”

A quick glance in Tom’s direction and the supreme blandness of his gaze told her that he clearly preferred it that way.
The other twin cleared his throat. “Now, about that net trap, Riddle…”

“Your jam bombs fired too soon.” Tom answered.

“Too soon?”

“I could hear it launching from your mini-trebuchets. I was avoiding that, not the net itself.” He clarified as he finished cleaning himself and then offering his arm to Hermione once more. She took it gingerly, still staring at the twins in thought as Peter cursed and had already gone back to the net (to lower it back down, she suspected, and perhaps adjust whatever needed to be adjusted at the mini-trebuchets to stop launching too soon).

“Isn’t the caretaker going to complain about your…” she vaguely gestured to the impromptu jungle in the middle of the corridor.

“Castle improvements?” Peter asked as he brightened, cheeks ruddy with good health perhaps a little too much vim.

“Mess.” Tom answered.

“Then it’s a good thing that we got Iggy to play distraction on the other side of the castle, isn’t it?” He said this with a wide grin promising such mischief that anyone who loved order and regularity would run and duck for cover at this point.

“That must be some favour,” Tom mused.

“Indeed.” His blue eyes twinkled but he said nothing more.

“See you, Prewett.”

“Why don’t you join our duelling club, Curie?” Peter asked even as she walked away.

“I don’t think Hermione has that much free time with nine advanced classes on schedule.” Tom replied without looking back.

“I’ll just see how my class schedule goes for now.” Hermione hollered as she waved at him.

As Tom followed a particular path among the bushes and undergrowth, avoiding traps that she didn’t always notice, she could hear Peter’s complaints in the background of how nine classes weren’t humanly possible to follow, what with the schedule only allowing five or six at the maximum. They both ducked as a swinging log made its way over their head.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Hermione murmured as Tom helped her up, ignoring his flat look at that statement. “Are your year mates always this weird?”

His reply was discreet. “The Prewett twins? They are always, hmm, so dedicated in improving the duelling skills of their peers by providing unexpected challenges.”

“They enjoy trapping unsuspecting passers-by, you mean?” She asked dryly.

“Hermione, I find it hard to believe that you would think so ill of such civic-minded and volunteering wizards!” He reproached.

She stared at him for three full seconds before bursting into laughter. His increasingly fake-sounding coughs that followed didn’t fool her the least.
It was with this odd camaraderie that they continued the last leg of the tour, albeit still faintly smelling of cranberries.

“You pushed me out of the way.” Tom noted as he’d finished showing her the transfiguration classrooms, particularly the one they’d be using this year.

“Excuse me?”

“When one of the Prewetts’ jam bombs came. You pushed me out of the way.”

“You did it first.” Hermione shrugged, before she realised what it meant and stared at him oddly.

“Anyway, is it so odd for you? That’s what having a friend and partner is about, you know? To have someone watch your back for you as you watch theirs.”

She had been wandering around, familiarising herself with this place that was familiar and at the same time not, that she hadn’t noticed that Tom had stood still.

“A friend and a partner, is it?”

Hermione rolled her eyes as her hands trailed over desks whose surfaces have been worn smooth by countless hands through the centuries. “I did say that before, didn’t I? I’m not taking it back, in case that’s what you’re worried about.”

The next time she placed her hand in his, he kissed the back of it first before placing it over his arm and he ignored the exasperated sound she made at it.

Melchior Nott has a good instinct for when discretion is the better part of valour. It was why when Tom sent him to find some of his peers, he knew that avoiding Abraxas Malfoy’s exuberant joy or Vespasian Starkey’s loud determination might be preferred. He found Gallus Rosier (whose preferred spot in the face of any conflict or battle can be described succinctly as ‘right behind that elephant-sized boulder’), and the pale and reserved Pendleton.

This was why when Tom had just finished eating lunch with Hermione in the infirmary, the three of them were waiting for him in the library’s studying area once again. The Slytherins may be out of their Hogwarts uniform right now, but under their robes, they were still immaculately dressed in suit jackets and ties. They stood up the moment he entered, and only sat down again after they’d exchanged vague greetings and Tom had taken his seat.

He stared at the Nott heir for a few seconds, watching Melchior’s fingers unconsciously tapping on the table as they waited. Tom allowed them to see his small smile.

“Good work, gentlemen.”

Melchior let out a relieved sigh while Gallus dropped his face into his hands, chuckling as the tension flowed out of him. Pendleton blinked slowly before he nodded his thanks.

“The Prewetts were booby-trapping the corridor leading to the transfigurations classrooms, then?” Gallus asked first. He disliked pressure the most among the Knights.

“You know they are. I would have given you a different answer if you had been wrong about the location of their current ambush area.” Tom replied. Gallus cleared his throat at that and lowered his head even as he fidgeted in his seat.
“I hope Verrault didn’t give you enough trouble…” Pendleton said. His concern was warranted, as he was the one who made sure he was overheard when he was talking about Tom’s plans today near one of Verrault’s friends.

“No, not at all. You know that I consider him a nuisance at most.” Tom answered.

“He’s still not someone I want to take up my time during weekends,” Melchior said. He nodded to acknowledge the other Slytherin’s point.

“Yes. Yet his presence is still, shall we say, necessary.”

This time, even the contentedly neutral Pendleton gave him a disbelieving look. It was Tom’s turn to chuckle.

“No, really. You know what they say, don’t you? A friend in need is a friend indeed.”

None of the Walpurgis Knights’ seemed to have any idea what Tom was about. Of course, Gallus had long resigned himself to hearing things that went completely over his head when he was in Tom’s vicinity. Melchior was clearly biting back his own questions with barely held-back frustration and impatience. Pendleton was as accepting of his liege lord’s quirks as usual.

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out sooner or later if you have but half a mind put to it.” Tom added. He was being truthful as he said this, because he had not hidden the fact that he spent more than half the day with Hermione Curie.

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Chapter End Notes

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Trebuchet:** (medieval warfare) A siege engine in general use in pre-gunpowder era, back in the time when huddling behind a castle or the fortified walls of a city worked to keep you safe and hostile armies at bay. When people say ‘trebuchet’, they usually refer to the counterweight trebuchet. This is basically a lever with a long arm on one side with a sling at the end, and a short one that holds the counterweight on the other. When the counterweight swung loose, the long arm would slingshot a boulder or large rock in the direction of the enemy.

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Additional Notes:

**Melchior Nott (OC):** Fifth-year Slytherin, an important Knight of Walpurgis. His family is part of the Sacred 28. He shares three classes with Tom; Advanced Potions, ADADA and Advanced Charms. ‘Melchior’ comes from Semitic roots that meant ‘king city’. This is the name of one of the Magi or three kings that were said to have visited the newborn Jesus). He must exist in canon in some form as either the grandfather or father of Theodore Nott in Harry’s generation.

Pragmatically, he decides that to side with Tom Riddle early on is better than to be
trampled later on when Tom has gained all the power he wishes on his side and has
taken the wizarding world by storm. Melchior thus enters his alliance with Tom with
eyes wide open.

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*On Hogwarts’ class, schedule and related addendum (just skip if you don’t really care
about or notice these details):*

On class schedule: I had to make up some sort of schedule for Hermione’s class. So,
there are four classes in a day, two before lunch, and two after lunch. That makes for
20 class slots from Monday to Friday, but this doesn’t include astronomy’s slots,
which is anywhere during the night (depending on the position of the celestial object
about to be observed), though I suppose Astronomy also has the occasional daytime
classes too. So, including Astronomy’s unusual timeslots, you have 20-24 slots
available for the average student. The average subject takes up 3 class slots in a week.
Advanced classes take 4 slots (alright, the one bonus slot is mostly used for extra
practise and/or final project consultation, so it’s relatively miss-able compared to the
other three).

Hermione’s class load of nine advanced classes takes up a total of 36 class slots a
week. This meant around 2/3 of her classes are always clashing against one another.
Hence why she’s given leave to attend all classes a third of the time. The only other
alternative is to give her a time turner. She might be a genius, but her biggest secret as
to why she could take this sort of load (plus reading, plus homework, plus final
assignment, etc), is because she’s taken around three quarters of these classes before.
They’re not exactly new material to her. There. In case anyone protests that it’s not
realistic—I’ll have you know, I made her schedule out in a spreadsheet in Excel for
consistency. Tom’s schedule at seven advanced classes (he doesn’t take Advanced
Herbology or Advanced Care of Magical Creatures) takes up 28 slots.

(Yes, I know I have too much time on my hands to even come up with this in the first
place).

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09 The Lazy Days of Summer

Chapter Summary

_Hermione is determined to enjoy her first day of freedom and the first days of autumn. In which we are introduced to Eugenie Delacour. A picnic with a friend or two. Tom explains things._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for _notes_

“I can finally attend _classes_!”

Hermione had finally, _finally_ been discharged from the infirmary. She was beginning to get the idea that she was a bad patient from all her fidgeting and constantly asking the nurse about how she was doing. She had declared at the eighth day that her urine had been clear of blood for three days now and surely it meant she could get out. Maggie threatened to tie her down on the bed if she doesn’t get back there right now, and Hermione returned there to sulk.

It was also the height of weirdness to hear Tom Riddle fully agreeing with the Head Nurse when he visited her that day. (“I’ll make sure she doesn’t tire herself, Madam Edelstein.”)

Then again, he probably just wanted to get back at her for unnerving him. He so disliked to be put off his poise.

The brunette stretched her arms to either side in relief, feeling the cool breeze on her skin. It was nice to feel the wind ruffling her hair, even if she did have a lot of hair to ruffle. The crisp scent of grasses, oak and willow hit her. Whatever happens, Hermione was determined that she was going
to enjoy walking on the Hogwarts grounds first. Footsteps came up from behind her.

“I don’t think the classes are that exciting,” the beautiful blonde that now stood next to her commented. There was only the slightest trace of accent in her voice. Her scarf, like Hermione’s, was banded with the blue and bronze of Ravenclaw. Somehow, the colours still managed to compliment her periwinkle blue dress.

“When you’ve been stuck in the infirmary for two weeks, Eugenie, you can tell me that classes are boring. Otherwise, you have no idea.” Hermione insisted.

“I think it’s the fresh air that you miss more,” the other witch said.

“Not really. I know I’ve wanted to go to the Hogwarts library since the day I was awake, and I can easily spend a week there without going outdoors.” Hermione said. Which was completely true.

“Bookworm,” Eugenie said fondly.

“That, I am,” Hermione replied carelessly. “And you care about what people say too much.”

At the reddening of the blonde’s cheeks, Hermione winced. She didn’t want to be that nice, helpful girl that Hermione Granger was in her Hogwarts days, so nice that people keep expecting her to pick up their work too. She might not want to try so hard at being nice that she held back on so many things that she wanted to say, but she never wanted to be callous either.

“I mean, you’re smart, you’re beautiful and that makes people insecure. Add the fact that one of the guys those other girls like might actually prefer to look at you than them, and it’s a textbook case of envy all over again.” Hermione explained, turning back at the Ravenclaw prefect with an outstretched hand. “Come on, Eugenie. You’re better than most of them, why worry about what they think of you? Let’s go down and picnic by the lake!”

“Um,”

“I know you don’t have classes. And look, I already have the picnic basket handy here!”

Hermione lifted the picnic basket from where she had placed it on the ground with a flourish. She could see that Eugenie was weakening and would succumb to the temptation. She might as well get the most out of today, because once class started, her focus on them might well be monomaniacal. She’d even taken the effort of asking the house elves for the blonde’s favourite foods, and to prepare them exactly for this outing.

“Let’s just enjoy the last days of summer days lazing around.” Hermione coaxed.

“Hermione, this is October, which means we’re practically in autumn.” The blonde witch corrected.

“Autumn, summer, who cares? It still feels like late summer and I’m certainly not going to miss out on the summer experience.” The brunette said.

Her house mate was still staring at her doubtfully.

“I checked the temperatures. I think the Hogwarts grounds have some weird ward effects on them that helped them retain heat longer, or something similar to it, because it is still rather warm for autumn. Come on, Eugenie, I have your favourite foods.” Hermione said as she wiggled the picnic basket and watched the other witch’s resolve starting to succumb to the inevitability. The brunette witch was counting on it.
Wait for it, wait for it...

Her thoughts drifted as she waited.

It had been two weeks since she arrived at Hogwarts.

Tom Riddle came to visit almost every day in the infirmary, though she had no idea why he bothered to do it that often when Nurse Edelstein watched him with the suspicion of a bulldog whenever she happened to be around. Maggie was nearby often enough when he visited, and they generally ended up only talking about classes when the nurse was close enough to eavesdrop. He did not even let up when a suspicious Maggie occasionally took up his time to talk and ‘get to know him’.

(“You don’t need to interrogate him, Maggie. I can take care of myself,” Hermione huffed. Maggie disagreed. “I very much need to. I need to know his intentions.” “We’re just study partners!” “My study partners never brought me flowers.” The Nurse countered. “Well, you’ve never spent two weeks hospitalised either, have you?”)

On the fifth day of her confinement, Professor Dexter visited again and saw her working on a different homework with a different set of library books with her. When he asked her how she managed to get all those things, her simple answer of ‘Tom, of course’, made him mutter under his breath ‘poaching from your neighbours now, Horace? Really?’ and other, more unprintable curses from boils in unmentionable places to bunions (though Hermione took notes of his creativity) before he informed her that he will assign her a Ravenclaw prefect to help her acclimatise to Hogwarts.

Well, that, and because ‘the Slytherins are shameless’, but he didn’t mean to say it out loud within her hearing.

This was how she was introduced by Professor Dexter to Eugenie Delacour the next day.

She was a member of the extensive Delacour clan (Hermione easily pronounced her name the French way). Her parents were vigilant enough of the tensions in the continent to have transferred her to Hogwarts by her third year. Her hair was the colour of flax falling straight down her back like a waterfall and her eyes the blue of forget-me-not blossoms. She moved like a fairy tale princess and smiles like one too. That slight, very slight shimmer of unreality around her told Hermione that she was probably also part-veela.

The Ravenclaw prefect visited Hermione every other day. The schedule of her visit never did coincide with Tom Riddle’s except once (Eugenie tended to take her lunch with Hermione, most of the time Tom preferred to visit when classes were over). On that one day the conversation was more formal than usual.

(She guessed that Tom and Eugenie didn’t really know each other very well other than for prefect business).

Other than that particular time, Hermione didn’t have any problem talking to Eugenie and asking questions about the Ravenclaw Tower.

To be honest, Hermione didn’t really care about how the blonde drew the eyes of most guys when they walk together (like now, as they walk arm-in-arm towards the edge of the lake, talking about stuff). She’d never thought of herself as a great beauty and thus suffer no disappointment on that front. Besides, it only meant that those guys have no mental fortitude.
Hermione snorted when she saw a Gryffindor boy fall into the lake when he saw Hermione and Eugenie bending over to spread picnic blankets on the ground.

“Hermione?”

“There’s another fool around ten metres away behind you.” Hermione said.

The boy swimming to the simple raft and his friends were toying with. The others were clearly laughing at him. When Eugenie turned around, he gave an overly enthusiastic wave that ended up elbowing another friend in the gut and send him into the waters. The blonde blushed while Hermione laughed.

“Well, at least they knew how to have fun,” the brunette said pragmatically.

“But the poor boy…”

Hermione took a deep breath. “Eugenie, if the rest of his friends managed to stay on board while he fell over, then he was just the most careless of them. See, he’s not the only one looking at you with interest. I do hope they don’t end up toppling the raft, though. I can’t imagine the caretaker would be pleased when they leave four sets of waterlogged trails into Hogwarts”

The Ravenclaw prefect quickly turned away from the boys’ unsubtle fawning, her cheeks still coloured as she buried her face in her hands.

“This is all so embarrassing.”

That surprised Hermione. She had no idea that there were shy veelas. With their beauty and glamour, she’d thought that they were mostly confident or aloof. “Uh, well, do you want to move?”

The blonde stared at Hermione with surprise.

“Move?” she squeaked. God, she’s so adorable. How is she so adorable?

“You don’t seem to be comfortable anymore. It’s not much of a picnic if you can’t relax, right?” Hermione said, patting her hand comfortingly. “Let’s go somewhere there’s no boys around.”

“You don’t mind?”

“You’re my friend, Eugenie. Why would I mind?”

The brunette witch didn’t think they were best friends yet, but somehow the smile that Eugenie gave her was blinding. It struck her then that like the old Hermione Granger, Eugenie Delacour was not one to make female friends easily, for entirely different reasons. Add her blonde hair and elf-like grace, and she reminded the time-stuck witch of Luna.

Hermione’s smile was a touch nostalgic as she stood up and packed bowls and plates back into the basket.

“Come on, let’s find a better spot.”

Arm-in-arm once more, the two girls walked away, oblivious (or uncaring) about the disappointed boys on the raft over Hogwarts’ lake.

Based on what Hermione knew, the blonde was probably going to be more comfortable with older gentlemen than those their age.
It was just a matter of effort, really. She knew from first-hand experience that Harry took the effort of building up his resistance to a veela’s natural glamour, so it wasn’t impossible nor was it too hard. Parts of it was something like meditating. Many ladies of veela descent were genuinely interested in him as he’d managed to not only speak with them normally, he could also keep prolonged eye contact. He did not somehow end up speaking to their breasts.

Most teenagers don’t have that sort of strength of mind yet—add in the hormone bomb that was puberty, it was really hard for boys to keep their wits in the face of even a part-veela.

“Ooh, did you see that tree, Eugenie?”

“C’est magnifique,” Eugenie murmured with a breathless sort of awe.

“Yes, I agree. We’re definitely going to go there.”

They spread the picnic blanket under a tree that was draped in with the fiery blooms of an uncommon, late-blooming honeysuckle. The fragrance drew Hermione in and Eugenie loved the beauty of the spot. It was not too far from the first of the Herbology greenhouses, which meant that they were quite far from anywhere else. At the very least, there would be no more foolish boys to unnerve the blonde witch.

Hermione unloaded the wealth of fruit dessert that summer brings, smiling as Eugenie’s eyes also lit up at the sight of some of her favourites. These would be airy meringues with strawberry slices and light lemon cakes that melt in your mouth. They were crispy almond thins and fluffy raspberry-blackberry soufflé. Hermione was crazy for anything with oranges; there was the orange, rose and mint cake, there was the orange marmalade she spread liberally over slices of sourdough and orange pie. There was also the candied orange peel dipped in chocolate that Ravenclaw witches liberally snacked on. The orange blossoms that adorned the caps of the marmalade jars were refreshing in their fragrance.

She’d carefully unwound them from the caps, piling them to the side. They were too pretty and too sweet-smelling that she was loathe to discard them.

There were two chilled pitchers of drinks too; one was lemonade and the other was mint tea. She and Eugenie toasted each other about everything and nothing in particular as they simply soaked everything. The cool wind and the scent of the flowers and trees infused them with the feel of summer while the light buzz of insects called on the sunset that was still several hours away.

She wished she could take a picture of today and keep it forever. On that note, I wonder who owns a camera at Hogwarts these days? It was something to find out tomorrow.

It was upon this idyllic scene that Tom Riddle walked into.

He had walked in a straight line towards them, which told Hermione that he knew how to find them, his hair as impeccable as his suit and tie with his bag in hand. The thought creased her brows, as she was sure no one knew where they were—they themselves didn’t even plan to be here. She could see Eugenie straightening up at the edge of her sight, a slight tension returning to her shoulders. At first Hermione thought she somehow feared Tom. Now, she’d figured out that the blonde was shy; Eugenie just hid her discomfort very well from other people most of the time.

“Good afternoon, Ladies.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Riddle.”

“How did you find us?” Hermione asked.
She almost rolled her eyes at his raised eyebrow. “Yes, yes. Good afternoon to you too, Tom. It’s just that we didn’t tell anyone we’re here and yet, here you are. Pardon me if I find that more interesting than just going over banal greetings.”

“Locator spells have not been lost to the sea floor with Atlantis, Hermione.”

Her lips curved up at his dry tone. “And I did my best to make myself directly unfindable because I was looking forward to a day of peace with a friend.”

As if she hadn’t expected any of the teachers to look for her (*cough*Slughorn*cough*).

He brought up several pieces of parchments with her handwriting on it. It was her library book requests. Hermione winced.

“Oh, locator spells operating on sympathetic principles. Yes, that is hard to avoid.”

“If I were truly intruding on you, I will take my leave,” he said with an understanding smile. “I would hate to get between friends.”

It made Eugenie shake her head vigorously.

“No, no! Not at all. You’re free to join us anytime.”

His gaze moved towards Hermione. She rubbed her face. He was leaving the ball in her court, and she was aware that he would keep his word and leave if she said so. Because that was what Tom the Prefect would do.

“Well, if you were to start and tell us what exactly brought you here, maybe we can decide whether we need to run you off or not.”

Eugenie was aghast. “Hermione!”

“It’s just a joke, Eugenie. See? Tom’s still as cool as a cucumber because he knows I don’t hold back on what I’m thinking.” She pointed out. True enough, Tom Riddle chose one point of the blanket closest to Hermione and right across Eugenie. He pulled a bottle out of his bag.

“Is that wine?” She asked.

Her friend shook her head. “No, the labels are different. That’s…sparkling grape juice I believe.”

“Well, today is a day of celebration, so I brought this,” Tom said, opening it with a flick of his hand and offering it to the ladies. Hermione gladly tapped her wand to the side of her glass to clean it before raising her glass to try it out. The blonde witch followed a few moments later. “I was looking for you at the infirmary, but apparently you decided to discharge yourself earlier and left no information of where you were going.”

He almost looked disapproving. Hermione shrugged without guilt.

“I was bored and you found me all the same, so what does it matter?”

For a split second, the annoyance in his blue eyes were clear before it disappeared again as if it was never there. The sparkling grape juice was excellent.

“Mmm, this is very good, Tom. I never thought juice could be this good.” Hermione commented. He nodded, accepting the compliment with grace, before he turned to the other Ravenclaw.
“I’m glad it’s to your taste. Miss Delacour, is it to your preference?”

“Oh, it’s fine! It really is fine, just like Hermione says.” Eugenie was drawing back to her shell slightly. Hermione felt like coaxing her out again, but really, why bother now? Tom Riddle was hell on her nerves, and she was pretty battle-hardened, she didn’t want to know how it feels like for the blonde Ravenclaw.

“I’m glad,” Tom smiled and Eugenie’s cheeks coloured slightly. This was when Hermione thought she wanted to groan for a completely different reason.

“I almost forgot. Here, congratulations.”

There was a tube that Tom had taken out of his bag and suddenly in front of Hermione’s presence was a small white bouquet. It consisted mostly of lily-of-the-valley with jasmine thrown in. Underneath it was a box of Honeydukes’ assorted chocolate truffles that made Hermione’s mouth water just looking at it.

“Chocolates for a get-well celebration?” Hermione asked, askance. Wasn’t this a tad too romantic?

“I heard Madam Edelstein complaining that you keep pilfering on the ones sent to her by her beau.” Tom replied, his perfect smile was actually edging into a sly smirk. It was something she thought of as one of his real ones. “I thought I’d provide relief for the poor woman by delivering you a new target.”

Oh. Now that was rather embarrassing. When did he even hear that, anyway? On the other hand, he had been visiting the infirmary rather often; he was unintimidated from any of what Nurse Edelstein would say her attempts at conversation and what Hermione would say interrogation.

He pulled it back slightly with nonchalance. “Or, if you’d rather not, well, I’m sure I’d earn her eternal gratitude with this box of chocolate to replace the one—”

“No! I mean, it’s fine, I can take it.” Hermione yelped, “thank you, Tom.”

Her brain was already taunting her with pictures of the little treasures, resplendent in their individual seats. She was certain that he wasn’t a poisoner, certainly not something so extravagant that can be easily traced to him. If he really wanted to kill her, he’d just Avada her in the forest and hide her body. She took the lily-of-the-valley bouquet and the box of chocolate truffles.

“You keep giving me gifts, though, and I haven’t given you any.” She commented.

Or, in Slytherin parlance, the balance-of-favours was tilting heavily in his direction, as Draco and Daphne had managed to impress the importance of that to her.

“It’s really not necessary. I enjoy giving you gifts.”

Hermione had to look up at those words, right to his dark blue eyes that seemed to be filled with laughter. Was he in his bullshitting mode or was he honest? She couldn’t tell. Probably bullshitting, because there’s Eugenie around to amaze, and Hermione didn’t doubt that he enjoyed confusing the odd new student. To her consternation, the blonde Ravenclaw really did seem like she was taking it all in with eyes filled with admiration.

“Hmm, yes, but it’s not really fair to you, though. How did you know I like jasmine?” Hermione asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t, but you did say that you like fragrant flowers better than the showy
ones that have no scent.”

The brunette nodded. It was true. It was probably one of their conversations about Herbology that had them talking about flowers. She was probably ranting about how she hated plant domestication that was either grotesque (why do you need bottle-shaped fruits, why?) or stripped the plants of critical function that they needed to survive.

Like scent.

“What do you think, Miss Delacour? Do you consider it a sad thing for flowers to be of infinite colours but no scent?” Tom asked. He was doing better as a host than Hermione, drawing Eugenie into the conversation.

The blonde shook her head. “I also think that’s sad. I would rather choose a simple wild rose.”

Hermione remembered that part of her rant. When flowers are obsessively bred to be bigger and more colourful, with hundreds of petals, they start to lose their scent at some point. Yet certain species of insect pollinators are called to their respective flowers by their scent. Then, when such extreme breeding happened, the flowers can no longer breed without human interference.

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“Hermione?” He asked.

“Wait a moment, I’m trying to come up with something.”

Her eyes landed on the white sprigs of orange blossoms she’d saved, whose scent she loved. She could use one, she mused, tapping her wand over the thin branch, murmuring a few words. The white blossoms grew larger as she transformed them—Seville orange blossoms, she knew, were larger and smelled sweeter. Another tap made all the buds blossom. She also stood up for a moment to take a few bunches of honeysuckle before she sat down; all bright yellow blooms with splashes of claret. The resulting bouquet was barely larger than her palm, but she was thinking of making something more in line of the single damask rose he’d first given her. She took one of the black ribbons in her pocket she’d used to tie a scroll together and tied the flowers to one.

“Here.”

She didn’t know why he looked so surprised. Were girls not supposed to give flowers to boys? Urgh, the sexism in this era keeps throwing her off because she was never quite sure where they were going to pop up and trip her next. She’ll just have to ask about it later and…do something to fix it somehow.

“It’s just a token of my thanks for all you’ve done while I was tied to the bed. You really didn’t have to get me all those books and you did, and the homework, and the everything else. It would’ve been a real torture if you and Eugenie hadn’t been there and…” did she just threw Tom Riddle off his usual unaffected expression? In the presence of a third-party that would usually make him put his best performance up? Wow, she did. Why was he staring at her like that? What? Why was Eugenie growing redder and redder?

“This is just like the damask rose you gave me the first time, alright?” She asked, puzzled.

“Thank you.”

His voice was oddly grave as he accepted the flowers, his gaze unwavering from hers. What surprised her was Eugenie suddenly standing up with an expression of a deer in the headlights.

“Oh dear! I almost forgot that I have a prefect meeting—a Ravenclaw prefect meeting! Yes, I’m
late, very late, and I need to go now. Goodbye, Riddle, Hermione! I’ll—I’ll see you sometime later!” Eugenie stammered out.

It was very rushed and suspiciously high-pitched. Hermione had scarcely managed to give her own goodbyes before the girl had marched away. It was clear that if politeness had not been necessary, she might have thought of sprinting. It was hard not to gape. She recognised Tom’s expression as the one he put on when he was presenting a front of perfect calmness and ease.

Which meant that something was wrong.

“What on earth is going on?” Hermione asked in frustration, to no one in particular.

With that, to her utmost surprise, Tom Riddle laughed.

It was one of the weirdest things in the world. She never expected to hear him laugh—at least not with clear humour and unrestrained ease. It was something completely human and had the additional inconvenience of making her see him as someone she could truly be friends with. Not as a dark-lord-in-training, not someone who was potentially Voldemort, but just as Tom Riddle; wizard, orphan, a clever and cunning wizard who just happened to be one of the Slytherin prefects of Hogwarts. She wished he had an awkward or weird-sounding laughter.

Unfortunately, it was a beautiful sound.

“Riddle.”

“Oh, so I’m back to Riddle now, am I?” He said, between chuckles as he drew a deep breath to settle himself.

“Well, you would be if you’re not telling me why you’re laughing at me.” She wasn’t pouting. She was frowning, with a severe expression. Yes. Yes, she is, though she didn’t know why every time he saw her face, he was pulled into a smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

“I’m not laughing at you.” His reply was firm and without doubt, and she knew he wasn’t making an excuse. “It is merely everything else in my life that has become so unbelievable.”

She frowned. “What is?”

“You asked me to promise you to always inform you if Slughorn is giving me requests to your benefit that inconveniences me. With the same good faith, I ask you for a small promise,” he said.

“What is it?”

“Don’t give orange blossoms and honeysuckles to anyone other than me, Hermione.”

He was still smiling, and laughter was still near the surface of his voice, but she also knew that he was serious. It might be something in his eyes, unmoving as the night with only the slightest hint of starlight to lessen the darkness.

“On that note, perhaps I should ask you to promise not to give flowers to any other man.” He corrected himself.

“Hey! That’s overly broad! Not to mention that you are being too forward by assuming you have any say in how I might try to court other men—which, newsflash, you don’t.”
His lips curved upwards slightly.

“You’re a menace, Hermione.”

She paused. Was that fondness in his voice? Yes, it was. It was starting to weird her out as she accepted his offer to pour her more grape juice without thinking.

“I’m not. A menace, that is. I follow the rules in general and I fight evil, such as the wizards who follow Grindelwald, for example.”

He cleared his throat. “And yet between the two of us, I am not the one who was recommending vigilantism.”

She gave him the stink-eye. He was unperturbed.

“I don’t. It's just that dark lords are an extreme exception.”

“Now, shall we continue with the celebratory meal?” he asked. “It’s unfortunate that Miss Delacour has other engagements to attend, but I’m sure we can make the best of this.”

He observed the food spread in front of them with something close to obsession. Some sort of enlightenment seemed to have reached him as his eyebrows rise, but he didn’t share the insight (if any) with Hermione.

“You do like orange, don’t you?”

“Yes, and I did feel like celebrating, so I requested beforehand for the kitchen to prepare any dessert recipes they have that has orange in it, as well as anything that Eugenie likes. This ends up being closer to an indulgence of desserts than a proper meal.”

“That’s even better, then,” he said with aplomb. There was a slice of the orange, rose and mint cake in his hand. “We have all of the sweetness and none of the plainness and boredom. We have the honeymoon phase instead of the entire ups and downs of marriage.”

She frowned as she picked up the orange pie. Mmmm, pie.

“Why are we even talking about marriage?”

He smiled. It was one of his real smiles, the one with the potential to scare little old ladies into crossing the street when they gaze upon it and convince thugs to find a different mark and leave him alone. Unfortunately for her, it was also still devastatingly handsome, just infinitely more dangerous.

“Well, it is rather apt, isn’t it, seeing as you’ve practically proposed to me.”

Hermione choked on her pie crust.

Tom Riddle had unceremoniously dumped the contents of one of his potion bottles on the ground, ignoring Hermione’s surprise (not that she was capable of saying anything while she was trying to cough that pie crust out). He cleaned it with a good use of Aguamenti before drying it. After he enlarged it, he moved the small orange-blossom-and-honeysuckle bouquet she made inside it, presumably after casting some preservation charm on them and charmed the glass to be unbreakable.
He’d dropped the bottle, now larger, back into his bag while Hermione was busy drinking mint tea and soothing her throat.

“Marriage proposal?” She hissed.

“Now, now, don’t say that you’ve regretted it already. Is your intention as fickle as the weather?” Tom Riddle, at this point, was definitely not being a mature prefect that is above rubbing salt on the wound when they were raw.

Hermione snorted. “Please. I didn’t even mention marriage.”

“Well, give me your promise about the flowers and I’ll tell you.”

“Tom,” she warned.

“You can give me your promise, or I can just walk away.” He casually said. “It’s just flowers, really, Hermione.”

His smile was too innocent to be true.

She sighed. It really wasn’t something that important. She can afford to do it, really. Even before she was unexpectedly returned to Hogwarts again, when was the last time she gave any man flowers? Not even on Ron’s birthday, not even on the date they first got together. There were no flowers on any other day they got together too, or Valentine.

That was…huh, that wasn’t exactly a bright memory, was it?

“Alright, I promise.” She finally said.

“And what exactly do you promise?”

“I won’t give any other guys flowers except for you.” Hermione conceded. “And never give anyone else the bouquet I just handed you.”

He nodded. “Thank you. Now, if you were studying Victorian flower language—which I recommend that you do because most purebloods are fluent in it—”

“Get on with it, Tom.” She murmured under her breath.

“—orange blossoms meant marriage, the fruitfulness of the marriage bed and related marital festivities.”

Hermione groaned and buried her face in her hands.

“That’s alright, I completely understand,” Tom continued, glib. If she looked up now, he was probably smirking. “I have been reliable informed that I am irresistible. I place no blame on you for having succumbed to the temptation—”

That’s it. She uprooted a bunch of grass from behind her, stepped to the side and threw it to his face before running off.

Tom should be up and chasing her, wand at hand any time soon. That was great, because when she was this pissed off, she was in the mood to beat someone down too. She ran in a zig-zag pattern, not really something comfortable to do, but she could manage it in burst. At one point, she ducked into a roll and turn back to cast one hex and two jinxes, her hair almost alive with the rising static as she drew magic to her.
He dodged (of course), but it gave her time to start chaining four spells at once, the first of which was even silent. Tom sent a percussive curse she did not even want to let hit a shield and Hermione ducked as he raised a shield against the rest of her attacks. He held the shield in front of him, it centre point seems to be his wand. She probably couldn’t breach it, but he couldn’t attack either.

Understanding what he was trying to do, she casted the same variation of the Protego Charm.

“Is this a duel?” He asked.

“It’s a fight,” Hermione corrected. “How long are we going to do this?”

“First blood?” Tom seemed a little too casual at agreeing to the opportunity to hack and slash at each other, but then again most of the veteran Aurors that Hermione knew were the same. They wouldn’t turn down an excellent opportunity to sharpen their skills.

“Well, some of us have just been recently sick. I don’t think I’d have the stamina for even ten minutes.” She said.

To her surprise, he removed his shield and shook his head. And… Was that concern?

Wow, that was real concern, she noted with surprise.

“You’re right. We should go back.”

“What?”

“You are not going to return to the infirmary on the same day that you leave it. Not on my watch.” His voice was firm when he said this, his mien implacable. It was probably one of the few times when Tom the Prefect was the real Tom Riddle.

Hermione was glaring at him while he politely offered her his arm like a proper gentleman.

“But we’re just starting.”

“Miss Curie,” he was just there, waiting. Hermione let out an explosive huff.

“Oh, alright. But promise me we’ll do this some other time.” She took his arm, feeling distinctly like playing a role in a period movie while she did so.

“Certainly.”

They strolled back, arm-in-arm, and Hermione’s curiosity reminded her that there were still things she hadn’t found out about.

“What does honeysuckle mean, then?”

“Generous affection, devotion.” She could hear the smirk in his voice. Hermione let out a pained sound from the back of her throat.

“I can’t believe that!”

“You’re welcome to check any reference you can find,” he said, idly.

Surprisingly, Tom wasn’t someone who tends to grip the arm of their date possessively that they were attached at the hip (she dated someone like that once—Hermione didn’t let him get past the second date). His arm wasn’t a limp and annoying dead weight either. He adjusted quickly to any changes in terrain, even holding her once when the ground was slippery and her damned mary-
janes weren’t giving her enough traction. As she’d almost fallen, he had to grip her waist to stop her from slipping. She could feel his shoulder warm and solid against her back, his breath light against her neck. He let go and moved back once he was sure she was steady on her feet, returning his arm back with hers without needing to be prompted.

*That’s it, I’m finding a nice, comfortable pair of boots sometime soon*, Hermione thought, trying to ignore how warm her face seems to be or the way his arms felt around her.

She was all for following uniform regulations, but not if it was going to get her killed. Slipping while trying to cast a counter-hex sounded like one of those situations.

“What about lily-of-the-valley or jasmine?” Hermione asked to distract herself. The blanket was visible now on the other side of the picnic tree.

“Lily-of-the-valley is ‘return to happiness’ and jasmine is ‘amiability’.” She didn’t imagine his smug tone as he explained.

“Oh, that is *so* not fair,” she groused. “How did you happen to find sweet-scented flowers that are somehow also completely friend-appropriate flowers? I just like the way orange blossoms and honeysuckles smell!”

“Those who are prepared create their own luck.”

Hermione harrumphed in dissatisfaction but didn’t retort back. There was no doubt that the git was prepared. That was when Hermione remembered that Eugenie was *right there* when she gave Tom the flowers before she pulled her vanishing act. Well, it explained why the blonde witch’s face was beet-red now, doesn’t it?

“Dammit,” Hermione cursed. “I’ve got to find Eugenie tonight and explain.”

Tom was unconcerned. “If she was indeed assigned to assist you on Professor Dexter’s behest, then I’m sure you’re given the same dorm.”

The witch chanced a look at his side profile. It reminded her of the outline of a Greek statue. He would not look out of place wearing a chiton on the Parthenon, or maybe, placed among some statues of philosophers. (Why the hell should she be thinking of her last holiday in Greece right now?)

“You don’t seem to be worried.” She said.

“Miss Delacour does not have the unsavoury habit of spreading rumours about her housemates.”

Hermione’s eyebrows rose. “Well, I get the feeling that she won’t betray her friends. Yet isn’t still possible that she’d say that she was worried that her friends were moving too fast in a relationship? That she wished to ask for advice about it from others? News still end up going out that way, and it can still feed the gossip network. That’s still concerning, isn’t it?”

He mused on it for about three seconds. “She would still not have said anything within the first day, as she is not extremely social. Really, Hermione, there is nothing for you to worry unduly about.”

Tom had the gall to pat the hand she had slipped into his arm as if they were the *dearest* of friends. It would’ve been condescending if his smile did not have that fox-like hint to it. He knew *exactly* how much it was annoying her. That, in turn, made her more determined not to be baited.
The picnic tree stood amongst several others in the clump some distance away. The breeze ran its hands through her hair and the hint of honeysuckle in the air lifted her mood.

Hermione huffed yet again and stepped closer to him instead, his arm was now pressed against her. He stiffened for a moment before he relaxed again, letting her pin his arm between her own and her torso—he’d started it and she knew it meant that he wasn’t going to be the one who’d back down. She gave herself a silent congratulation; he’d kept very precise distance between himself and any other person. It was not hard to guess from there that he was not a fan of casual bodily contact. Oddly enough, that meant it was one of the few ways that she knew she can disconcert him.

She’d resigned herself to address Eugenie’s misunderstanding later.

“So, Eugenie might be weirded out but fine, then?”

“She might find it unsettling, yes, but nothing that will prompt her to be anything than discreet.”

It was not hard to give credit to Tom’s opinion, as he should know the various people here better than she did. He’d been in Hogwarts for years, after all. Besides, she couldn’t really do anything about it until she was back at the Ravenclaw Tower. Hermione sighed and settled for getting back to the picnic blanket.

Chapter End Notes

Additional Trivia:

**Eugenie Delacour (OC)**: Fifth-year Ravenclaw prefect, French transfer from Beauxbatons. Among the French transfers to Hogwarts, she is the first one, the one who had transferred earliest (her parents presumably sensitive to the tumult in the muggle war on the continent). A member of the extended, part-veela Delacour clan (many of which has a different last name as they married out). Her name is the female, French version of Greek name Ευγενιός (Eugenios) derived from the Greek word ευγενής (eugenes) meaning ‘well-born’.
Chapter Summary

Hermione practices a little applied biology. Tom escorts Hermione back. Hermione is acclimating herself to the local customs. Lakshmi introduces herself and shows Hermione around. Hermione settles in.

Chapter Notes

It should be obvious by now that the time period involved necessitates many OCs or practically-OCs to be Hermione's Hogwarts' peers. If someone complains about it even after realising this story is set in the 1940s... well, I wash my hands off you. A bit of a calmer chapter before the next one (oh, and how the next one explodes).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were back to sitting on the picnic blanket again, and the honeysuckle vines gladly dropped its flowers into her hair every now and then. She didn’t brush them off, only collected them together and figured out how to chain them into one. Wait, she was sure that Luna had told her about a more elegant solution to this before…

“Oh well,” Hermione mused as she cast around for longer branch. “I suppose we can tidy all this up now and go back to the castle.”
She didn’t know why Tom was raising his eyebrow at her.

“Well, Eugenie’s already gone back, and I’m sure you have other things to do. I haven’t settled back at the Ravenclaw Tower either…”

“Perhaps you’d like to just enjoy the day for a while?” He finally asked.

Hermione was standing up again, wand in hand, cutting some of the younger twigs of the honeysuckle for her idea; strong enough to provide structure and yet flexible enough to be wound into a circle. *Perfect.* She looked back to see his eyes intent on her form. It wasn’t the first time since they walked back—his gaze sometimes flickered to her entire self than stay on her face. No, it was not a leer (or anything in the neighbouring range of one). It was more clinical and it was systematic.

Tom was checking up on her.

“I’m fine.” She insisted the moment she figured out what he was doing.

He met her gaze for three seconds and she was aware that he was politely holding back his disbelief.

“That’s good to hear,” he said. Wait, she hadn’t expected *that* answer. “I’m afraid I’d like to rest for a while after the exertions we’ve gone through. You won’t mind terribly if we delay our return for a while, would you?”

His smile was deceptively innocent.

For someone whose statement was obviously a load of crap, he was too calm. She had a feeling that he was prepared for her to either accept his request or to challenge it, but the unhurried way he’d started picking a lemon cake told her that he was prepared for either answer.

If she insisted on walking back right now, she had the suspicion that he’d call attention to her less-than-perfect health in a more embarrassing way than this polite fiction of his supposed tiredness. So, she resigned herself to keeping the détente.

Hermione huffed and settled back to weaving the twigs into a crown. Carefully making small diagonal slices to the bark with her wand past the cambium, she inserted the fallen buds carefully to each cut. She held them there, healed the cut with a spell of regeneration and then cast another spell of growth. The wound and the flower stem joined as if they had always been one. Neville taught her that one. It always helped his grafted branches to set in a day. The application, however, was pure Luna.

“What are you making?” He asked.


_A flower crown always makes you feel better on a bad day_, Luna had told her once, right after she gifted Hermione with a crown of roses at lunch (how she got her hands on a rose plant during the day, when they were both working at the Ministry was the type of question she’d stopped asking around Luna). Her friend was on to something there, because it *was* pleasant to have the sweet fragrances follow you around all day. Luna charmed them to release their fragrance in waves and then hold back and merely collect them at other times, _so we won’t get desensitised to the scent, of course._

Of course.
It also made her feel better at that miserable day at the office, and she was an Unspeakable. On the degree of strangeness that they see at the office every day, a flower crown barely made anyone blink. The witches she met in the hallways actually complimented her on it and asked how she made it.

“You’re not using a sticking charm for the flowers,” he noted, curious.

“Well, that would be an ordinary flower crown. I’m going for an extraordinary one—a living flower crown, if you will. If I grafted all the loose flowers to one branch, all the elements would end up being one organism, one plant. It can live for days, no, weeks on a glass of water. Well, I’d add nutrients to the water to be sure, but that’s trivial.” She replied with a shrug. The highly interested look on his face told otherwise and she couldn’t help a small grin.

“It really isn’t that hard. Well, the exactly two spells required isn’t. The important part is actually knowing how the dicots are structured—you need a plant that arrange their vascular network in a series of neat, concentric circles.”

She went back to slicing just the right distance past the phloem, cambium and xylem. She checked the flower stems critically before sticking the flowers into the cuts and then muttering first the healing spell, and secondly, the regeneration spell.

“These vessels, these mini pipes that carry minerals from the roots upwards and the ones that carry nutrients generated by the leaves? In dicots, they’re arranged in a series of concentric circles. The phloem vessels are at the outermost, the cambium lies in between and after that you have the xylem vessels. Once you know how they’re arranged, you can join the corresponding vessels from any two branches, from any two plants, to become one.”

She paused for a moment.

“Well, they have to be closely related, of course, you can’t try it with magnolias and oranges, for one. But still, imagine the possibilities once you knew that! A master herbologist can theoretically create a bower the shape of gazebo made of entirely of rose plants and ensure that when it blooms, it blooms with a hundred type of roses.”

The master herbologist that she knew here was certainly Neville, and the result was certainly not theoretical. He had made that for his wife. It was heart-stoppingly beautiful, though not as much as his look of utter adoration she could see in his face at the happiness in hers.

“It takes patience and effort, but unlike the muggle world, we certainly didn’t need to wait for the plant to heal and recover. That’s only a minute or so away in the hands of a master.”

(Pity the gazebo didn’t quite survive the Insurrection unscathed.)

*Wait, what?*

(It could still be regrown, though. It was only damaged, not dead. This is unlike what happened to —)

*Shit. Not again.* Hermione ignored the blanks with effort. Or how she had more than one memory of how the rose bower looked like. And blurred pictures of Neville standing with someone. The witch in them didn’t seem to be the same one either. *What on earth? I can’t have two memories of the same time!*

Her mouth, fortunately, was able to keep going and her pause was not too long to raise questions.
“In monocots, however, they’re spread at random. That’s why you won’t ever be able to do it for monocots because they don’t have it. No grafting for the banana or the coconut tree.”

Hermione looked up from her continuous effort to graft all the flame-coloured honeysuckle flowers on one branch because he was being surprisingly quiet. She narrowed her eyes.

“You don’t understand most of what I’m saying, do you?”

“Not all of it yet, but I’m sure you won’t leave me hanging.”

“Well, just ask about anything you wish me to clarify.”

And off they went. She had to explain what monocots and dicots were (“unlike monocots, dicots are not monophyletic.” “I’m sorry?” “Oh, never mind. I’m rambling towards excessive and unnecessary detail. Ignore that.”) She munched as she worked, and before she even extended her hand at one food item or another, Tom was already there and offering it to her. He even made the sourdough sandwiches with marmalade.

Hermione had not considered the possibility that a conscientious Tom Riddle that was finely aware of her physical condition could be annoying, in a way. His manners had always been flawless and it was flattering to be the subject of so much care. Yet the intensity of his gaze was almost a physical caress over her skin—frankly, it was distracting. She’d never wished she was healthy as much as she did now. On the other hand, his singular attention on her magical grafting impressed her (most people would’ve given up and stopped asking for more details when they figured out just how extensive and technical her knowledge could be).

At one point, he picked up the remaining sprigs of orange blossoms she had set aside from the top of the marmalade jars.

“Add these in too?”

She gave him a suspicious look. “They’re not even from the same family. Grafting them is beyond me.”

He shook his head. “I wasn’t speaking of attaching them to the honeysuckle, but to intertwine was a second layer to the crown.”

“They’re only short sprigs!”

He raised an eyebrow. “You can join them into one long vine with that regeneration charm, can’t you?”

Tom was right, damn him. His mind certainly worked fast with the knowledge she’d just imparted. With careful application of said charm (don’t overpower it, Hermione. Slowly and steady does it), she managed to make the orange sprigs grow and lengthen. She grafted them, joined them, into a single vine to expedite the growing process. Soon she had enough length to braid with the honeysuckle twine. Not enough blossoms, though.

She tried to recall that there was a spell to increase blossoms, it was just at the tip of her tongue.


Tom had taken the orange vine from her hand and stuck the cut end to the loose soil. He called Aguamenti to water it and cast a spell she didn’t recognise on the ground.
“Coalesco.” Then, he pointed his wand at the vine.

“Florescentia.”

As called, a profusion of white blossoms flowered all along the vine where previously they had only been young buds. Their fragrant scents filled the air.

“That’s…not what I was thinking of, but it works. Wait, as far as I can remember, Florescentia only induces flowers to bloom on plants, not cuttings.” She was excited and baffled at the same time.

“You’ve just told me that the difference between a cutting and a plant is that the first haven’t regrown its roots.” Tom answered her calmly as he pulled the vine’s cut end from the ground. True enough, wispy, spidery roots have extended from that end, courtesy of the first spell he cast on it. “I merely applied that knowledge.”

He applied it within a few minutes of knowing it, she realised. That took an insane level of insight.

He took the honeysuckle vine from her as she stared at him in surprise and entwined it with the orange branch filled with white blossoms in his hand. He worked with precise movements, careful enough not to dislodge the more delicate flowers in the process, more careful than Hermione would have been. He placed it back into her hands when he was done.

It was, indeed, a crown of flowers.

“Perhaps you’d like to change the type of orange blossoms?”

“Why?”

“You did say that you liked another type better because they were more fragrant.”

Ah, the Seville orange blossoms she’d changed his orange blossoms into. Well, she could do that again. It wasn’t that hard. To make the change permanent, though, takes more knowledge of plants than is obvious at first sight. She could do it, of course. The white flowers grew slightly bigger, their scent carrying slightly more zest. Hermione added that last charm Luna recommend, so the flowers would hold back their scent most of the time, releasing them only in waves. Then, she was done.

She’d made her own flower crown.

Tom searched his pockets and came out with an extra scroll ribbon of his own. He lengthened it and changed its colours to a metallic bronze and offered it to her. Hermione shrugged and accepted it.

Well, why not? She was a Ravenclaw, this time around. The more’s the merrier. She wove it around the vines before tying the two ends together into a bow.

“Well, it looks perfect now.” Tom commented.

He looked completely serious when he said that, to her surprise. She hadn’t realised until she was comfortable in her own skin as an Unspeakable that she had envied Luna’s ease in Hogwarts. They both attracted people who would gossip and belittle them for different reasons, but only Luna was completely content with who she was. Hermione has unconsciously wished she had everybody’s approval, as ridiculous as that sounds when she said it out loud to herself years and years later.
Now? Now she wasn’t going to ask for anyone’s approval. Teenage peer pressure can go screw themselves.

“Why, thank you. I think I’m done with the crown.” With that, Hermione picked her crown and placed it carefully on her head. It was a little lopsided at first, but it was hard to adjust it once it snagged on her hair. She sighed. She forgot her thick curls.

“Here, let me.”

Before she knew it, he was already behind her and had released her hair from its single tie. After that he was…doing stuff with her hair. The occasional strokes as he released a knotted strand or several were weirdly soothing. Instead of retying her hair, he braided it. The crown did seem to sit securely once he was done.

“Right. Thanks.”

She closed her eyes took a deep breath and was met with the scent of orange blossoms and honeysuckle. *Perfect.*

“Pass me the berry soufflÉ, Tom, and the mint tea too.”

“Of course, Hermione.”

A corner of his lips was twitching upwards in amusement, but Hermione ignored it because she knew he wasn’t laughing at her.

It must have been more than ten minutes when not only her heartrate had gone down again, all the adrenaline in her system returned to a normal level. That was when the slight feeling of weakness in her legs became apparent, as was the passing dizziness. She felt the effects of the Rejuvenating Charm cast upon her in the form of a warm breeze. She tensed.

When she looked up, Tom had his wand out and his expression was unapologetic.

Well, she’d grudgingly admit that his reaction had been spot on. It didn’t mean she was going to thank him for it. She could feel the static charge of magic building up along her nerves and the thunder hex that was at the tip of her tongue.

“I’d have to inform you not to do that when I’m tense, Riddle.”

Her seriousness came across well with her tone and he replied in kind. “To do what?”

“Cast any spell on me without my knowledge. I’m liable to retaliate before I’m conscious of it and I would hate to count you among my collateral damage.” Hermione replied with the harsh truth as she discreetly grounded the hilt of her wand into the ground—the excess magic was conveniently dissipated. She was not a child grown in a time of peace, her reflexes were not pretty to admit. There was a reason that whenever Harry or Ron embedded her in a frontline unit, she would always be working with others who’d survived at least two dark lords.

He took it in a stride as he smiled. “Ah, you’d miss me already, Hermione?”

“If I really have to inflict mortal harm on someone, I prefer the people to actually deserve it.” The witch rolled her eyes. How did all that ego even fit inside his head?

“If you somehow managed to kill me that carelessly, I’d have well deserved it.”
Hermione groaned. She should have known. How did she not guess that that would be his answer?

“You’re a prick, Tom.” She stated.

“And yet you prefer me this way.”

That was…hmm, she couldn’t even argue about it. Hermione closed her mouth again as she realised that, ignoring his amused look. She would rather chat with him, all annoyingly excessive confidence and belligerent intelligence that he didn’t somehow hold back rather than chat with the nice, polite prefect he’d first been that was as interesting and readable as a blank wall. She didn’t need anyone to be someone they weren’t with her. It’s not as if she was going to break with the first use of sarcasm.

After all, it gave her the perfect excuse to slice back with biting wit.

“I have been told on good authority that I have questionable tastes in men.” Hermione replied.

Tom’s surprised chuckle was just as real.

Tom had insisted on carrying the picnic basket. She still couldn’t decide whether it was convenient or vexing. His company was easy, though, and Hermione had only realised then that she would be bored if she’d gone back alone. Of course, she saw no reason to inform him of that little factoid. It was unnerving to note how easily he’d slipped himself into her routine.

As they walked the hallways of Hogwarts and Hermione saw more than one student turn their eyes in her direction. That was when she remembered that she was wearing her flower crown—she’d almost forgotten about it when the crown wasn’t releasing its fragrance every few minutes because Tom had acted normally all the time. He truly did not think twice about it. Other students, it would seem, was a completely different issue.

“Wow, Hogwarts must have been very boring,” Hermione said, making sure her voice carried.

“Why do you say that?” Tom asked, matching her volume.

“You’d think they’d never seen flowers before. I mean, flowers, Tom! What do you do to the students here? Lock everyone up indoors for months?”

Some students turned red when they realised they’d been staring. Others just upped their disdain, which Hermione ignored with ease. Of course, there were always the dense ones, but she’d written those off as a loss early on.

“Well, one has to admit that such an enchanting view is not commonly found here.” She saw that he was smiling when he said this.

Hermione snorted, because the alternative would be to laugh. That would have been a good effort at a compliment if she didn’t know that he was playing it up. Always charming, that Tom Riddle. She was not going to blush demurely or embarrassedly try to change the conversation.

“Please, Mr. Riddle, I’m sure you don’t mean to say that. The ladies of Hogwarts would be heartbroken to hear it.”

“They seem to be quite lively from where I’m standing. I’m sure they’ll survive.”
She followed his gaze and this time Hermione had to cover her mouth to stop the laughter. Several Gryffindor girls were positively livid at the sight of Tom Riddle carrying a picnic basket and her with a flower crown. Hermione couldn’t help grinning just to rile them up—it wasn’t her fault they were jumping, no, skydiving into conclusions.

“Oh Tom, you take me to the most interesting places. The local courting customs is absolutely fascinating. Do the ladies hunt in packs or do they hunt separately?” Hermione said this in an overly saccharine coo. She took distinct pleasure in hearing him suppress a bark of laughter and turned it into a series of unconvincing light coughs.

“Do their prey retain veto rights?” She asked again.

“I’m sure I have no idea what you are asking about, Hermione.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do.”

She let Tom take the lead, which certainly wasn’t a hard thing to do with the degree of consideration he was giving her. When they reached the bottom of Ravenclaw tower, what she hadn’t expected was for there to be a student holding the door open. She was as beautiful as the evening, her large, kohl-rimmed eyes was liable to make any man’s heart to stutter when she shoots them with her amber gaze. Her lustrous black hair hung to her waist, and her perfume was a subtle mix of jasmine and magnolias with a touch of Rose of Damascus.

“Hermione Curie, I presume.” Her accent was the King’s English, her expression was halfway from boredom. She didn’t even seem to make any note of her crown of honeysuckle and orange blossom.

Hermione smiled. “Yes, and I feel thankful that I am here to welcome you.”

That earned her a peal of laughter from the girl as Hermione’s grin turned wider. Tom’s even expression disguised his confusion quite well.

“I’ve heard that you’re not unread; I’m glad to have actual proof of it. Mr. Riddle, it’s good to see you too.”

Tom politely stepped in. “If I may, Miss Chakravarty?”

“Please do, Mr. Riddle.”

“Hermione Curie, this is Lakshmi Chakravarty, fifth year Ravenclaw. Miss Chakravarty, this is Hermione Curie, the transfer student that had been confined to the infirmary all this time due to unfortunate illness.”

Hermione shook Lakshmi’s hands. Her nails were painted coral and beautifully decorated with pictures of the tiniest flowers.

“It’s nice to know you. I’m curious. I don’t suppose you make it a habit of hanging around the doorway to the dorms on summer afternoons, do you?” Hermione asked, all innocence and wide eyes.

The fact that she was there to open the door for them when they arrive could hardly be a coincidence. Again, Hermione was sure she didn’t broadcast her movements.
Lakshmi smiled. “You’re not a milquetoast or a pushover either. Good, you’ll need that here. Come on in, both of you. I haven’t had this much fun in ages. I bet the other girls would love to get to know you, Curie.”

The way she said it didn’t make it sound as if it was something pleasant.

She opened the door wide for them and strolled in with all the ease of a panther in her den. Lakshmi sat on one of the single chairs available, one rather separated from the cluster of others, even. Her eyes adjusted a little to the brightness—all the sunlight shining down from the windows at all the tower’s sides reminded Hermione that this was indeed the Rookery of the Ravens, while what little walls were there between the windows were covered with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. It was almost romantic.

This was when Hermione noticed that there were groups of girls in the common room. Ostensibly, they were studying. Of course, considering that she saw one group had a girl opening an arithmancy text book, another opened a potions book and yet another was of charms, she sincerely doubted that.

“Oh, who’s this?”

Blond, busty and with not-quite a pleasant expression on her face and a lipstick too red for school, the student stood up and stared Hermione up and down. And found her wanting, she supposed. Lakshmi answered to the whole room.

“Everyone, this is Hermione Curie. She’s the new fifth-year transfer student to our house. Hermione Curie, the Ravenclaw girls. The one closest to you is Olive Hornby.”

“Have you been to Diagon Alley? We can show you where the best dressmakers are and they can tell you what’s truly in fashion right now.” The blonde—Olive—said sweetly. Young Hermione might have mistaken it for friendship. Now, she knew the insult to her fashion sense as it is. It’s not as if it was unwarranted, as Hermione did pick a dress from among the infirmary’s lost-and-found stack.

“It’s certainly not forest chic,” one of her cheap imitators said, which Hermione soundly ignored. She was only addressing Olive.

“Thank you for your offer, but I think…” Hermione allowed her words to trail away as she gave her own visible appraisal over what the blonde wore and clearly broadcasted in her expression that she found it lacking. “I think I’ll stick to practically any other stores, even second-hand stores. My tastes don’t run too… unique, unfortunately.”

Hermione didn’t miss the way the girl’s eyes narrowed at her.

“But Olive is really the height of fashion,” one of her stooges, oh, sorry, friends, chimed in to support her dear leader.

“Yes, quite avant-garde, isn’t she?” Hermione smiled in a way that was both sweet and vicious. “Well, I don’t tend to use my clothes as political statements, so I’m afraid I can’t quite understand where she’s from.”

“Political statements?” A plainer girl asked. 

That poor, poor girl, Hermione shook her head internally as she saw Olive and the other girls giving her various looks of warning. She just gave Hermione the opening she needed.
“Oh, you know, Fashion Statements against Good Taste and Dignity. I mean, good for you for having the courage to go boldly against the system! I’m just not that brave or experimental, I suppose. I’ll stick to timeless elegance.” She answered cheerfully.

That had Olive flaming red. Hermione made a show of turning around, as if she didn’t really care enough about the cluster of girls to turn her back on them.

“Tom, thank you for escorting me, I’m sure I can find my way up the tower on my own.”

“You’re welcome, Hermione. Do watch your health; we’ve only just now allowed the pleasure of your company. It would be a shame if it were to be cut short again.”

She didn’t manage to completely push the exasperation out of her voice as she extended her hand to take the picnic basket from him. He handed it over after reapplying the lightweight charm to it.

“Yes, yes I will. Goodbye, Tom.”

“Goodbye, Hermione.”

He walked out and Hermione turned back to see the girls still standing there and staring at her. Right, Tom Riddle is the Perfect Prefect, Stellar Student and a gentleman. She almost forgot about his reputation. “If anyone is actually interested in talking to Tom, I’m sure he’s at the Slytherin common room if you want to look for him. I, however, need to get to my dorms. I don’t even know where they are yet.”

Lakshmi Chakravarty stood up from her chair with the expression of the cat that had emptied a dozen of cages of canaries and was still promised a pet shop. She had been watching all this time and the remnants of complete enjoyment were still visible on her face.

“No worries, Curie. It’s just up this way. We’re sharing dorms, darling.”

Hermione walked over to her, ignoring the other girls once more. She asked in a lower voice. “You sound much too happy for someone who gets yet another person to fight for bathroom in the morning. Why is that, Chakravarty?”

“Well, the Tower gets so boring sometimes. Your presence promises to liven things up and I’ve run out of easy ways to do so. And please, just call me Lakshmi.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Have you ever tried to ‘liven things up’ before?”

“Well, this one time, there were the snakes. They were non-venomous, really, it was a harmless bit of fun. There were many screaming and crying, but Lucretia made me promise not to do that again. And just when I managed to get her to laugh too!” She pouted, her plump lips begging to be kissed. It was a perfectly tender expression of slight melancholy. Hermione could easily envision her draped in jewels and rich fabrics where a desperate king would promise to build her the Taj Mahal if only he could get her to stop being sad.

“You’re the kind of person who would burn the world down because they’re bored, aren’t you?” She asked suspiciously. It struck her that Lakshmi was a dangerous sort of beauty—the kind that can start wars.

Lakshmi laughed at that and patted her arm. “Nooo. Of course not. You’re funny, Hermione. Why, how would I live in comfortable wealth if I burn the world down? Where would I get reliable domestic help? That’s such a silly question.”
“Right, sure. I’m sorry that your preference for the mental anguish of your housemates made me wonder whether you’d even mind burning the world down. I’m sure there’s no relation to be had there.” The brunette witch said with a roll of her eyes.

Their distance made her notice that it wasn’t precisely perfume that Lakshmi was wearing, she just seemed to comb scented oils into her thick hair. It was as subtle as it was enthralling.

“Don’t frown, Hermione, you’ll add wrinkles too early. Now, there’s also no need for sarcasm because I’m sure you’re capable of doing much better than that.”

“Why were you at the doorway?” Hermione asked.

“You’re still on to that?” She looked askance at the brunette. “Why, I was waiting for you to arrive, of course. When I saw poor Eugenie rushing in, red-faced and without wanting to give any explanation to anyone, I knew I have to see you work your magic. So, I had one house elf to wait on the hallway and inform me if she saw you arriving. As such, my timing is perfect.”

Hermione groaned. “Right. Eugenie. I still owe her an explanation.”

Lakshmi’s smile was mischievous. “Well, what did she see? Did you happen to be straddling and molesting Mr. Riddle in a mutually enjoyable manner when she came upon you? Was it a clothing optional activity?”

“Goodness, you’re nuts.” Hermione muttered into her hand.

“We’re all mad here, Hermione. At least the interesting ones are.”

It was hard to stay mad at her when it was clear that she was being so entertaining, not to mention that she read muggle books. This time, it was Lewis Carroll too—the witch had good taste.

“I was just giving him flowers as a thank you gift for helping me stay ahead of my classes. Eugenie happened to find my gift…excessive and misunderstands.” She said. She didn’t mind explaining because the other witch didn’t strike her as someone who’d easily believe rumours.

Lakshmi pursed her lips to a moue of disappointment.

“That’s boring.” She declared, “My imagination is much better than reality.”

“Well, if you’ve figured out how to live the lives of our fondest wishes, do tell me. I’ll be first in line for that.” Hermione’s reply was drier than dust.

There were velvet curtains of deep sapphire blue and five beds—the symmetry was maintained because the location of the entrance door took over the floor space for one more bed. Of course, they were four-poster beds fit for the noblest scions of great wizarding houses here. The entrance to the bathroom was discreetly tucked away to the side with the help of some folding screens to hide the entrance, while on the other side, the folding screens merely hide the linen closet. There was enough space for a chest at the bottom of each bed and the walk-in corner with the largest windows were lined with desks. Thick Persian carpets covered floor, richly patterned. And there were…paintings? Pastoral paintings (thank goodness, wizarding portrait annoyed her sometimes), but they were still quite beautiful. The brunette witch blinked several times at the view, as she was sure that her Gryffindor dorms weren’t ever this richly furnished.

There was even enough space in the middle of the room for a tea table set with six chairs. Right.
Definitely not the average dorm here.

“So, how is this room arranged?” Hermione asked.

“Eugenie is the bed closest to the door. Obviously, that’s because she’s the prefect. Always has to wake up earliest most of the time and end up latest. I’m the one that’s the farthest from the window after that.”

“Why would you choose that?”

“Because I don’t like getting the sun in my eyes.” She met Hermione’s incredulous gaze with a shrug. “I’m not a morning person.”

“You’re not even a noon person, Lakshmi.” Another voice added.

Hermione turned around to see another dark-haired beauty with waist-length hair, this one tall and elegant and moved with the bearing of a queen. It was a good thing that Hermione had really come to a point where she didn’t care about her physical beauty (or possible lack thereof), because otherwise, she’d be a weepy, insecure mess on the floor.

“That, I am not,” Lakshmi admitted with ease. “Back so soon, Lucretia?”

“Walburga is being unreasonable.” Lucretia replied, turning her gaze to Hermione. “Ah, Lucretia, this is Hermione Curie, our fifth-year transfer student. Hermione, this is Lucretia Black, seventh year and the unofficial head of our dorm.”

She nodded her head regally. “I’m pleased to meet you, Hermione. You can call me Lucretia.”

“I’m pleased to meet you too, Lucretia.”

She could easily imagine that this was a dorm that not many female students would choose, because with Eugenie, Lakshmi and apparently Lucretia here, any random fourth person chosen to fill the spot would just look dowdy and plain compared to them. Also, Black? Lucretia Black? If she was in the same generation as Walburga, that would mean that she was Sirius’ aunt.

“Also, hmm, the unofficial head of our dorm? How does that work?” Hermione asked.

“Technically, this is her dorm and we are all here on her sufferance,” Lakshmi answered.

“Lakshmi, that’s not true.”

The other witch sniffed elegantly, giving Lucretia a half-lidded gaze. “Oh, it’s absolutely true. This has been Lucretia’s dorm since she came as a first-year, and it would be hers until her last year. Her father had been guaranteed that she’d have no roommates to clutter her life unless she so chooses. It’s completely fine, darling, I have no idea why you try to play that down. You are the jewel of Hogwarts in your generation and you should own it.”

“Well, the other girls of my year have been assigned their own dorms and they’re afraid to move in when I asked them as a first-year.” Lucretia explained.

“And then she has me, who has only moved to Britain a year or so before she enrolled at Hogwarts that when the dorm arrangements and rearrangements came to, the other girls were confused where to exile me to.” The British Indian witch said this with her usual patina of boredom coating her words. One listening to hear might make the mistake that she had no personal attachment to the
“It was just a misfortune of numbers. There were twenty-one Ravenclaw girls at the beginning of your year. One person was always going to be the odd one out.” Lucretia said. She was unexpectedly nicer than her pureblood princess persona would suggest.

“Well, I certainly didn’t mistake the second and third years complaining that they’d had to take an odd-one-out first-year in.”

“Their dorms were quite full already,” Lucretia added.

“Then-third-year Lucretia kindly offered me a spot in her marvellously empty dorm, so I accepted.” Lakshmi explained easily and even made a show of observing her fingernails. “Why would I even say no? Please.”

“Some of the girls didn’t give you an easy time about it.”

“Well, you can’t help with the stupid, not even in Ravenclaw” Lakshmi said pragmatically. “I’ve figured out early on that you weren’t asking out of politeness and that you meant it. Anyway, I did promise to pay you back for the favour. Eugenie transferred in at our third-year and now we have you, Hermione. Other than our great lady here—”

“—Lakshmi, please—”

“—we are all exiles of various sorts. So, as Lucretia had taken you under her glossy black wing, make yourself at home.”

Oddly enough, Hermione thought she just might.

“Thank you.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Lucretia Black insisted.

“Now, you can choose between the two remaining beds over here…” Lakshmi directed her away from the bed at the door.

Lucretia had other social engagements, and thus had to apologise for not being able to help Hermione settle in. The brunette witch assured her that it was completely fine, and besides, she had Lakshmi. Not that Hermione even had that much to begin with, even after she went with Professor Merrythought to get measured for uniforms yesterday afternoon. Those had just arrived today, along with a smattering of dresses Hermione had chosen out of a catalogue (with expressions of regret from the seamstress and tailors about possible fabric scarcity or shortage that was still nowhere near the levels she’d seen in non-magical WWII history books), basic school supplies and school books.

She had unpacked the picnic basket and remembered Tom’s lily-of-the-valley bouquet and her box of chocolate truffles (Mmm, chocolate truffles). The bouquet had been unexpectedly preserved—Tom must have cast a stasis charm on it as he helped her pack. She resolved to think about what to do with the bouquet later. Maybe she’d ask for another small bottle for the infirmary and just keep a small part of it? Yes, that would work.

Now, Hermione had carefully eased the crown out of her hair after casting some unsticking charms. She laid some spare books to support it on her bedside table, and then placed the crown on
top.

“You’re not tossing that out?” Lakshmi asked.

“No! I put the effort to make sure this whole wreath consists of only two vines. Throwing it away defeats the whole purpose of ensuring that they’re still alive.” She said. She dipped the trailing ends of the crown that were the cut ends into a spare glass she’d picked up from the supplies closet in the bathroom, now filled with water. She added some minerals into the glass to be sure.

Lakshmi gave a theatrical sigh “You made it yourself? How tedious. I thought Riddle had made it for you, for sure. Foiled by the boring real world yet again!”

Hermione shrugged. “Well, he did help me with some charms when I was stuck to remember some of them. It had been a while, you see. But it’s mostly my work.”

She observed it critically, casting another sticking charm to make sure the glass wouldn’t be knocked over. When she was satisfied, she dropped herself on her bed. The bed covers and linens on both unoccupied bed had been fresh, as the house elfs had been informed that she was discharged today.

The black-haired witch turned to her with gleaming amber eyes from her own bed. The expression really reminded Hermione of a cat on the prowl.

“You know, you should tell everyone that he did made it for you. Considering that he actually went on a picnic with you, I’m sure he doesn’t mind. All the girls’ jealousy would be such fun.”

Hermione’s warning look was a jaded one. She even made a point of fiddling with her wand.

“Do I look that naïve? They’ll form into mobs to kill me. In their perspective, it would also be completely justified. Who is this new girl, anyway? Where did she come from? And now, apparently Tom Riddle just publicly proposed to her. It’s got to be Amortentia.”

Lakshmi pouted.

“Damn, you know British flower language? That is so not fun.”

“Well, not for you it isn’t. It’s fun enough for me.” She replied sardonically, absolutely not admitting that she wouldn’t have the faintest clue about what the flowers mean if Tom hadn’t told her.

Hermione reminded herself to find a book on it in the library quickly.

“Anyway, they won’t kill you, Hermione. They’re not that stupid. I imagine that it wouldn’t really last that long, what with Riddle most probably clarifying things to keep public order. It’s not going to be that bad” She said.

The brunette witch snorted. “You try that yourself if you want it so much.”

“I’m afraid I’m not that brave,” Lakshmi demurred from under lowered eyelids. It would have been bashful had Hermione not known that she wouldn’t be afraid of something that pitiful.

“Stealing my words now, are you?”

“Well, I’m certainly not the one who wore a crown of orange blossoms and honeysuckle by Tom Riddle’s side while crossing the whole school. Considering that this is you, I would also bet this
month’s allowance that you have an expression of sheer ‘I don’t give a damn’ plastered on your face while you did that, which would give credence to the thought that, yes, you are that shameless to have stolen Tom Riddle from under the noses of the entire Hogwarts female populace.” The other witch stated.

“At least that’s how they see it. I’m sure you won’t be surprised about the number of people like me who really don’t give a damn—except maybe for pure schadenfreude.”

“Oh, bloody buggering hell.”

Hermione allowed herself the luxury of letting loose to curse. A lot. She ended up using up most of the vocabulary she picked up from Ron but rarely used because she had to set an example to the younger Aurors and Unspeakables (in the office, anyway). Well, there were no such concerns here.

Lakshmi didn’t even blink, though her grin did grow wider.

“You provide the most interesting entertainment in years, Darling. You have my sincere gratitude.”

“Do the students really have nothing else to do? Like, homework? Preparation for OWLS? NEWTS?” Hermione hissed. “Maybe trying to figure out how we’ll all survive and win this bloody war? Grindelwald is still out there and he’s certainly not just having tea with the King!”

The dark-haired witch blinked her thick eyelashes, curiously regarding Hermione. There was an almost apologetic cast to her mien.

“Dearest Hermione, do you really want me to answer that question?”

Hermione’s answer came in the form of an extended, frustrated scream, muffled by the pillow that she buried her face into.

Chapter End Notes

Lucretia Black is a canon character. She is exactly of the age described here, as is the rest of the Black family that Hermione is going to encounter sooner or later as she made her way across Hogwarts. If you were going to complain to me that this story has a surfeit of Blacks, the complaints are best addressed to J. K. Rowling, really, because she was the one who placed them in this time period. The endnote on Lakshmi is going to be in the next chapter that she shows up in, because this one is long enough as it is.

We don’t see enough Herbology-related spells in book canon, so I made some up. They’re genuine Latin words, by the way, and hopefully with the right declensions.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Dicots:** (Biology) a. k. a., *dicotyledons,* rarely, *dicotyls.* One of two groups that the clade of all flowering plants (*Angiosperms*) were formerly divided into. The name refers to one of the group’s typical characteristic; the seed has two embryonic leaves.
Unlike monocots, they can’t be said monophyletic (which meant that it includes a common ancestor and everything descended from said ancestor), because one clade actually splits off from the rest of the dicots earlier than monocots split off.

It basically consists of the magnoliids (of which one of them is magnolias, obviously, but also avocado and nutmeg) and the eudicots (the ‘true’ dicots, or the ones usually thought of as dicots and form the bulk of the group), along with a few small groups leftover/unplaced in those two. Easiest examples? The order Rosales has fruit plants such as apples, apricots, peaches, plums, cherries, etc. Also, roses, strawberries, raspberries and blackberries. Yum. Easily my favourite plant order.

**Monocots:** (Biology) a.k.a. monocotyledons, rarely, monocotyls. One of two groups that the clade of all flowering plants (Angiosperms) were formerly divided into. The name refers to one of the group’s typical characteristic; the seed has one embryonic leaf. Grasses are obviously here, which is why all the important food grains of humanity are here, as is sugarcane. This group also contains the various bananas, various palm trees (like the coconut tree), the orchids, lilies, tulips, daffodils, bluebells, various root herbs (ginger, turmeric & relatives), and many more.

**Phloem:** (Biology) the living tissue of a plant that transports the soluble organic compounds made during photosynthesis, in particular, the sugar sucrose, to parts of the plant where needed (Wikipedia). I see it as food transport from leaves, basically. Phloem is the innermost layer of the bark.

**Xylem:** (Biology) the tissue that transports water from the roots to everywhere else in the plant, sometimes transport other nutrients too. So, they’re the water transport pipes.

Hermione smiled. “Yes, and I feel thankful that I am here to welcome you.”

You know, the basic format of “XXXX, I presume,” when confirming someone’s identity the first time you met refers back to Henry Morton Stanley finding the lost Victorian explorer, anti-slavery activist and colonialist Dr. Livingstone, in the depths of the jungle of sub-Saharan Africa. The aforementioned Dr. Livingstone had lost contact to the outside world for six years, so it wasn’t a surprise that people feared he was dead.

Hermione knew that and was able to give Dr. Livingstone’s reply to Stanley’s greeting.

The words are humorous because Dr. Livingstone was certainly the first Englishman Stanley met in miles (and there was only a tiny, tiny chance that he was someone else other than Livingstone). Stanley was just too awkward to hug him in relief that he said that. Livingstone’s reply was obviously the humour of someone who’d been close to death too often (Livingstone was beset by various diseases in the last four years of his life). This is mostly sourced from Wikipedia (because my memory is not eidetic, obviously).
Chapter Summary

Hermione avoids the crowd once more. Stargazing in the astronomy tower. An accident occurs and Tom forces Hermione to confront something she'd missed all this time. Supper and the art of making sandwiches. In which Tom procures some insurance.

Chapter Notes

There was a guest reply to Chapter 8 in FFNet that I found interesting. When I finished writing the reply to it on that site, I realised that my answer was long enough and might even be enlightening (in terms of the possible directions that I'm pulling this fic towards) for some readers to be interested in it. So, I thought I'd cross-post it here, with the relevant part of the review included. Otherwise, feel free to skip directly to the story.

- A longer reply to the Guest who gave a perceptive review in Chapter 8: You said [Oh.. this is a bit unusual, usually Tom/Hermione ship include a large part of denial, Hermione trying to bring Tom to the light side or Tom dragging Hermione to the dark side.]

Congrats, you've just found out what I tend to avoid like the plague—unnecessary angst and drama. The reason why I don't particularly enjoy the romance genre in fanfiction, particularly when the characters are from diametric sides, is because I mostly feel like banging my head on a desk whenever a main character enters denial-land, or "I can't fall in love with him/her because reasons."

Look, (insert character name here), when you're already unreasonably attracted, that's too late. It's easier just accepting it and decide what to do with this new development. It might be avoiding the person because you're not looking forward to having a relationship with them and hope the feeling would die away with the distance, or actually trying to get a date and see if you both would actually fit together in a relationship. It might be asking your friends to introduce you to a lot of new people in the hopes that you can find someone else you're even more attracted to than Person B. Really, I'm happy for whatever plan gets chosen and acted on; it's certainly better than just pretending/denying that the feeling is not there because that's ignoring the bloody problem. It's just going to bite you in the backside sooner or later. If the character still gets surprised when their whole denial effort blew up in their face, it's no longer the urge to headdesk that I have to stifle, but that to bang my head against the nearest wall.

Secondly, 'trying to bring the partner to the dark/light side' thing smacks of either a) rather naive idealism to me, or b) someone who's been trained (and probably partly indoctrinated) for the purpose of turning foreign agents by counterintelligence agencies, since turning people to a very different side than the one they started in does require some efforts in, hmm, reeducating them. These two motives aren't mutually exclusive. Keep in mind that I'm definitely not trying to write high fantasy here and is
sticking to an approach with more realism. I may or may not elaborate on Hermione's pragmatism through her perspective in-story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

11 Uncomfortable Truths

Hermione’s stubbornness and remembrance of Luna had made her pick up her flower crown and wore it when she went out again, all the way through the afternoon. It didn’t matter if she was casually reading in the common room or was presently meandering back to the library.

The blatant stares were starting to get on her nerves, though. Her mood had only improved slightly when she met Professor Merrythought, a woman with a warm smile and a shock of white hair. The Defence professor beamed the moment she saw the intertwining red-yellow and white blossoms, admiring her taste in accessories. The older witch only recommended adding a spell or two for resilience, to ensure that the flowers won’t fall easily, and Hermione did just that after she thanked the teacher for that good idea. After that, they simply set off to Diagon Alley for another round of shopping (she still didn’t have any combat-worthy boots).

Yet Hermione had only been back for ten minutes before she stumbled upon one of those Hogwarts idiots, outright gaping at her. The experience soured her from the idea of dining in the Great Hall tonight. Perhaps she’ll have an impromptu picnic yet again, if only for herself. She’ll pack some food from the kitchen and then make her way to one of the astronomy classes in astronomy tower.

Hermione had been going out of the Ravenclaw tower with Lakshmi when the other witch noted that she wasn’t going in the direction of the Great Hall.

“Once more to the library, eh?” Lakshmi asked.

“No, not really. I’ll just walk around. Maybe drop in at the astronomy tower.”
“You’re not having dinner?”

“Oh, I plan on getting some food from the kitchen. It’s just…” the brunette sighed, rubbing her forehead. Her dormmate waited for her to collect her thoughts together with unexpected patience. “I’m just not in the mood to encounter the more foolish and dense denizens of Hogwarts. I’m sure most of the people here are great, really. But some are simply…”

The brunette faltered, ending her statement with a soundless shrug. Lakshmi must have recognised her agitation in the way her fists occasionally clenched, or how her shoulders sometimes stiffened, for she replied with ease.

“Sure. Just make sure you don’t get back too late. We do have curfew you know?”

“I know, Lakshmi, I know.” It was on the list of regulations that Tom had handed to her on their first few meetings.

“And there’s no guarantee that the prefect you might stumble upon on your way back would be Riddle, who would certainly let you off scot-free.” Lakshmi said with a slight grin.

Hermione snorted, unamused. “Right. Say hi to the others for me at dinner.”

“I will.” She waved Hermione off.

It was only after she made her way to the kitchen that Hermione realised Lakshmi hadn’t even blinked at the fact that she had been wandering around Hogwarts with a crown of flowers on her head. Hermione would’ve forgotten that she’d been wearing it if the scent of honeysuckle and orange blossoms didn’t delicately wreath her from time to time. Lakshmi has a higher tolerance for the weird than she seemed.

She didn’t dwell on it for too long once she reached the kitchen. Hermione had greeted the elves cheerfully, surprising them with her second effort to remember the names of any elves she’d forgotten. She made an effort to memorise all their names, even if she did say that she probably wouldn’t be able to remember all of them at once. It was rather sad to see that they were excited for something so simple.

Her supper was certainly packed in no time because of it.

After that, she was left to wander and find an unused astronomy class for her purposes.

Not all Hogwarts students realised that the castle actually had more than one astronomy classroom —though arguably, most who thought that way noticeably lack common sense. Technically, there was only one tower, but a little jiggering of space ensures that the windows and retractable ceiling of a class on any floor show the vistas from the top of the tower, ensuring that all classes have the best view for observation.

The technical proof on how this is managed is much longer than the margins of Hermione’s essays can contain. Suffice to say that she had enough of an understanding about it to know that if she wanted some time to herself and enjoy viewing the stars on her own, she could pick any unused class in the astronomy tower and it would serve her as well as the ones most often used by the astronomy professor.

The doors of one opened easily with a slight push—like all astronomy classes, all the walls except for the one that covered the winding stairs were the tower’s outside walls, and all the outer walls were covered with French windows to allow a full 360 degrees view. A step out in any direction would lead to the balcony (observation deck) that ringed the tower in a continuous circle. There
was only the lightest of dusts over the tables, which showed just how zealous the house elks of Hogwarts are at fulfilling their tasks. She cast *Lumos* and then tapped her wand over several lighting fixtures to light them—she didn’t need that much light, just enough to see her way to the windows without tripping over chairs or stools.

The wind was refreshingly cool on her face. She wryly thought that she did remember to bring her jacket this time.

She placed the basket on top of the bannister and then climbed up to sit on it.

Hermione didn’t know how long she spent sitting on the balcony, her legs dangling down in the air, the treetops far below her as she ate sandwiches and pies in turn with only the barest acknowledgement of their flavours. She entertained herself by watching the sun setting slowly at some time after five, admiring the bright pinks and peach glows of the sky that slowly flowed into rich purples. She tried to find the Venus once the sun was down and its glare no longer obscuring the paler celestial objects, and yet she failed because the planet had set faster than the sun.

That implied that it probably rose faster than the sun too and would be visible right before dawn. *Hmm.* She supposed it was being the morning star more than it was the evening star right now.

The calming breeze and the wide, wide sky made it easy for Hermione to lose herself in observations and thought just then.

‘-

“Hermione.”

She pulled away from watching the stars come out and fill the sky with their innumerable lights. He stepped forward from the darkened doorway, the warm glow of the lanterns flattered his pale skin better than she imagined harsh electric lights would, making him seem more human. He was dressed for dinner, with a dark green waistcoat that she suspected was made of silk.

“Tom. How did you get here?”

“By the stairs.” When she kept staring at him for a little while, unamused, he gave slightly more information. “Your dormmate told me of where you were going.”

Well, she knew he was diligent for the things he cared about. Even if she had no idea why, it was obvious that finding her this evening was in his interest. The part of her that was taught by Daphne bemoaned her rather simple dress of celadon that she’d worn to the picnic that would definitely lose in elegance to his current suit. She was too aware that her curls weren’t tied up in any form and had fallen wildly down her back. A savvier part of her insisted that she managed to pull off looking ‘unearthly’ rather well, what with the flower crown she still wore.

Hermione huffed inwardly, still not quite convinced. She probably looked like a deranged dryad right now.

“Watching the stars?” He asked.

She nodded, looking up again. “At first, I came to watch the sunset, after that I stayed for the stars.” It was difficult for her not to feel pensive and she sighed.

“It was just like the old times. Luna used to pull me to the rooftops or the nearest available tower to see the stars whenever she thinks I need distracting or if I was thinking myself into circles. We’d start from the brightest constellations, if we were in the city, though we can find the fainter
constellations if we were in the countryside. The stars are also comfortably familiar—wherever you are, however much your surroundings change, they stay the same.”

Perhaps that was the reason why she was being maudlin. If she didn’t look down and see that she was in a different Hogwarts, she might even convince herself that she was here with Harry and Ron. Or maybe she was at the roof of the house she shared with Malina, with Malina and Luna—each of them doing it for fun as well as their own respective projects. She heard his steps approaching, stopping at some point behind her, but it did not concern much. Tom placed his left hand next to hers on the balcony but leaned no further into her space.

Pieces of pastry fell from her hand and she watched the paper-thin pieces twist and turn in the air as they fall before the darkness swallowed them. She scattered several more pieces on purpose, just to see the fragments dance in the wind again.

“Why don’t we get down and have a proper dinner in the Great Hall?” He asked, to her left.

“I’m already somewhat full from all the food the elves packed for me.”

“I heard that you were avoiding the hall for a particular reason.”

She huffed. Must Lakshmi tell Tom everything? Then again, she probably thought that there was no harm about it, and Hermione couldn’t exactly argue with that. There was no harm about it.

“I don’t want to be someone else but me, and if I see one more idiot I today, I might blow my top.”

“We can go anywhere else but the Great Hall if that’s what you wish.”

Hermione glanced to the side. Why was he suddenly being so solicitous? “I don’t know. I don’t think I want to be anywhere but here.”

Here, she could almost convince herself that her friends were merely out of sight, not gone.

As if to make her point, she stood up from her sitting position—not by setting her feet on the ground, but by standing on the edge of the balustrade. A small remaining piece of peach pie was on her hand, and she deftly stepped over his hand and walked several steps away. To her left were the tree tops of the Forbidden Forest thatbrushed against the castle on this side, hemming the grey stones like prickly waves of a churning cove. The darkened grounds also hid just how high the tower stood from ground level, else she might’ve been suddenly gained altophobia.

But at this height, she could also see the sea of green spread far and wide, with a distant twinkling of lights that she suspected was Hogsmeade. She understood in that moment why Harry loved flying. It was the prospect of freedom under the open sky and no boundaries or limits to hold you back—

“Hermione.”

Tom’s voice pulled her back from her musings. “What?”

“Please get down.”

He sounded like he meant it, which surprised her enough to turn around.

Her foot met empty air instead of stone and Hermione slipped.

She swung out her left hand, scrambling to catch the balcony’s edge. Her wand was in her right
hand, and even as she fell down, she could cast flame whip fast enough to catch the edge of the railings. The way her right shoulder yanked was a comforting sensation that told her that the flame whip had managed to grip something. It was only getting up that was going to be a problem. Hermione couldn’t easily cast any other spell without releasing the flame whip. If she did, then she would need to start considering what she could do to make her fall hurt less, or not hurt at all…

Fortunately for Hermione, Tom cast a Summoning Spell on her. The first jerk was uncomfortable, but it was rather smooth sailing right until she crashed right into him and they both toppled down on the floor.

“If you really want to die, couldn’t you at least have the grace to do so when I wanted to kill you?” She had never heard him sound so sarcastic. His hand firmly gripped her shoulder.

“I don’t want to die!” Hermione countered.

“Right, and any sane person would have sat on the balcony’s edge.”

“I was fine. I could use Wingardium Leviosa to slow my fall—it worked on a falling quidditch player.”

“And a quidditch pitch already has a hundred and one charms to slow down fall and buffer the impact! You can guarantee that the grounds here wouldn’t have any.”

Her face heated up because she knew he was right. They were sitting almost face-to-face on the floor now, one of her legs sprawled over his, while Tom’s expression was dark. His next words held a coldness she didn’t expect, but it was the words themselves that was a direct hit.

“I should’ve known. You’re as selfish as anyone else.”

Hermione gaped. “What the hell?”

“Does it amuse you, Curie, to overturn someone’s future completely and walk away? Laugh at the wreckage you’ve carelessly left behind?”

“I do not do that.” She hissed. She had grabbed his lapels without thinking.

“It’s your current plan, isn’t it? For all your promises, you’d leave me without so much as a by-your-leave.”

“I’m still here and right in front of you!”

“Not for long. Only until you chose death. Your memories hold more sway with you than the living—your dead friends hold more sway with you, so much that I suspect, you’d rather choose to be with them than be here.”

She drew a sharp intake of breath.

“You are suicidal, Hermione.”

He could have struck her physically right there and then and cut her less. Hermione stood up quickly, her cheeks red with rage while he pulled himself up with no less speed.

“I am not! I know a hundred and one spells that would allow me to fall safely from a great height. Since I’ve already managed to hang on with the flame whip, I have more than enough time to come up with a good solution. In fact, I can demonstrate that to you right now!”
“No.”

“Ha! You’re afraid to be proven wrong?”

“You’re only proving me right.” He snapped.

Hermione’s had gripped the bannister with one hand, fully prepared to pull herself up to it once more, but Tom had grabbed hold of her and wasn’t letting go. He wasn’t easy to dislodge, and soon she’d realise that it would require a full-blown grapple to escape.

“What are you doing?” She hissed.

“Apparently, stopping you from doing something stupid.” His expression was the distaste of someone whose friends had abandoned him to shovel manure.

“And I’ve heard enough of your insults that I’m going to prove them false right now.” Her arms had been pressing outwards against his for some time, always varying her position and trying to find a weak spot. Yet his restraint was more resilient than she thought as he changed his own hold whenever she changed hers.

“And I was only pointing out something you’re too blind to see.”

Hermione dropped her knees and let herself fall to the ground, surprising him with the sudden change in their centres of gravity while her hands grabbed his arms. Tom didn’t adapt fast enough and fell forward as she went down; she deftly used his forward motion to throw him back over her shoulders. Her sensei would be proud.

(All thanks to Harry’s insistence on getting martial arts instructors for the Auror corps).

Hermione stood up. She had only climbed half way up the balcony before she was tackled down again. Her breath was knocked out of her lungs as her back hit the floor and she could feel his weight over her. A distant part of her was dryly remarking that this seemed to be turning into a new habit of his.

“Let go!”

“Only if you promise to stay away from the balcony.” He bit out.

“You accused me of lying to you and you won’t even let me prove you wrong?” She was incredulous. “You jerkass.”

Something in what she said irritated Tom even more and he cursed.

“Oh, for the love of—”

And then his mouth crashed over hers, a culmination of the frustration and edge he felt. Hermione was only surprised for a second before her outrage rose up again and she met him move for move, for the aggravation that she felt was certainly no less than his. She was all too aware of the feeling that they’d been dancing on the brink—it was there from the moment they exchanged words with the precision of knife throwers letting their daggers fly. This was a debate in nips and tongues, of heat generated by anger.

Channelling all that physically towards each other was inarguably cathartic for both of them. It was probably why when he pulled away soon enough, gazing down at her, his voice was more composed even if there was still colour high on his cheeks.
“Are you going to actually listen now?”

Hermione gingerly retracted her left hand from the nape of his neck (how did it get there?), slowly catching her breath. His eyes were dark, the pupils fully dilated. She closed her eyes for a second to regain her composure and focus, to not automatically stare at his lips.

(It’s all just the emotions running high in the moment.)

“It depends whether you’re going to keep accusing me.” She said.

He rolled his eyes and she thought she heard him sigh as he sat up.

“Let me tell you a story, then.”

When she opened her eyes again, she could see him offering his hand. She took it, the movement felt more natural in that moment than it had ever been. He pulled her up and didn’t release that hand afterwards.

“Alright.”

“A friend of mine had a father who was an Auror.” Tom began the tale. Hermione leaned back against the bannisters, the leg farthest from him pulled up against her chest. “The man joined the force for his love of the hunt, of finding and catching a challenging prey—for he was bright and bored and he scarcely needed to enter profession to earn a living, considering how prosperous his family’s estate was. One day, a family member of one of his prey decided to pay him back for his favour and kidnapped his wife and child. It was a tight chase. He was in suspense for weeks during the process—something that you needn’t be, as I can tell you the ending easily right now.”

His neutral tone made it difficult to discern the fates of the unfortunates in the story, so she asked despite her own misgivings.

“What happened?”

“Pain, blood, death, in that particular order. I’m sure you’re not too interested in the gory details even if I can provide it to you.” Tom said calmly, and he was right about her preference too. She did not delight in suffering; she had no need to know the exact way it was inflicted on the man’s family. “Afterwards, people say that he was so brave, to be able to move on from such tragedy. He threw himself into his work, caught the guilty people and went on to catch even more criminals from that point on. All in all, he seemed fine.”

Hermione nodded slowly, following the story but unsure of where he was going to take this.

“If there was a dangerous dark wizard or witch that needed to be questioned or apprehended, he was always the first to volunteer. He didn’t care if the situation was dangerous or if the risks were high. He’d been hospitalised more a few times after that, and always he returned to the field whenever he recovered.”

He paused, dark eyes staring at her, and she had to force herself to breathe after she realised she was unconsciously holding her breath.

“And?”

“How long do you think he had until the hunt claimed him?”

“I don’t understand…”
Tom’s gaze didn’t waver from her, his tone still dulcet even if every point he made had the precision of a scalpel cutting out the heart away from the lungs.

“He might insist that he was not suicidal, but I don’t see how his carelessness over his life was a significant improvement over it. He courted death. He practically danced with his own demise with every close shave, every near-impossible case that he took on himself.” He leaned forward now and took her closest hand in his.

“Now, Hermione, tell me. Is that what you’re going to do? Or can you give me your promise that you would not be reckless with your life while I still live?”

It was to Tom’s credit that he didn’t push her for an answer this time, content to simply stare at her hand that he was holding. She did not know what thoughts occupied his mind even as his thumb idly traced patterns at the back of her palm, particularly over the parts skinned when she tried to grasp the outer walls of the tower. The witch had the weirdest idea that he was going to continue holding her hand hostage until she came up with some sort of answer.

“I really did come here to look at the stars.” Hermione said. He glanced up at her and said nothing. “And I was being impatient with some of the foolishness the other students display.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t.” Tom said.

“I know. I still needed to say it.” She said.

His reply was a wordless hum.

“And I’m not suicidal.” That earned her a sceptical, though silent, look. “It’s true! I’m not. I’m just…sad, I guess. I miss them.”

She was lost in her own thoughts. He gave her time. When Tom spoke up next, his voice was soft.

“Tell me, then, would you regret being able to meet your dead friends sooner than you expected?”

She hadn’t even realised that she’d looked away until she felt a light tap on her cheek and she turned back to him. Hermione supposed she could say ‘no’, but she would be lying. And she so disliked saying untruths about something so essential to herself, lest she inadvertently believed the lie and became blinded to her own nature.

“It’s as I thought. They’re more important to you than this castle full of strangers, isn’t it?”

He didn’t need to say that she valued her memories more than him or her newer acquaintances as he turned away from her. She wanted to say that it wasn’t strictly true—if she was too lost in her memories, the thought of changing his future wouldn’t have even occurred to her.

Hermione sighed.

“Luna always said that I need to live in the moment more. That I need to appreciate what I have and not spend all my time mourning my losses or tirelessly reaching into the vision I have of the future.”

He might be mostly looking ahead, but she knew he was listening in the slight tilt of his head.

“If she could see me now, she would’ve told me that I can always make new friends.” Hermione
admitted.

A few moments passed before he turned back to her and spoke up.

“And?”

“I can make that promise to you, that I won’t be careless with my life, but I’ll have you know that it’s the sort of promise you can only make to your real friend.” She said.

His brows creased at her statement, and she realised she had to clarify it for him. He was perhaps one of the few people who didn’t immediately see the implications of her statement.

“If I’m going to be your friend, Tom, you also have to be mine.” She said.

“I think I did fine on that part. I’ve just prevented your accidental suicide, didn’t I?” He asked dryly.

“I’m not suicidal!”

She glared and he smirked, probably because he’d successfully baited her, yet she did understand the point he was trying to make. Hermione would’ve been more pissed off at him for all their previous shouting and his accusations if she hadn’t managed to recognise by now what his fear-driven anger looked like. She couldn’t even be angry at him right now even when she wanted to.

“You know what? You absolutely suck at showing concern, Tom. You should practice more.” She said sardonically. “It’s excellent for your first try, though. Thanks for caring.”

The incredulous expression on his face was priceless, and Hermione couldn’t hold back her laughter at that. She didn’t think she’d ever seen him without his polished façade before—and she wasn’t talking about his dark lord side either.

“I don’t care.”

“Yeah, sure.” She managed to choke out between chuckles.

“I don’t.” He insisted as she picked herself up. Tom followed suit at that. “If you were to die, I’d still be on that road to death you saw before. Currently I’m no better than a traveller without a roadmap and who knows how many dead ends I’ll have to go through before finding the path I’m looking for. That’s not including the probability of fatal paths that exist and—are you even listening?”

She turned back at the door, waiting for him. This time, their arms linked with barely a thought.

“Oh, I understand completely. I’m Miss Map to you, right?”

“Precisely.”

Her innocuous smile still earned her the occasional flat look from his direction, but she didn’t change it at all. If he can push her buttons, the good news was that she knew what pushed his buttons as well.

They walked out of the astronomy tower, picnic basket included. By some wordless agreement, they talked of nothing much beyond the lessons and classes.

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They supped in one of the greenhouses.

How Tom managed to get the keys to one, she had no idea (his only answer was a mysterious
smile, and she wasn’t about to feed his ego by actually asking). Yet she certainly wasn’t turning
down the opportunity to sit among some jasmine bushes. What she did know, was that he listened
to her statement that she was not up to meeting the crowds at the Great Hall again (or to use Tom’s
terminology, apparently ‘not fit for company’), and he adjusted accordingly by finding a different
but suitable place. Their supper was thus a humble affair that suited her.

Well, the fragrance tropical flowers, the single lantern lighting the place and the innumerable
bright stars wove the illusion that of the secret garden of some sultan straight out of a thousand and
one nights, where a princess enchanted into a bird by daylight was imprisoned. She shook her head
before her imagination ran away with her.

The meal was mostly cold meats and pies, though there was enough variety in bread, cheese, meat,
condiments, sauces and several vegetables for her to construct almost any kind of sandwich she
wanted. There were some bottles of butterbeer. The kitchen elfs had outdone themselves yet again.
A few years (as she remembered) of living either alone or with a friend meant she was too used to
surviving on her own haphazard cooking—she was more aware of the blessed cornucopia that is
Hogwarts’ kitchen now than she had been when she was younger and had nothing to compare it to.

From the ease that Tom sliced bread loaves, cut meat and spread dressing (not a drop spilt, and she
envied the evenness of his slices), while focusing completely on her conversation, he probably had
no idea what this competence in making his own meal told her. His first reflex wasn’t even that of
most purebloods like Draco’s, which was to wait for the hostess to prepare the food, even in a
picnic. He even took one loaf away from her with an appalled glance after he saw how she had
roughly cut the first slice away.

“Are you trying to bludgeon the bread to submission?” She didn’t understand why he had to look
dismayed. It was just bread, for goodness’ sakes.

“No! I just need another slice—”

“Oh no you don’t, Hermione. Stop. It’s not firewood, so don’t hack.” Tom criticised.

“My bread is fine.”

“It’s lopsided and the thicker part looks torn through than cut. It’s as appetising as a random
kitchen sponge you’ve just picked up from the cleaning bucket.” His reply was downright acerbic.

He was even looking down on her poor bread! She folded her arms defensively.

“Oh, fine! Show me how it’s done, then.”

Even as she harrumphed in disagreement, she did let him show her how to cut properly. It started
with choosing the right knife instead of just picking the first average-looking one that drew her
attention (“there is a reason the serrated knife is used”). She didn’t know that making sure it was at
least a third longer than the width of the loaf was even necessary, or that if the bread was soft it
would be better if the knife was longer.

“Oh. And here I was wondering why the kitchen elfs gave us so many knives.” She mused.

She could hear him huff. “Obviously. Have you been raised by wolves all this time?”

Tom easily ignored the fact that she was trying to burn him on the spot with the force of her glare.
They only started to talk about other subjects once he was done casting aspersions on her barbarous sandwich-making skills. It wasn’t her fault that modern supermarkets provided cut loaves! He was the one who was being as exacting about domestic skills as her mother.

The way that Tom actually looked like he enjoyed his simple meal made her suspect that his own basis of comparison was no less stark than hers, if not more so. It struck her that his orphanage probably experienced the full bore of wartime rationing. Compared to that, any meal out of Hogwarts’ kitchen were feasts fit for a king. His skill convinced her that he had his share of chores to do when he was in the orphanage too, which probably included preparing food for the younger kids.

Hermione had to look down and focus on her own sandwich as she replied to some issue of transfiguration. Even if the Ravenclaw managed to keep her tone normal, she didn’t know if she would manage to successfully hide all hints of pity from her expression, and so it was better if he didn’t see her face at all until she managed to compose herself in a moment or two. From what she’d known of him so far, she thought he’d hate it rather than welcome it.

As reluctant as she was to acknowledge it, she had to admit that Tom was actually excellent company, especially with the breadth of conversation topics and the full extent of his courteousness—that is, when he was not being sarcastic. Even then, he was still amusing, and it wasn’t as if she didn’t have her own scathing wit when she was annoyed enough to stop being nice or polite.

Hermione had to keep reminding herself that he was most certainly a practitioner of several branches of dark arts at this point.

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“I can find my way back to the Ravenclaw Tower on my own.” Hermione said.

“I’m sure you can.”

It did not stop him from escorting her there. She knew that staring him down wouldn’t make him go way—she’d done that several times to no effect.

“Tom,”

“Does it occur to you that I might actually have other affairs of my own to settle at the Ravenclaw Tower?” His tone was mild as he said this.

She had to admit that it was entirely plausible and she said so, but follow-up questions about what exactly his business was had not been answered satisfactorily.

When he asked Hermione to find ‘Misses Delacour and Chakravarty to join us’, she was curious but did went off to her dorm to look for them. If Olive Hornby and her posse gave her the stink eye the moment she stepped into the common room, especially once they noticed that Tom was casually waiting outside, the brunette couldn’t care less.

She found Eugenie and Lakshmi alright. Eugenie was surprised that Tom might be looking for her, while Lakshmi was undoubtedly intrigued. The minor mystery deepened when he asked them for their patience and a little of their time to find a slightly more private surrounding before he’ll clarify his intention.

One corridor later and the four of them found themselves in one of the many unused classrooms that was prevalent in Hogwarts.
“Thank you for coming at such a short notice.” He said.

“Oh, it’s no problem at all,” Eugenie assured him. Lakshmi mostly only shrugged.

“It’s fine.”

“Ladies, I’m afraid I would have to ask a favour,” Tom said. Hermione was about to ask why she even needed to be there if that was the case, if his gaze didn’t imply that there would be answers coming. He was back to being the respectable prefect right now.

“Which is?” Lakshmi asked.

“Please be Hermione’s friends.”

Hermione closed her mouth before she started imitating a goldfish. It was the last thing she expected him to say.

“It’s always been my pleasure to be Hermione’s friend,” Eugenie assured him with a warm smile. Lakshmi seemed to be having more fun from staring back and forth between Hermione’s disbelief and Tom’s apparent seriousness and sincerity.


“You did say that you miss your friends and you don’t have any here.” He answered, as if his solution was anywhere in the vicinity of normal.

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean you get to be ham-handed and—” She stopped herself and took a deep breath before she started yelling at the bloody interfering wizard. “I can make friends on my own, you…you lummox.”

She thought she could see his slight smile growing when she became so irritated that she ran out of words.

“There was no guarantee that it would be fast enough to counteract your recklessness.” Tom answered. He dodged the swipe she’d just aimed at his shoulder.

“Recklessness?” Eugenie asked, confused.

“Oh, yes. You should’ve seen what she was doing when I found her this even—”

“I was star watching! In the astronomy tower!” She yelped, lunging at him. He might be fast enough to avoid her grasp, but she managed to cover his mouth with her hand. He was more amused than affronted since he wasn’t trying that hard to get her hand off. In fact, she could swear that he was silently laughing.

Of course, that was when Hermione turned around and saw that both Eugenie and Lakshmi had eyebrows that rose up to their hairlines. Eugenie herself was covering her mouth with both hands, while Lakshmi was sitting at the edge of the teacher’s table with a wide grin on her face.

“Well, Riddle, I know we’re not exactly friends, but I swear I’ve never seen you get so cosy with anyone before.” She drawled.

“Um, this isn’t what it looks like?” Hermione sheepishly said, even as she slowly stopped yanking his tie.

“Why not? It looks like you’re good friends.” The blonde Ravenclaw answered innocently.
Lakshmi bit her lip and waggled her eyebrows at that, clearly holding back her laughter even as she answered. “Yes. Very...good...friends.”

Hermione couldn’t have pulled her hands faster if it was burnt.

Unfortunately, she forgot that it meant Tom was free to speak.

“She was lonely this evening. I don’t think I can be of much use since we’re not even in the same house, so you see, I’m worried for her.” His words sounded so genuine and caring. Eugenie was already nodding fervently at his request.

The tone was so alien to what she knew him to be that it gave her goose bumps.

“Cut out that fake smile! You’re making me want to hurl.” Hermione hissed as she glared sideways, sure that neither Lakshmi nor Eugenie could hear her.

He had the audacity to grin, and he still used that oh-so-concerned tone even as he spoke softly only for her ears. “But I do care so much about your well-being, Hermione.”

“And pigs may fly.”

Tom shrugged, his tone turning more neutral. “Consider them as my insurance, then.”

Their gaze met, and she knew that even if he hadn’t said anything about the main causes of their argument this evening, it was still at the forefront of his mind. She tightened her jaw, realising that she couldn’t exactly lay his accusations to rest easily or prove him false. He’d surprisingly managed to find a blind spot of hers at so short an acquaintance. Then again, their conversations had blasted through small talk, whirled past mundane concerns, and right into life-and-death territory. She’d stared into the abyss of his soul unflinching and the abyss had stared back into hers.

They had a brutal honesty with each other that most people don’t even have after years of friendship.

Lakshmi cleared her throat and raised her voice.

“You know, if the two of you want to look into each other’s eyes the whole night and whisper sweet nothings to each other, you really don’t need us as an audience.” She waved one finely manicured hand carelessly at them, her amber eyes half-lidded. “Not that I mind, to be honest. Go on. Pretend we’re not even here. I haven’t had this much entertainment in ages.”

Eugenie blushed and looked away while it only made Hermione stare at the ceiling in despair.

“Merlin’s underpants, Lakshmi! Your imagination doesn’t so much as run away from you as win the Olympics!”

The brunette dearly wanted to wipe off the smug smile from Tom’s face.

Lakshmi smirked. “Well, it’s not just my imagination if you’ve laid your hands on him in front of us all this time, is it?”

Hermione let out a frustrated growl, threw her hands in the air, and then stalked out of the class without further ado. Tom turned back to the two remaining Ravenclaw witches, as courteous as ever.
“I hope my request isn’t too much trouble for you, then, Delacour? Chakravarty?”

“It has never been any trouble at all. I’d be happy to.” Eugenie insisted.

“I’m intrigued enough for now to accept, Riddle.” Lakshmi said. “Though now that Hermione isn’t here…what is this recklessness that you mention?”

She was not a Ravenclaw for nothing, and she was always perceptive at the prospect of new information. Tom leaned back against the table nearest to him and think, picking parts of it, considering whether it was to his liking and discarding those that was not.

He carefully began his tale. “As you are aware, I was looking for Hermione earlier this evening when I met you, and you informed me of her plans…”

René Descartes might have posited way back in the Age of Reason that mental processes can exist outside the body, and that the body without the mind cannot think, but the scientific progress of subsequent eras would batter the position of such extreme dualism until only a shadow of it remained.

Hermione’s education on wizarding healing as well as anatomy and physiology has provided her with plenty of cases that spoke of the reverse. If the mind is separate from the body, why do people who have experienced damage to the Broca’s area of their brain have difficulty expressing themselves through language that they’ve used without any problem before? Or witness the famous case of Phineas Gage, who somehow improbably survived an accident that destroyed a good chunk of his left frontal lobe and was afterwards reported by his friends and family to be a different man than he was before.

It is not difficult to acknowledge that the mind—and even the self—emerges from the structure and chemistry of the brain, even as one acknowledges that life experience and learning constantly alters it as well.

Why Hermione thought it prudent to run through these old memories as she made her way back to the Ravenclaw Tower reflected her effort to calm herself—she hadn’t completely recovered her equilibrium after all that happened this evening. She did not think her temper was volatile, nor did she think that she was impatient. At the very least, she didn’t think she was after her Hogwarts years were passed.

Yet she clearly had exchanged harsh words with Tom before and acted rashly, and she could not even blame him for this. He’d been unexpectedly reasonable before he also blew his top. Hadn’t she also walked out of her companions just now without giving them much explanation? Caught in a snit of her own?

She groaned. Her cheeks coloured as she covered her face with her hands.

Hermione found that even if she knew all these things about how the mind emerged from the brain, she hadn’t exactly understood what it meant. Whatever neural architecture that her brain has that reflected the memories and skills she’d kept, no matter the structural similarity or dissimilarity between her current brain and her brain before the accident that landed her here and damaged it, she could not deny that she’d missed a change that was just as significant.

Her body was one that fitted perfectly for fifth-year Hermione, not Unspeakable Hermione who’d started to settle to her position and feel comfortable in her occupation a few years after she entered
the Ministry.

Of course, the largest chunk of her memories and her sense of self was that of an ambitious and industrious witch a few years out of Hogwarts. That was beyond doubt. For any problem she might encounter as a Hogwarts student, she can come up with more alternative solutions and actions to it just due to a few more years of experience than other student of her physical age. Not to mention all the skills she possessed (of which not all she could account for, nor remember how exactly she acquired them). She would never be as foolish or desperate as an actual Romeo or Juliet—wherein faking your death and not informing your impulsive lover of the subterfuge sounded like an excellent idea.

Yet her brain was part and parcel of her current body; it was a continuous part of it, not something separate or disconnected. Adolescence was a period where you’re constantly bombarded by a cocktail of hormones, along with the accompanying mood swings that come with it. She had no doubt that she was experiencing more-or-less the same thing that other people of similar age to her body experienced. Many hormones can easily traverse the blood brain barrier with impunity, not to mention that there are also parts of the brain without normal blood brain barrier that would allow hormones with larger molecules to pass (see: circumventricular organs). Many brain cells are also hormonally active. Her brain was practically bathed in adolescent hormones.

Simply put, instead of cogito ergo sum, she had to conclude that corporeo ergo sum. ‘I am embodied, therefore I am’. Her emotions and their intensity were also the product of the youth of her body, not just the rational musings of her mind.

My body is that of a teenager, therefore, my emotional reactions are approximately close to one too.

The next time Lakshmi and Eugenie caught Hermione was when she was reading in the Ravenclaw common room—there was no one else who wore a flower crown on her head without the slightest care in the world.

The brunette witch had all the appearance of being absorbed in her reading, or at other times, whatever it was that she was seriously writing on a scroll. Lakshmi would wager that she was not as oblivious to her surroundings as she seemed from the way she still replied Olive Hornby’s occasional question sent in her direction with aplomb. Eugenie would rather the other blonde stop, but since Hermione seems to have it all under control, she only huffed at Hornby and then walked up to their room.

Lakshmi found a nice, unobtrusive spot to keep watching (of course). Sure enough, it was not long before Hornby spoke up again.

“Curie is such a great reader, I’m sure, because how else would anyone explain her amazing scores?” Hornby said.

“The mastery of magic requires as much practise as it does theory, Hornby. But I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you that, right?” Hermione absently replied. She hadn’t taken her eyes off her book.

“Did you have a good day, Curie?” Hornby asked sweetly.

“I did.”

“It’s hard to have a bad day when the company is so pleasant, isn’t it?”
She’s only glanced up from her book once before she returned to it easily.

“I admit that Tom is very good company.”

Hermione’s remark sounded careless, but the slight twitch of her lips as Hornby fell into appalled silence at the implied familiarity of her words assured Lakshmi that the transfer student was fully aware of what she said.

“Don’t you think it terrible when people impose themselves on your company just because you’re being unfailingly polite?”

“Oh, very terrible indeed.”

“I wouldn’t even dream of using a familiar form of address with a gentleman merely based on a few weeks of acquaintance.” Hornby stated.

“I wouldn’t dream of stopping the gentleman’s pleasure of using my first name.” Hermione replied. “Nor would I be so unkind to give the impression that I am ungrateful about his considerate attention by not reciprocating his pleasure.”

Lakshmi covered her mouth to stop from laughing at that last hit. Hermione had clearly checkmated Hornby there, as the only way she could defeat the brunette’s position was by proving that the other witch’s claims of familiarity was false, or showing that the blonde could claim the greater familiarity with the aforementioned gentleman. Obviously, Hornby could claim neither.

It also needed to be said that the innuendo was sublime. Lakshmi loved innuendo. It’s always nice to find out that there’s another sharp-tongued student she can sharpen her wits against.

To no one’s surprise, Olive Hornby beat a hasty retreat after that. Of course, she merely looked as if paying attention to Hermione was beyond her, and that Hermione should feel sorry that she was not invited to her circle. But to any observer with a functioning brain, it was clear who the winner of the last repartee was.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Eugenie asked softly.

Hermione had just changed into her pyjamas and dropped herself on the bed when she heard the question from her dorm mate. She raised her head and saw that Eugenie, Lakshmi and even Lucretia was looking at her with varying states of concern. She sighed and sat up again.

“Talk about what?”

“I don’t know. Anything? Tom said you were lonely. Well, he also said how he you were so lost in thought that he had to catch you from slipping a few times on the astronomy tower stairs. It was why he was concerned.” The blonde Ravenclaw said.

Hermione winced. She had to commend Tom on his discretion and creativity—instead of telling her dormmates of their complicated argument, he came up with a similar case that was milder still. Her expression, of course, only affirmed to both Eugenie and Lakshmi that Tom was telling the truth.

*I suppose his story is still in the neighbourhood of truth*, she conceded. Apparently, he had better common sense than she thought. It was certainly much better sense than Voldemort.
“What else did he say?”

“That he wished you would not be so alone.”

The strongest urge that she felt right then was to ask the password from Eugenie, march all the way to the Slytherin common room, and find Tom to tell him to mind his own business. The less hasty part of her had to admit that his observations was rather accurate, if overblown in the conclusion (she wasn’t suicidal. She just wasn’t). She was still surprised at the ‘solution’ he came up with, because she’d half expected that he’d follow her everywhere to assure himself that she wasn’t going to jump out of some random window.

“He didn’t say much of what happened between the two of you, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Lakshmi shrewdly noted.

“Nothing happened!” Hermione insisted.

The other Ravenclaw snorted. “Right, and two people could be as close as you both are in such a short time when they’re only talking about the weather all the while. I noticed that he told us about what happened as you leave the astronomy tower but not what your meeting there was about.”

“I don’t think we’re very close.” The brunette denied.

“He’s oddly informal with you and allows you such familiarity. I’ve never seen him giving anyone else that privilege all this time.”

“What, and you’ve been watching him all these years?” Hermione was sceptical.

Eugenie was nodding at Lakshi’s answer. “That’s true. He was careful enough never to be asked to escort any witches around anywhere before or stand right next to them. I wouldn’t have realised it if you didn’t say that.”

“Exactly, Eugenie. Anyway, he is rather striking and conspicuous that I always notice what he’s doing or who he’s with whenever I see him around. Look, Hermione, I don’t really care about the details, but it’s obvious that he’s concerned. So, I’ll just cut to the chase and ask if there’s anything wrong with you.”

Hermione only shrugged.

“Oh, nice put down of Hornby, by the way. She does grate on the nerves at times.”

“I know it was probably evil of me, but it was fun,” Hermione admitted, as Eugenie was a little surprised though Lakshmi only smiled wider. Lucretia seemed content to be the observer among them.

“Yes, her overactive imagination is very convenient, isn’t it?” Lakshmi said, knowing. The brunette couldn’t even hide her slight grin even if she tried.

Alright! So, considering that we don’t know each other that much yet, why don’t you tell us of how your day went as well as all the people you’ve met so far? We’ll give you a sketch of most of Hogwarts’ denizens and we get to get to know you better. A slumber party isn’t such a bad idea, right?” Lakshmi had walked into the tea table in the middle of the room and rung the service bell. A house elf instantly appeared.

It was Lucretia who stepped forward and Lucretia whom the elf addressed. She seemed to be asking for…refreshments? Hot chocolate as well as some snacks.
“But we have classes tomorrow,” Eugenie answered, confused.

“Oh, come on, Eugenie. What’s a little lost sleep compared to getting to know our newest dormmate?”

Hermione didn’t think she can say no to Lakshmi’s winning smile. Moreover, she knew that she does need to care about her current life. And what better way than gaining some new friends?

“Alright,” Hermione agreed. “But you’re going to have to spill on some of your embarrassing secrets too.”

“There’s a good number of that if you’re interested,” Lucretia spoke up, her expression knowing. “Trust me.”

The brunette smiled as Lakshmi tried to persuade Lucretia to stay away from a particular second-year incident of hers, while Eugenie looked almost too afraid to ask about what exactly Lucretia knew about her. For all of Lucretia’s appearance of calm respectability, there was a worrying glimmer of wicked humour in her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Broca’s area/Broca’s region:** Region of the hominid brain linked with speech production. (Humans are hominid too, in case you didn’t notice).

**Cartesian Dualism:** (philosophy) Also known as ‘substance dualism’, the most famous proposition of which was put forth by René Descartes (several other philosophers from different places and earlier times have espoused something similar, but their works was not widely disseminated in Europe just before the Renaissance took off). To quote Wikipedia: Descartes in his *Passions of the Soul* and *The Description of the Human Body* suggested that the body works like a machine, that it has material properties. The mind (or soul), on the other hand, was described as a nonmaterial and does not follow the laws of nature.

**Cogito ergo sum:** (philosophy, Latin), a famous quotation of René Descartes, most commonly translated as “I think, therefore I am”.

**Phineas Gage:** (medical case) A man who during his work as a railroad construction foreman was famous for his improbable survival of an accident in which a large iron rod is driven right through his head. As I mentioned in-text, his left frontal lobe was destroyed. Also known as ‘The American Crowbar Case’.

How different his personality before and after the accident is subject to much debate (and not a little exaggeration among different parties in the medical establishment trying to use him to support their pet theory), but his ability to adapt and overcome the difficulties apparent in the early days of his recovery serves as a good example of how flexible the human brain is at adapting to losses of its parts and taking over the tasks previously done by those lost/damaged parts.
Additional Trivia:

Hermione dropped her knees and let herself fall to the ground, surprising him with the sudden change in their centres of gravity while her hands grabbed his arms. Tom didn’t adapt fast enough and fell forward as she went down; she deftly used his forward motion to throw him back over her shoulders:

This is not a move that should be tried by a beginner.

It doesn’t exactly require *dan*-level skills (that is, black belt levels), but it’s not newbie level either—conservatively speaking, it’s a solid intermediate one. It’s a combination of two things:

1. mastering the ability to fall properly without injuring yourself (yes, believe it or not, this is a skill), and
2. mastering at least one move of unbalancing and disarming a standing attacker while you’re sitting/kneeling/at a lower position than the attacker (none of these movements are tested in the middle-kyu* tests in the martial arts school I’m from, even if it was taught earlier).

(*kyu ranks, that is, the junior ranks below the black belt ranks. Some schools give colourful belts for different kyu ranks, others are less flashy/doesn’t care about impressing outsiders and simply make all of them wear white until you’re 2-kyu and 1-kyu, which is respectively 2 levels and 1 level below the first *dan* belt.)

I’m not giving any precise *waza*/movement/technique names, because there are definitely several moves that fit the bill in any given martial arts branch. I also know that at least aikido, judo and jujitsu have many *waza* that addresses what to do when you’re sitting/kneeling and the attacker is standing.
Hermione finally gets to go to classes. Hurrah. Or maybe not? They walk to Transfiguration class and Hermione is reminded of a previous conversation she had with Dumbledore. She extracts a promise.

I reread Chapter 12 last week and was dissatisfied with what I wrote a few months ago, especially now that I’ve inserted a new chapter or two. So I tore it at the seams, rewrote at least two-thirds of it and was only done now. In case anyone is asking, yes, I have a rabid perfectionist streak.

If one were to ask Hermione back in the future (pick a date, Hermione thought, any date past the War), and asked her what she thought the risks of being stuck in time in the 1940s was, she’d have thought it would be in dodging or facing the rising Tom Riddle and his would-be followers, probably already accreting into some semi-solid block around him, like planets coming into their final form around their star.

Because nearly half a century later, that was what Harry had to face, and she had unconsciously projected that into the past without first checking what it was actually like. After all, the past, as
they say, is a foreign country. She would do well to scout the terrain first before waging her battles there. But she was only human; we all take mental shortcuts because they help us think faster and this one was Hermione’s. This particular shortcut merely happened to be wrong.

Therefore, Hermione was blindsided. She would not in a thousand years come up with the answer of ‘Hogwarts’ rumour mill’, or even the more general and broad-brush ‘the archaic and stagnant social strata of the wizarding world’. This was the uncomfortable reality that she would be forced to face a week from now, after she’d truly lived and breathe in the past. The worst had yet to come.

Right now, whatever inconveniences she was facing was actually still minor (not that she knew that).

The wizarding world was just the wizarding world, wasn’t it? That was what she’d always thought before now. It was simply there. It was the backdrop to all the action taking place and it doesn’t get in the way (well, except in the very physical method of getting in the way, such as a prison wall you need to tear down to escape). She had come to it at such a young age that she grew into it, taking its limits and strictures for granted instead of the question and wonder that would come if she were to first experience it with a mind less childish.

In a way, that was what she was doing now.

She knew her wizarding world, took its shape and customs for granted, but she did not know this wizarding world. It was once again new to her, fresh in form and unfamiliar in character. It was the cousin of a friend, instead of that beloved person themselves, and the flaws that had seemed endearing in a close friend was now harsh and grating when presented in a stranger’s face.

Of course, it raises many interesting questions now. As in, were the flaws ever endearing in the first place, or was it merely a matter of her getting too used to it, that she began to tune it out, like some annoying background noise? Now that her attention is called to it once more, was it merely a bad habit, a verbal tic, or was it something that can alter a person’s morality?

Hermione had arrived early to her Advanced Ancient Runes class because she liked to be prepared. Of course, she hadn’t counted on the fact that coming early meant that she would be open to conversations.

“You’re Hermione Curie, right? The new student?”

“Yes, what’s the matter?”

“I’m Annette Bartleby, and I heard you were wearing such a lovely flower crown yesterday,” Annette said. Hermione stared at the girl. Alright, she gets points for politeness, especially considering that she was actually a Gryffindor than any other House, but this level of attention was getting absurd. Hermione opted to stay oblivious.

“Why, yes, I did. Why? Do you want me to teach you how to make it?” The brunette readily offered.

“No, not really—wait, you made it yourself?” Annette sounded surprised.

Hermione nodded. “Of course. My friends taught me how, back home. It’s a special flower crown, you see, because it’s still a living plant. It’s not dead. I like smelling fresh flowers the whole day and I felt like celebrating the day I get out of the infirmary, you know?”

“Oh.” She looked sorely disappointed. Hermione had to hold back not to roll her eyes. “I…maybe next time? I’m just not sure how to free up my schedule right now.”
“You can take all the time you need,” the brunette insisted.

It was probably never, but who knows? The Gryffindor returned to her seat and Hermione can sigh in relief that the first (of probably many) inconveniences were over. Tom Riddle entered the class some five minutes before the bell actually rang. His gaze caught hers and she raised her hand in an easy greeting and he did the same. They sat in their respective seats.

Some people thought they were being subtle as they eyeballed Hermione and Tom in turn, sometimes even rapidly back and forth like the rapidly bobbing head of a mandarin duck. She pretended they didn’t exist.

Just because she and Tom knew each other didn’t mean that they absolutely had to sit side-by-side. They can both function quite well on their own. You know, like regular, productive human beings instead of being the awkward one half of a Siamese twin that needs to coordinate their movement so they don’t trip over each other’s legs? Yes. That.

Seriously, why was the budding dark lord one of the saner people in Hogwarts at this time? That feeling of weirdness in the wizarding world began to accumulate in her gut again.

Luckily for her, Professor Honoria Gildenstern swept in not long after and had thus unknowingly put a stop to any further stupid behaviour. Dark braided hair and with an appearance that unsurprisingly reminded Hermione of a librarian, albeit perhaps one with punk tendencies, considering the field-worthiness of her boots and the glimmer of defensive runes carved into her leather waistcoat. The Ancient Runes professor had seen Hermione’s presence in class at the first sweep and merely nodded to her. The Ravenclaw student nodded back in return and that was that, the lecture started.

Hermione was only too glad that Professor Gildenstern wasn’t one of those overly-friendly professors who felt that they need to introduce the new kid right in front of the whole class first. The class was thankfully uneventful and there was nothing unexpected in the material of the lecture. She’d read (refreshed) the books, including the supplementary ones, and next week she might even manage to start on those tangentially-related books that Tom bothered to put in one the list he’d made for her. And continue with the thermos/vacuum flask idea she’d begun halfway during the weekend.

Once she covered the required reading for all her classes this week, she was sure she’d be able to free up enough material to read up about time travel by next week.

It was a pleasant plan with many things to look forward to.

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Eugenie caught up with her outside the Advanced Ancient Runes class.

“Hermione! Hermione.” Her blonde hair was flying behind her, robes flapping, and Hermione found it almost funny that a prefect was running in the corridors. Eugenie was probably lucky there were no other prefects who’d seen her and can complain about it—they might even deduct some house points to go along with that.

“Take it easy. There’s, no need to run.”

“I’m sorry, I just forgot. I should’ve accompanied you to your classes because you wouldn’t know where they are.” Eugenie said. “You know that the corridors and stairs move in Hogwarts, right?”

Hermione shook her head. “Oh, I can find them just fine. Really, you don’t need to worry about
“Really?” The blonde was sceptical.

“Oh, yes, really. Let me show you something.”

Hermione shoved her hand into her book bag and started rummaging for the various syllabi that Tom had collected and given on the first day of their acquaintance. She took one out and cast an object-based locator spell, using the syllabus as the anchor. Balancing her wand between her thumb and index finger, the stick pivoted around the fulcrum in the ways of a primitive compass—she’d managed to get Tom to teach her this particular locator spell.

“See? This is the syllabus for…Advanced Arithmancy Class. The wand points to where it is and I just follow it.”

Eugenie’s blue eyes widened. “Does it really work?”

“Well, if the professor spends way more time at their office and doesn’t like their class, it would lead to their office rather than their class. Yet even then, I can just try knocking and then go to class with them.”

“Or, they might have already gone on ahead before you got lost in that direction,” Eugenie pointed out.

Hermione shrugged. “All methods have their weaknesses. The trick is to plan ahead and cover those beforehand.”

The blonde witch still looked slightly doubtful.

“I think I’ll feel much better if I’ve accompanied you to your next class.”

“And that is my cue to step in.”

Hermione and Eugenie looked up at the same time; Tom Riddle had just stepped out of the classroom and was now a few steps away from them. She thought he’d probably had a few questions to ask to the teacher. Eugenie’s cheeks unexpectedly turned rosier as she held Hermione’s non-wand hand firmly.

“I didn’t—I didn’t know! Hermione, I’m sorry!”

“Um, what? I’m fine. What are you apologising for?” Hermione asked, perplexed.

“It would be no trouble at all if I were to show you to your next class. After all, it also happens to be the same as mine,” Tom said. Was there a spell to do the Windsor knot? Because Hermione was sure that her tie wasn’t as perfect as his. Just how much time did he spend in front of the mirror to perfect that? Tom Riddle was all friendly smiles, as usual. Right, that’s his public persona. She almost forgot.

“Ah, good morning, Miss Delacour.”

“G-G-Good morning, Mr. Riddle.” Eugenie managed. “I’ll j-just be off now, Hermione. Bye everyone!”

Hermione watched her sprinting form recede in the distance with a puzzled frown on her face. “She was in such a hurry to arrive and now she’s leaving again? I just don’t get her sometimes.”
Tom chuckled. “Well, I suppose she has other things to attend to that she’d just remembered?”

“You don’t sound so sure yourself.”

“Miss Curie, I don’t presume to know the affairs of witches and I don’t pretend otherwise.” His tone was wry, and a small smile grew involuntarily on Hermione’s face.

“Wise man.”

“Of course. Shall we?”

This time, it only took her two seconds to realise what his offered hand meant and she linked their arms together once understanding dawned on her. She did notice as they walk that they were far from the only male-female pair to walk arm-in-arm, and some of them really did just look like friends. This was a time when men still pull out a chair for a lady to sit.

Hermione supposed she had all the time in the world to get used to the habits of this time.

“So, where are we going now?” She asked. He was oddly quiet for a moment, but his next question told her what had taken him aback.

“You don’t know?”

“I haven’t exactly opened my schedule before Eugenie dropped in.”

His eyebrows rose slightly. She understood why he did that—Teenage Hermione would certainly have memorised her schedule to hell and back as well as the alternative routes around Hogwarts. It was just the sort of thing her conscientious, overachieving younger self would do. Current Hermione thought that she already knew where all the classes are (she could certainly use his last tour of Hogwarts as an excuse), and Hogwarts was safe.

“Then you came and I decided that it was a moot point, anyway. I could just ask you.” She shrugged. “It’s not really a big deal, is it?”

“You might get lost,” he replied.

“And what’s the worst that could happen? I have to go through five corridors to get to my next class instead of one? Go up several flights of stairs? I’ll live.” Her answer was dry.

Nobody would get bitten by an annoyed griffin if they took the wrong turn in Hogwarts, and no one has any pets (*ahem* experiments) that try to fondle you if you get stupidly baited to approach their tanks—and she could still thread her way past the hazards of Department of Mystery with a hangover on most mornings. You can navigate Hogwarts while sleepwalking.

(Shed had a passing memory of rolling her eyes at her housemate about the other witch’s newest project. “No, Malina, I don’t think a guard octopus is a good idea—how many people even have pools in their front yard to keep the poor thing in?”)

Hermione blinked slowly when she realised that her standards for passable corridors were getting skewed from all the times she had to deal with routine escapees from the experiments of her co-workers…

She knew she missed his last sentence or two, as she had been so lost in thought.

“I’m sorry?”
“I said, I wouldn’t recommend being late for your first Advanced Transfigurations.” Tom said. There was something beyond his offhand tone. If she hadn’t been feeling more-or-less the same, she would’ve missed it.

Hermione met his gaze and in the span of that moment, she could not help but recall the time when Dumbledore’s visit to the infirmary happened to coincide with Tom’s, a few days before the picnic…

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“Good afternoon, Hermione.”

The young witch glanced up towards the greeting from her bed, meeting friendly blue eyes. Her smile was hurried and unprepared; the gleam of long auburn hair had flashed her eyes as he entered the infirmary.

“Ah, um, afternoon Professor…”

Said pair of eyes turned from hers, to meet another of similar hue. Yet where his was sky-bright and light, these were as deep as the ocean was blue.

“Tom,” a polite pause. “Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon, Professor Dumbledore,” he replied.

It was enunciated with care, his accent clear and true. Tom’s bow accorded him formal respect, beyond what a professor was due. A blooming flower of frost could not be more perfect, and just as frozen too.

Dumbledore recognised that Tom Riddle did not put great care into his manners for just anyone. The least he could do was acknowledged it with as much delicacy.

Tom spoke up again.

“If you have things to settle with Hermione, I wouldn’t dare to be in your way.”

“It’s not a problem at all,” the witch answered quickly. “You’re welcome to stay.”

Both wizards turned to her and saw raw earnestness untrained. Yet she wavered not under the observation, or let her mind changed.

Dumbledore conceded to her. “Only if you’re sure, Hermione.”

“Oh, I’m pretty certain. After all, if we’re talking about class, Professor, Tom told me many interesting things today.”

She did not know why exactly she insisted, only that she was not blind. Hermione knew her history well, and wondered, what a conversation with both would find.

The professor took the new maroon chair. Tom asked him for his opinion on a topic, drawing him in with meticulous care. Their dialogue flowed fluently, well-practised actors in a play. She found to her chagrin that, at times, she was the one with no lines to say.

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Hermione was more than aware of the wariness between Tom and Dumbledore; she had expected
to have to play mediator sooner or later. Yet she had to commend them on their conversational skills as the topic turned easily into magical theory and interesting things about non-naïve transfiguration. Her interference was not required. If she did not know any better, she’d have thought that they had a pretty good rapport with each other.

Of course, their exchange on some topics were simply rather…telling.

“I had never considered the transfiguration of animals much,” the brunette commented.

“Yet small wooden blocks are changed into mice with regularity in transfiguration classes,” Dumbledore pointed out.

“Oh, but that is temporary. The mouse is not a real mouse. At the end of the day, it would return into a block of wood once again. I’m sure Tom wasn’t referring to that either, were you?”

She glanced farther to the left. An odd half-smile flitted upon his face as the Slytherin shook his head lightly.

“No, I wasn’t. I was considering what it takes to turn a mouse into a rat.”

“So simple a change. So similar too that someone might comment that it’s wholly an unnecessary action to try,” Dumbledore said. Hermione knew better than to take his words to represent his opinion, since she’d experienced Dumbledore prodding her arguments to get her to defend them properly, regardless of his own position.

“But it’s a useful first step to try before one begins to consider the change required to, say, begin with a lion and end with a manticore, isn’t that right, Professor?” Tom answered.

There was a quiet second or two, with an undercurrent she could not quite glean.

Hermione frowned, considering the technical requirements. “If you were considering changing a lion to a manticore, I don’t think you can rely on transfiguration alone.”

“Oh, I’m very aware of that,” Tom’s answer was mild and he added nothing else. His attention was still trained on Dumbledore, who was thinking carefully.

It took Hermione another second to realise that if you can transform a lion into a manticore, you’re also another step closer to trying to change a man into a manticore. There was no time to dwell on it further as Gryffindor’s Head of House had spoken.

“You’re looking for permanent change, I presume?” The professor asked again.

“Why would anyone wish for impermanent change if they can achieve otherwise?” His tone was still that preternaturally calm one.

“To push so hard and so alien a change, one might think you were trying to bend the laws of nature.” Dumbledore stated.

“To find the loopholes in natural laws…one can say that it is the entire principle behind magic itself. What would a muggle say to the ease that we can defy gravity?”

Tom was still perfectly polite. Hermione, on the other hand, wondered if he was not a little too stark about his intentions to Dumbledore. The transfigurations professor took a long, careful breath.

“The last time an entire society agreed with you, they were the vanguards of old Atlantis.”
He did not need to be more detailed in his answer—any student of magical history knew of it. *They not only brought their nation down, they have managed to erase it from this plane of existence as well. So great was their hubris that their mistakes had torn their fair isle from reality.*

There was a reason why no one has managed to find the archaeological remains of Atlantis.

The island did not exist anymore.

“So,” Hermione said casually, “can anyone enlighten me as to why we still cook our food instead of transfiguring them from their base ingredients?”

If the conversation from that moment on was less rigorous in its academic topic and more frivolous, Hermione was all-too-glad that it was not as freighted with second meanings either.

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“You do not trust him.”

There was no doubt in her words, as light and steadfast as the sun rising in the morning. Hermione let him guide her towards their transfigurations class. Tom only afforded her a glance at that.

“Why would you think so?”

The witch huffed. “Please, there’s a little too many…pauses in the only conversation I had with both you and Dumbledore. It’s clear that you have a history with each other.”

“Academic differences are a fact of life between scholars.”

“It went deeper than that.” She disagreed.

“Entire careers have been made and broken on competing theories no matter the field.” He replied glibly. “These differences are certainly Very Important Things, Hermione.”

“Tom.”

Hermione knew he could feel the tug on his arm as she came to a standstill on the corridor, and his easy dismissal about the tension between him and Dumbledore was getting to her nerves. She knew she wouldn’t be able to reach him if all his walls were up, because even as he answered her questions randomly, he was able to sidestep her concerns with ease. His quicksilver tongue was a little too smooth for her to be fully comfortable with.

“Can we find a quieter corridor and talk?”

“We don’t seem to be having any problems talking right now.”

“Don’t we? You’re avoiding the truth right now and it makes me feel like I’m only imagining things when I thought that we’d be working together with a common goal.” There was more than a touch of asperity in her voice. “You’re losing me right now, Tom.”

Tom gave her his full attention at that, though she had yet to really understand what that particular tilt of his head meant. He set off again at an angle, and they were soon down one of the less-populated side corridors. It almost certainly meant a longer trip, but the Founders were considerate enough of first-years perpetually getting lost between classes that she knew they still had ample time to reach transfigurations even with the detour.

“Please don’t hide or avoid the truth with me. It’s the easiest way to lose my trust.”
“Disagreements are a natural factor in critical discussions, Hermione. As agreeable as he is, I even have them with Slughorn. It’s not a wonder if I’m not always of the same mind with Dumbledore.”

She dropped her arm from his, turning back. He caught her wrist in the next moment but didn’t pull her by the arm; he let her lead instead and a passer-by would have the impression that he was following her.

“You’re upset.”

“Wonderful statement of the obvious.”

“Hermione.”

Hermione could feel him tugging her hand behind her. With a sigh, she slowed her pace and turned around, steadying her breath and counting to ten as she tried to order her thoughts together. To his credit, he did wait for her to gather her words instead of forcing her to talk immediately. Otherwise, she’d be snapping straight back at him.

“Let’s start this again. I was there during your talk in the infirmary, and I can see there are some issues between the two of you. Even if I didn’t know that, I could have tried mapping the British wizarding world in an arithmantic model and generate a future projection from it. Dumbledore isn’t someone you want to have working actively against you.”

“Are you telling me you’ve actually performed arithmancy on Dumbledore’s future while you were in the infirmary?”

It was a reasonable disbelief. She, however, already figured out the answer for just this sort of occasion since several days ago.

“Of course not. Some future of myself did.”

“Why would you need to do that for Dumbledore?”

His voice was a little too level for someone who’d just heard such an outrageous claim, but his steady gaze on her was a clear sign of his complete attention.

“Not Dumbledore in particular, of course. I didn’t speak wrongly earlier—I was calculating for the entire wizarding world.”

“Impossible.” His hands were clasped behind his back at this point, his eyes dark. Probably because he was holding back the urge to…what, throw his hands in the air? Would he draw his wand against her and demand that she starts speaking something with sense?

“Why not?”

“You’d be doing the calculations for how many hundreds, thousands of people in the wizarding world? And you will also need to factor and calculate all the possible relationships and influences between them.” He paused and she met his gaze squarely, without concern or doubt. She had the feeling that there were a multitude of sentences and disagreements that he was holding back just then before he settled on a final one.

“It would take years.”

Tom was right, in a way. The traditional arithmantic approach began as a method of personal divination—to find out how the future of one person would develop. If you were trying to see how
the future of two people together, it’s only marginally more complicated. The calculations for ten would start being pretty crazy, and the first time she casually asked that to her arithmancy teacher, the dry answer was to rely on astronomy altogether—it might be vaguer, but it was certainly made for a larger scale of augury than old-school arithmancy.

“You’re correct—if you were to use the methods of arithmancy available this year, yes. Give a few more decades and one can begin charting the flow of history.” She answered.

“If you were to calculate the turbulence of a river, you do it by modelling the river itself, along with its large rocks and obstacles. You don’t try to calculate every single water molecule in a typical flow.”

Even when she purposefully looked away, she could feel the pressure of his gaze at her back, where his initial reflex to deny the possibility of what she was saying warred with his curiosity and greed. Arithmancy had experienced a minor renaissance from the 1980s, led by muggleborn witches and wizards who’d went to the muggle world to study higher mathematics in graduate school and then returned to the wizarding world with new ideas and innovations.

There was a reason she ended up writing a proposal to the higher ups in the Department of Mysteries, asking them to send her to Trinity College. It wasn’t a surprise that they agreed; half of said muggleborn experts disappeared or died during Voldemort’s reign. A part of her knew even without enough memories that she had become one of the best.

(It takes not just mere years. A soft voice inside her whispered).

Hermione took a deep breath and turned it down with ease, refusing to wonder yet again how old she was exactly. By now, the sorrow of her lost memories was a familiar old ache to her instead of a fresh pain.

She did not stop Tom from taking her hand, or from slowly linking their arms again as they made their way down the side corridor.

“You talk of many impossible things.” He commented. “Of the moon to fly to, a fine future to forecast far.”

His alliteration reminded her of something else.

“Of shoes, ships and sealing wax,” Hermione murmured.

“Of kingmakers and kings.” Tom continued, the quirk of his lips the only sign that he noticed her surprise at his deliberate (but apt) misquote. “Is it truly possible, Hermione?”

“You would not say it was impossible if you see the field equations I’ll use, if you can see how I’ll calculate the forecast for the entire wizarding world based on it. I can still see it clearly in my mind.”

“Do you know that actual seers never quite remember the real prophecies they’ve made?” His voice was deceptively gentle.

“I know,” she answered without concern. “I didn’t say I was one, did I?”

“Then what are you, Hermione?”

She could hear the weight of his inquiry. The Slytherin had paused in his steps and turned to fully face her. Her smile was the broken fragment of one, and her answer was the most honest she’d
“I don’t know.”

Hermione shook her head slowly as she could see objections flickering past his mind even if he had yet to voice them.

“I can’t give you a full explanation Tom, not with my memories as they are. Perhaps you’ll never have any. Perhaps I’m just a madwoman after all.” She sighed. She knew he didn’t really believe that either, not when she was perfectly capable of debating against him on a variety of topics. “I will never force you to trust me, but now you do have to choose. Would you trust me with the truth? Otherwise, this agreement of ours is never going to work.”

“Yet truth always depends on who is telling it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, we can both read Rashomon and debate the relativity of human experience until the cows come home. Yet I’m not trying to find the answer to the meaning of life, the unified theory of the universe or everything. Some measuring weights are more accurate than others; some truths are closer to the real world than most. A picture built from a hundred perspective is usually more representative of the object than a picture relying on just one viewpoint.”

Hermione needed to take a deep breath to collect her thoughts, to reach her conclusion.

“I guess in the end, it comes to this: would you trust my perspective on the future more than a random student picked out of the blue? If you say no, then this is where we part, isn’t it?”

She would not let him redirect her easily into some other topic, to distract her with interesting issues to discuss. The answer she was waiting for was simple now—yes or no.

His smile had an unsettling edge to it now. Like any predator, she knew that Tom disliked being pushed into a corner. It was too bad because she wasn’t budging either.

“What are you looking for?”

“We never did formalise our agreement, did we?” She asked back. “Time to state our terms properly. I wish for your truth. It’s not enough to have the absence of lies. I wish for no hiding, no avoidance of it.”

She did not know what he was searching for when he simply stared for a moment. Hermione pushed back the urge to find a reflective surface and see whether she had something on her face.

“Would you return the favour?” Tom asked.

“On anything you ask me to assist you? As long as you’re not asking me to help you hurt or kill someone? Yes. The only promise of truth I can’t make is regarding myself.” She was apologetic, but his mind was quick to see the answer.

“Because you don’t even know your own truth.”

“Yes.”

She couldn’t help sounding slightly bitter, hated that it was a gap in her armour that she couldn’t hide from him, even if her primary concern of saying so was not disclosing that she came from a future. He must have catalogued every tic of her expression right now, since he had scarcely looked
elsewhere, but to her surprise he didn’t mention it at all.

“If you ask for truth, then I’ll ask for trust.” He raised a hand before she managed to express her scepticism. “I’ll ask you to not jump to conclusions easily.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen one very probable future when you’ve killed a lot of the people I know, my friends, and yet I’m still your friend right now, aren’t I? Who’s the *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* in this equation? Certainly not me—”


Hermione gave him a look. He gave her his most innocent smile and pushed an errant curl behind her ear. His fingertips brushed past the shell of her ear and she could feel the tingles down her neck.

“Well?” He asked.

She bit her lower lip as she made up her mind, looking away from his dark eyes.

“Alright. I’ll do my very best not to. So, you’ll give me your friendship, then?”

Nothing she’d said earlier surprised him as much as what she’d just asked.

“Friendship?” He finally managed to say.

“That’s what friendship is about, you know? Mutual trust and assistance?” Her thousand-yard stare almost dared him to disagree with her, or to express an opinion on her naivete that she believed in such things as having friends.

“I stayed my hand, Tom Marvolo Riddle. I knew what you are and the worst you could be and I still stayed my hand. If that’s not me stopping myself from jumping to conclusions, of proof of my tentative trust, I don’t know what is.” She enunciated his name clearly, carefully.

He tilted his head to the side, and she thought she’d seen the same behaviour once in a wild wolf. Observation: he was trying to decide whether taking the leftovers from the camp was going to kill him.

“You would offer me your friendship for my truth and a little self-restraint?”

“Yes. My friendship for yours.”

She stopped herself from commenting that she didn’t believe it would take just a little self-restraint. The reducing-violence front was probably going to be a work in progress for a while.

“What do you gain?” He thought out loud.

“Are you telling me that your friendship comes cheaply and easily? That it’s barely worth anything compared to mine?” She raised an eyebrow in challenge. She thought she saw a ghost of a smile, just before it vanished all-too-quickly.

“My friendship, is it?” His voice was soft.

A nod. “Yes.”

“I suppose if you were my friend, you would know that I’d kill anyone who’d tried to kill you.” He
mused. “It would show that I take threats against people around me seriously, and it would be a nice deterrence against future fools who thought they’ve found a flaw.”

She had opened her mouth to protest when she realised that he was waiting for her to disagree. It was there in his half-smirk, the knowing look in his eyes. Hermione remembered then that the Aurors were not always the full-fledged police force that she knew them to be. A century ago, wizards and witches still settled family feuds and disagreements with duels, sometimes leading to death.

“We can’t always help acts of self-defence.” Hermione finally said. “As for the rest, we can talk about it later.”

If his expression was a touch too confident, she tried not to see it. He might believe he could make her forget about it, but she knew her own mind. Still, it was no use borrowing trouble for now when it seems like they’ve finally managed to hammer out the basics of their working relationship. Not that she’d believe that he’d immediately refrain from pointing his wand at her—she wasn’t that naïve.

There was still that gleam in his eyes that spoke of some particular knowledge, though, and it caused her eyebrows to draw down.

“What?”

“You could kill.” He stated, an interested smile growing on his face.

“Well, otherwise I wouldn’t be prepared to face any dark lord—”

“No, no. I know of your avenging tendencies. You’re such a perfect student that even I sometimes forget that you’re not the angel the teachers are half-convinced you are,” he stopped her from denying that she was nowhere near perfect with a gentle tap at her lips. “Yet Hermione, your wings aren’t quite pristine white anymore, are they? Not when you could accept someone else’s death for your self-defence.”

“Because I know you won’t be slinging spells in moderation,” she was quick to find a reply, but Tom only chuckled as he took a step closer. She stepped back without thought.

“Your feathers are spattered with red. You have blood on your hands already, don’t you? Hermione?”

The brunette witch closed her mouth and sent him a dark look, but she could not deny him outright.

“I don’t know where you get this angel idea from. A bit cliched, isn’t it?” It was a weak reply by her standards and Tom clearly realised that too.

His smile was genuine now, intriguing, even if that glimpse of teeth was as cool and comforting as the flash of a knife’s blade.

Tom had found a scrap of parchment one of his pockets and with one hand folded it into another paper rose. When he slipped it into her hair, it had turned into yet another real flower. This time, it was dark purple, the closest colour to black as she’d ever seen on a rose. There was a hint of spice in its perfume. She supposed he was making a witty allusion to her being Lady Death, but she was too busy thinking.

Tom was right.
Hermione could kill.

It was not something she ever advertised even in her old life. She did her best not to, as whenever
Harry brought her what he thought were new movements, new groups involved in some attack or
another, she analysed whether they were dealing with desperate youths or the darker, more
brainwashed fanatics that would not think twice before they take innocent people down with them.
She would kill in an emergency or to save people, but she really didn’t want to start considering it
as the first thing she could do. It would be too easy to consider it as the fastest way to solve
problems.

She was stubbornly staying on the side of the light here, striving to stay there even if she had to
grip that slippery edge in a death-grip with all her available hands and toes.

“We shall certainly be friends, shall we not?” His drawl was dark and smooth.

“So? You do accept?” She asked quickly, pulling herself to focus.

“As long as you won’t be careless with your life while I still live.” He answered, and it was clear
that he remembered their last argument. “It would be useless agreeing to have you as an advisor if
you were to die too quickly.”

That one was easy. “Agreed.”

He raised a hand to her face, a hair’s breadth above her skin and only the shadow of a touch. If she
were to go off and catch a falling star, she’ll get two neutron stars, darkened and faint but no less
capable of burning the night away. And they would look exactly the same like his eyes now.

Alive.

“I accept all of it, Hermione.” He said.

Tom sealed the deal with a kiss over her lips. It was not the furious rush of last night, of a verbal
argument turned flesh. This was the novel sweetness of the first fruits of harvest.

The enticing taste of a promise.

His hand was warm over her cheek and the other was snug around her waist. It was soft and it was
solemn, with a touch of genuine longing at the edges that made her breath catch and she just
wanted to stay there for just a moment more. For forever and a day. He tilted his head slightly and
somehow, they fit together better with it. She melted into his touch even as she pulled him closer.
One of her hands were in his silky hair while the other was appreciating the fine lines of his
shoulders properly, clutching him to her. His lips parted and she followed suit, and as they slipped
deeper suddenly they were both caught by the unexpected undertow of their mutual thirst. Neither
could stop drinking any more kisses, impulsively taking yet another sip. Hermione lost track of the
future (the past) and the ever-extending present as her awareness crystallised in one single moment.

Hermione blinked. She was trying to gather her thoughts together and figure out how she ended up
pushing a budding dark lord against the wall to kiss the life out of him. Not that he was
complaining, or that she wasn’t enjoying herself. His chest was as solid as it looked; she’d know,
she’d been held against him for a while. For a wizard who wasn’t a muscle-bound hulk of a man,
he wasn’t reed thin either. There were definitely more muscles there than was obvious, as her
wandering hand could attest.
Pesky teenage hormones, really. This was just a momentary distraction, she reasoned, and she was sticking to that explanation.

The delicate way his fingers trailed up and down her back raised goosebumps and shivers. Currently, he was more interested in planting distracting kisses along the line of her jaw. Considering that she found the line of his neck mesmerising, so much that she was stroking her thumb along its length and tugging his collar aside, she supposed she was just as occupied as he was. She used her right hand to tap the top of his shoulder blade.

“Tom.”

“Yes, Hermione?”

His reply was soft, but it didn’t need to be loud said next to her ear. She closed her eyes at the most diverting sensation as his mouth found her skin again.

“We have… a class to go to. Advanced Transfigurations?”

“I don’t suppose you feel like retiring from it and make your way back to the infirmary later?” He asked. She pulled back and narrowed her eyes.

“And miss what, another three days of classes? No thanks.”

“Well, I thought I’d ask all the same.” He straightened up with an ease she envied as she stepped away from him. His collar was slightly lopsided, and as she worked to correct that, he smoothed down her hair and adjusted the new rose in it. His touch was light at her temple.

“Right. We should—”

“Go together,” he finished, extending his arm to her yet again. She was a little too confused to think straight right now. She could only blink a few times while staring at his hand before managing to ask something.

“Why?”

“We are friends, are we not? Then we’ll go together. Present a united front and all that rot.”

She found herself mildly sceptical of his claims. It did not stop her from taking his arm. “A united front? Really? Against what, the gossiping hens of Hogwarts? The nosey parkers choosing for an Outstanding in rumours rather than NEWTS?”

“You are not a Gryffindor,” he pointed out.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“And you are an anomaly that most does not understand. When it comes to Albus Dumbledore, I find that those factors inform any interaction with him very well.”

There was that coldness to his tone that she didn’t hear often and it took her by surprise.

_No_, she wanted to insist. She would always save Hogwarts and fight any current dark lord. It was just something that she did by now (she, Harry, Ron, Luna, Neville…). She was the last thing that Dumbledore ever needed to worry about. But the words, in any form or explanation that can be understood in this time, could not come out. For the first time in her life, she felt doubt. It was not about her Headmaster’s younger incarnation as she was sure he was undoubtedly also a force of
good when he was younger, but more about how this Dumbledore saw her. She sighed in defeat, at least for now.

Hermione Curie (Granger) understood that trust is one of the most expensive things in the world.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone notices me falling into meter/rhythm at a section of the flashback scene, um, yeah, I did that. It just feels right to do it at that point due to... [message redacted due to excessively convoluted explanation].

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Rashomon:** (Japanese, Literature) A short story by Akutagawa Ryunosuke, inspired by an older collection of short stories. It’s a recommended read for anyone who is interested in the art of storytelling. It succinctly illustrates with its handful of characters how we are all heroes in our own narratives and how no narrator can be completely reliable all the time.

**Additional Trivia:**

*La Belle Dame Sans Merci:* (French, Literature) Translated literally into English, it becomes ‘the beautiful lady without mercy’. It is also a title of a poem by Keats.

The poem follows an unfortunate knight who hand found a beautiful woman and thought she was in love with him as he is in her as she took her to her elfin home. Unfortunately, the next time he pulled himself awake from a nightmare, he turned out to be sleeping outdoors, by a barrow in the cold, with her nowhere in sight. The nightmare itself was about many pale kings and prince clamouring and warning the knight that “the beautiful lady without mercy” has enthralled him. Make of that what you will.

*Of shoes, ships and sealing wax:* (Literature) from Lewis Carroll’s poem ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter’ in *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. The actual section that has it goes like this:

"The time has come," the Walrus said,  
"To talk of many things:  
Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax--  
Of cabbages--and kings--  
And why the sea is boiling hot--  
And whether pigs have wings."

'
Chapter Summary

Advanced Transfigurations. An after-class chat. Romulus Rowle’s gargoyle is a great conversation starter (or killer, now that you think about it). Lakshmi and Hermione had a lot of fun with creative conversation. Lunch is not precisely uneventful.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the first clue for everyone that I actually enjoy writing about Hogwarts classes. It channels my inner nerd. Remember when I said that I wrote this fanfic to relax? Yeah, this is me, relaxing. Expect to see more later (also, this is me saying that any complaints about how I should just skip the classes’ content/scenes would be futile).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

13 Advanced Transfiguration, Lunch, and a Spot of Scandal

Transfiguration was…nice. It was probably because the class simply proceeded like a class.

Dumbledore had been a good orator, his speeches intense, and it translated well to his teaching in front of the class. As for his grasp of transfiguration, Hermione never had any doubt that it was excellent. The harder part of any of Hogwarts’ advanced classes was in the depths of the theory that they have to start covering; it was no longer just about the practical side of magic.
With a teacher of such extreme talent, Hermione was quite excited that she hadn’t missed the point where the lecture started to hit the spectrum of spells, from charm to true transfiguration. Oh, the extreme end of being able to transfigure lead into gold was more hypothetical than anything, but the middle of the spectrum was where wizards and witches can truly play.

“I ask you all this, is permanent transfiguration possible?”

Dumbledore’s blue eyes glimmered in challenge. “Yes, Mr. Zabini? You seem to have something to share with us.”

“It is not possible, as I’m sure we’ve all been warned to never transfigure something into food and eat it with the expectation that it will satiate us. At the very least, it would be harmless but still leave you hungry, while if you had picked a terrible object, you would be poisoned.” Some progenitor of Blaise Zabini had answered.

“A solid beginning, five points to Slytherin.”

Hermione ignored the girl with the green-and-silver tie not far from her that hissed under her breath. “five points, really? He should’ve gotten a ten!”

No, Hermione thought decisively to herself, really, he shouldn’t. It was not the complete answer. She had raised her hand before she’d realised it. A glance to the table at her left showed Tom trying to hide a small grin at her excitement, but she ignored him. Dumbledore glanced around the entire classroom. He had noted her, gave her the slightest nod, but had drifted away to latch on to someone else.

She thought she’d seen that guy this morning in the Ravenclaw common room.

“Mr. Shafiq, you seem to have a question you dearly wish to ask. Go ahead.”

“Professor, you said that Caspar made a solid beginning but far from enough. I can understand that, since there is the use of the Philosopher’s Stone that is capable of doing that and he’d failed to mention it.” Hermione didn’t miss Zabini flinch at that realisation. Shafiq continued on. “Yet that’s a mere addendum in transfiguration since it’s the exception that proves the rule. You make it sound like he’d missed far more.”

Dumbledore raised both of his eyebrows, to prompt the frustrated boy.

“What are we missing?” the Ravenclaw—Shafiq, Hermione tried to remember—finally asked.

Hermione’s hand was still in the air. The professor was smiling one of his mysterious smiles again.

“Let’s see, shall we? Miss Curie, I’m glad to see that you’ve finally recovered enough to join us.” Dumbledore said.

“It’s my pleasure, Professor. I was claustrophobic enough to miss class.” She could feel the heads turning as the students finally received confirmation of who the mysterious new student was.

“I presume that you have something to add?”

The brunette witch nodded.

“I think you’re being unfair to the others, Professor. You asked a leading question.”

She could see the expressions of confusion rising around her. Tom had his smile, though it was
distinctly more amused than before. Dumbledore’s blue eyes seemed to be filled with laughter too.

“Oh, I did, did I? Would you like to explain, then?”

“You asked us whether permanent transfiguration is possible. The definition is too confining and it causes people to close their mind the first time they hear it. It is better to first start with a different question.”

Hermione thought she was better than the know-it-all she’d been. She wasn’t just spouting lines she’d memorised from a book, for one, regardless of how many people could actually parse her answer. This time, she’d carefully lead the class from where they were thinking at to where she was. It would seem that Dumbledore could see what she was doing too, because there was a definite appreciation in his smile.

“And what would that question be?”

“Is it possible to use magic to affect permanent change in the world?”

Hermione took a careful breath, letting the question sink into the minds of her classmates. She could see Shafiq’s and Zabini’s expression already changing into a more contemplative one as she said that, though there were still no lack of confused ones. She glanced at Dumbledore before pausing her gaze somewhere at the bridge of his glasses.

“If I may continue, Professor?”

“Certainly. Take your time, Miss Curie.”

“I’d like to start my argument by illustrating that there are spells that affect the world permanently. Consider Confringo, Flagrate or even Fiendfyre.”

She ignored the single gasp that mentioning fiendfyre invoked.

“These spells explode and burn. Do they effect a permanent change on the world even after the caster stopped and walked away? Yes. Yes, they do. We can even extend our consideration to hexes, jinxes and curses. Does the victim’s body change? Yes. And a finite does not always remove them.”

“And yet they are not transfiguration spells, Miss Curie,” Dumbledore said.

“But what are transfiguration spells but very specific ways of inducing change?” She asked back. “For example, if I am given four blocks of wood, I can change the first into ash, the second into coal, the third into soil and the fourth I can decay it slightly and grow mushrooms on them.”

“These changes, these transfigurations would not change or revert back into a block of wood whether you’d wait for a year or a hundred and perhaps even more.” Hermione said. “Would anyone say that the transfigurations are not permanent, now?”

Dumbledore seemed happy enough, but he picked Zabini again.

“Yes, Mr. Zabini?”

Zabini nodded to the transfiguration professor. “Yet ash is what we get from just burning wood straight away. The mushrooms and the decay is a natural progress. It’s nothing like changing the block of wood into gold.”
Dumbledore raised a hand to hold Hermione from jabbing a reply back at Zabini. She huffed and folded her arms as she continued to sit at her table.

“But Ms. Curie had made her point, Mr. Zabini. I asked, ‘is permanent transfiguration possible?’ She had just proven that it is.”

“She still can’t change wood into gold.” He insisted.

Surprisingly to Hermione, Dumbledore turned to her and then moved his gaze a little further.

“Mr. Riddle, if you please. I see that you have something you wish to clarify.”

“Thank you, Professor. I think the critical point is that you’ve never asked us whether all possible transfigurations can be permanent. You were only asking of whether a permanent transfiguration is even possible in the first place. Hermione has soundly demonstrated that yes, it’s very possible.” Tom stated.

“It is not necessary for her to prove that every single possible transfiguration can be made permanent, such as the wood-block-to-gold transfiguration.”

Dumbledore nodded in understanding as he let the class digest that, walking his way back to the front of the class. Two girls turned their head sharply at Tom’s direction, though Hermione had no idea what it was about. He’d made the perfect concluding remark. (She half-wished Dumbledore had called her so that she could be the one to do it, thought she supposed hers wouldn’t be as pithy as his).

“Thank you very much, Mr. Riddle, Mr. Zabini, and especially to you, Ms. Curie. Another five points to Slytherin goes to Mr. Riddle and fifteen points for Ravenclaw.”

He waved his hand and the blackboard was suddenly filled with his handwriting. It was clear that it had been written beforehand, and Dumbledore was only now removing the spell he’d applied to hide them.

“Permanent transfiguration is possible.” He stated this firmly, his voice carrying weight across the entire transfigurations classroom.

Hermione couldn’t help but preen at the pleasant feeling of being vindicated.

“As Miss Curie had shown, creating permanent change with magic is possible—otherwise, how does wizard duels end in death if magic is but an illusion? We can easily call up elemental powers in our hands. Now, permanent transfiguration is merely another step from that level, concerning more with fine control rather than brute force. How to do it is a different kettle of fish altogether. Keep in mind that naïve transfiguration is what you are all taught in early classes, because it is enough for most common purposes.” He paused for a moment.

“In naïve transfiguration, to impose a new form onto an object, you imagine its new shape and keep that in mind as the words and wand movements of the spell bring it forth into the world. You don’t need to know what the object’s material is and how it relates to the material of the new form. Ignorance is not a handicap. Your will is absolute and you reject the original shape without so much as a by-your-leave. This imposition strains reality, of course, as all objects remember their essence, of what they truly are. The world remembers. Once your magic is no longer grasping the object firmly, nothing holds them back any more and they revert.”

Many quills were hurriedly scratching lines across parchments. Tom made only the occasional note here and there. Hermione herself had changed her note-taking habits. She would just note down the
primary ideas, along with the occasional detail. Then, she’d try to reconstruct the argument herself using textbooks as her sources later.

It made for a more comprehensive understanding.

“Now, permanent or real transfiguration manages to affect actual change by not ignoring the state of the world and the state of things. You have to understand the material you are working with and the material you wish to change it to. You have to know and understand the natural processes that can create such change, because this is what you’re replicating. You have to know how many steps it would take to get there and coax it slowly, making sure that its entire being mutates every step of the way.”

He sighed. “Impatience and rushing through it will only change the spell into naïve transfiguration once more, where you impose your will on reality regardless of its plausibility. The object will certainly revert back to its initial state after some time had passed.”

Dumbledore paused and looked around each and every one of them carefully.

“Ladies and gentlemen, there is a good reason why the grounding theory of transfiguration is such a significant component of this class.”

“Ignorance is a handicap here.”

“Miss Curie, can I speak with you for a moment?”

Hermione had already picked up her bag. Tom Riddle was at the door, his attention fixed on her. “Of course, Professor, I don’t mind. I’ll just tell Tom about it for a bit so he doesn’t wait.”

They walked to just outside the transfigurations classroom.

“Seems like Professor Dumbledore wanted to talk about some things with me. Maybe you should head off to lunch right now before you miss it.”

“What’s the matter?”

His tone was only slightly wondering, but Hermione had gotten used to reading the relative coldness of his eyes. This one was back to being rather chilly.

“I don’t think it’s anything important—it’s probably just because I showed a very good understanding of lasting transfiguration. Really, there’s nothing to worry about.” She patted his arm without thinking and turned back to the class. She could still feel the weight of his concerned gaze on her. It was weird, but Hermione decided not to give it too much thought. Tom’s hackles just seemed to be triggered by anything related to Dumbledore, as if they were two rival seekers moving in the same field, always keenly aware of the other’s presence and what they were doing and always considering any approach as a threat.

(Yes, Ron, I understand and can use quidditch analogies too, the random thought/memory popped into her head).

The professor was rereading his notes on his table.

“Professor Dumbledore? You were saying?”
“Ah, Miss Curie, please, take a seat. I know that you’ve expressed your love of transfigurations, but the thoroughness of your understanding of basic principles still astounds me.” Dumbledore said.

She took a seat in front of the teacher’s desk.

“I’m glad that you think so too, but I have to admit that I have an unfair edge. When one grows up with an awareness and love of science, figuring out how the world works is merely the extension of that. The foundations required for true transfigurations? Well, physics and chemistry are actually even more detailed than natural philosophy.”

Dumbledore’s smile was one of genuine pride.

“You’re not embarrassed at all by having a muggle upbringing?”

“I think both worlds have something to offer, Professor Dumbledore. Everyone should be given the opportunity to walk in both. I find many benefits of being able to walk both sides.” She said diplomatically. She can be diplomatic too (don’t roll your eyes, Daphne). It’s just that she remembered that she had no idea whether she was a muggle-born or a halfblood in the documents that had mysteriously backed her entrance to Hogwarts in this time.

“You have no problems at all in following the class, then?”

“Your explanations are very good, Sir, and they’re always accompanied with vivid examples. I just regret that I’d probably only be attending your class slightly more than half the time at best, because I’d have to balance all the classes I’m taking.”

His gaze was sympathetic. “Advanced Arithmancy, was it?”

“Yes, some of the schedules clashed, unfortunately.”

“I’m amazed that you did not consider simply taking some of the classes next year.”

Hermione’s smile was slightly bitter. “Well, none of us ever know how much time we have left in this life, do we? Besides, I know I can handle this, at least for this year. The material is the one leading to OWLS, right? And I’ve taken the test very similar to it in Norway. I would need to study the differences, but for most of the material, I’m merely reminding myself of what I know and refreshing the fundamentals.”

Why did Dumbledore invite me in for this? This is Head-of-House sort of chat, and I’m not Gryffindor this time.

“Well, I can see that you have a high awareness of your own limits and capabilities.”

Hermione nodded. “Thank you.”

“I’m sure you would thrive in Hogwarts.”

“I hope you’re right.” Hermione didn’t quite do the whole bashfully-accept-compliment-while-downplaying-too-high-praise dance this time. She could only hope her smile wasn’t strained, but she was running out of patience with all these questions whose endgame she couldn’t see.

“I see that you’ve found a good friend in Mr. Riddle.”

Ah. And there we are.
“I don’t know about the good friend yet. I don’t want to impose too much on him, it wouldn’t be fair because I know that Tom’s a prefect and I’m sure he has many things to do,” she said, easily avoiding the ‘good friends’ label Dumbledore brought up and just leave it up in the air. “But he has been extremely helpful while I was in the infirmary—him and Eugenie, really. They visited often and helped me keep up to pace with what’s happening in my classes and brought library books. It’s just unfortunate for Eugenie and I that we don’t share many classes together.”

But she knew that he knew that already, didn’t she?

Her smile was neutral and probably a bit on the lacklustre edge, but it was the best she could do at a moment’s notice. The other alternative had her pinching her nose and going ‘just spit out the questions that I’m sure you have about Tom Riddle, Professor Dumbledore, Sir. Let’s begin about your suspicions that he’s going to be a dark lord in the future’. Which would not go down very well, if at all.

“Is Mr. Riddle aware of your muggle connections, Miss Curie?”

“Even if he didn’t know, it would be highly hypocritical of him considering that he lives in a muggle orphanage, isn’t it? And I may not know much about the British wizarding world, but I’m quite sure that the last name Riddle is not part of the Sacred 28.”

Her tone may be bland as she said this, but she savoured the fleeting look of surprise on Dumbledore’s face before she idly looked away and pushed some errant locks back behind her ear, brushing past the rose that was in her hair by accident. It was mildly entertaining to be able to outmanoeuvre great strategists on the scale of Dumbledore. Oh, she was just lucky that he thought she was a normal transfer student. She knew that.

She just wanted him to know that she wasn’t entering the situation blind here.

“He has told you of his background?” Dumbledore didn’t hide the slight surprise from his voice.

She glanced up. “Not quite like that. I just have a way of drawing these things out, Sir. You would be surprised what you can get with an understanding and sympathetic ear. Sometimes, people just need someone who would listen and not judge.”

Alright, Hermione had to stop there, bite her lip and shut up. She looked down on to her hands, demurely laid on her lap. She was laying it rather thick there, wasn’t she? If she didn’t hold herself back, she was going to blow up into laughter. No, she didn’t really believe that Tom Riddle became a dark lord just because no one understands him (God, he could’ve just made a band instead of going on a killing spree—that’s what every other British guy with an identity crisis did. He could’ve made it big as an international star along the same wave that carried the Beatles. Merlin knows he already has the cheekbones and the smouldering gaze).

She did, however, think that Dumbledore was mistaken for writing him off too soon. She thought he could’ve done more, at least, before giving up.

“And do you listen, Miss Curie?”

“Oh, often,” she glibly replied. “The trick, you see, is to pull him out of that perfect student persona in the first place. If you can’t get past that, you won’t get anywhere since you’re not seeing the real Tom yet.”

“His perfect student persona?” Dumbledore asked curiously.
“Well, for people like Tom…people like us, we don’t feel that people would appreciate us if we can’t show that we’re useful. So, we put all our self into it, 200% if necessary. We become hyper-achieving people. In the grand scheme of things, we’re simply what, extras? Bonus? Cast-offs? We’re not heirs to some prestigious family, or one with an extensive pedigree. We don’t have insane amount of wealth to help give us a leg up in the world. One gets the feeling that we’ll never get anything done unless we reach the very top first so that people would listen to us.”

“It’s just…I wanted to tell him that he didn’t need to do that performance with me, no matter what. Because I get that. I really do.”

Dumbledore had a different opinion, she knew, and for all her respect for him, she couldn’t help but disagree. Treat people like an outcast, provide them with no support network, and the only path they can see open to them would be to become that outlaw everyone already thought they were. Add the dated pureblood hierarchy into the mix, closing up opportunities for people from unconventional backgrounds to climb up socially, well…you have a toxic cocktail waiting to blow up.

She snorted in remembrance, “Well, his real self might still turn out to be an annoying arse, pardon my language. Clearly, he thinks that he’s the bee’s knees just because he’s so clever. Yet I think we can work it out between the two of us by sitting down and talking about it whenever one of us annoys the other too much—you know, like real friends, real people?”

The mood in the room was pensive.

(Hermione could almost remember the numbers she was scribbling as she was charting the flow of history. She had to the oddest realisation that she’d done some of the calculations for the shape of events in the 1940s—to try to understand Grindelwald’s rise and fall, perhaps. It required calculating where the attractors are in that particular locale of the decade’s phase space and she soon noticed which ones are the largest as it would affect the most variables. One force that came up again and again in various calculations was the dated social structure of the wizarding world. It was everywhere and it affected everything. It was the miasma that everyone breathed.

It was a strong force that influenced events and people in the direction of the attractor (cultural trap, the civilisation quicksand) that she’d labelled Rise of Voldemort.

She had a feeling that she was still missing something, though, that even Voldemort himself may be a symptom instead of a cause. It occurred to her that now that she was in the 1940s, here was her opportunity to dig deeper.

No wonder all these things feel so easy to realise, she mused. It was already there in her memories. Future her probably already did some preliminary calculations, and even if she cannot recall when and how she did so, Hermione still had a vague notion of what the results were.)

“You are happy to be his friend, then, Miss Curie?” Dumbledore finally asked again.

She couldn’t quite understand his tone. It was a little strange.

“Yes, I think I do. As much as I’m happy with my friendship with Eugenie, or maybe even Lakshmi, as weird as she is.” Not that she can throw a lot of stones on the weirdness front, really.

Dumbledore’s gaze seemed to be lost in some distant place. Possibly not even the present.

“Oh, I’m sorry, dear. I’ve simply gotten caught up with my memories.”
Yes, she knew how it was. It was why her expression of sympathy wasn’t fake at all. She could also see the point where Dumbledore realised he was talking to a war orphan and she looked away. Hermione often felt bad at getting cheap sympathy from her fake background.

“Now, what are your plans for your independent study?” Albus Dumbledore asked.

Hermione almost groaned, but she persevered. She might have several ideas—ideas that had never seen the light of day when she was in Hogwarts because she’d been too busy staying alive. If she wasn’t doing it for herself, she was helping Harry and Ron do so. Anyway, the point is, there had been lots of distractions. Luna’s method of creating a living flower crown (or garland) was interesting, but she had a feeling that it would probably fit Herbology better.

Transfigurations, transfigurations…she scoured her mind for her old school memories.

‘-

Sometime later, they began to wrap everything up.

“Very well. I’m happy to know you’ve settled in. I think I’ve taken up enough of your time for now, Miss Curie. In any case, don’t forget that my door is always open to you; I feel that you have a bright future in this field.”

Dumbledore finished writing whatever it was that he was scribbling and handed it over to her. It was an explanation, a hall pass, just in case she was late for the next class from lunch because they’d been talking.

“Thank you, Professor Dumbledore.” She wasn’t even lying about it as the pass made it so much more convenient.

‘-

The brunette witch was shoving a book into her book bag while walking (it was the second that had been shoved in now). Lending her hard-to-find books from his personal library covereth a multitude of sin in Hermione Granger’s books. Yet even when Dumbledore did just that after they were speaking about the possible directions of her personal project, every other third question was always related to Tom somehow. Hermione had only been able to suss out the hidden side to these questions after five minutes because of how very vaguely connected they could be.

It was annoying. It was a pain in the rear. It was fraying her nerves and patience. If she heard another question about the books she’d happened to want to discuss with Tom, or whether ‘any of her friends’ had told her of their plans for next Hogsmeade weekend, or what varieties of roses that she liked and how she came to like oranges, she was going to scream.

“Don’t tell me you waited for me.” Hermione flat-out said the moment she walked out of the class.

She’d noticed one Tom Riddle had been leaning against the wall across the door, looking at ease and as if he was exactly where he wanted. She knew that Dumbledore was probably eyeing Tom curiously if he’d glimpsed him at all from class—the professor had assured her that she can go off first as he still had things to tidy up.

“I visited the kitchen and enjoyed some snack. I ran an errand or two and I thought I’d see whether you will come out within three minutes or so of my arrival. It would seem I was right.”

“But you haven’t been waiting outside the door all this time, right?” Hermione asked.
“No, I haven’t. You seem…insistent on that.” He gave her a sideways glance.

“I don’t like the idea of anyone waiting for me for half an hour or more—I don’t even know how long I’d been there talking.”

“I would have been bored within ten minutes of doing nothing,” he replied. Hermione snorted at that, yet she ended up smiling all the same.

“I see. No need to worry, then?”

“Precisely.”

When Tom offered her his arm again once she had her book bag under control, she sighed.

“No offence, Tom, but even with Dumbledore’s hall pass, I might still lose time from the next class and I’m not looking forward to that. We can’t exactly walk at marching speed when we’re arm-in-arm.”

“There’s a shortcut to the Great Hall.” He assured her.

She stared at him in disbelief, but he didn’t back down or even change his expression the slightest.

“Do you have one that would take us there in five minutes?” She asked, incredulous.

He seemed to weigh several known shortcuts in his mind. “There’s one if you don’t mind going down a stone slide.”

Hermione slid her arm into his and let him lead the way.

“At this rate, I’d slide down a basilisk.” She said.

“You’re exaggerating,” he noted, but with that lighter tone that she knew meant he was amused.

“No, really. Find me a basilisk that can get me to the Great Hall in a minute right now and I’ll ride it.”

“Even if it takes other students for snacks?”

She knew that he did not always noticed the difference where she was annoyed and joking about maiming people or annoyed and serious about maiming people. This time, she was too hungry to care, her mind was running a mile a minute, and she wanted to release the aggravation she felt at Dumbledore’s roundabout conversation somehow.

Besides, she’d make sure it was all too outlandish to be true.

“You know those groups of students that act like the hallways is their common room, blocks it with the hive mind of a ball of snot and has the collective speed of a paraplegic slug? If the basilisk can get all of them in that single trip, I’ll consider it. I’ll even consider giving it a trophy cup.”

“This hypothetical basilisk has to get them all at once? It can’t just take, say, half of them?”

“Well, the remaining human mucus balls would undergo mitosis and split themselves up to bring the colony back to its full number. And then where would I be? Still walking behind slow, self-important, gossiping students while you’ve raised the alarm for them and is probably on the run
from the DMLE. And that would just be sad. No, if the basilisk can’t pull off miracles, it’s better if it just keeps a low profile.”

“No killing the people?” He asked, idly. She nodded.

“No killing the people.”

Not ten metres from where they’d been walking, there was an obscenely ugly gargoyle that Hermione was sure was the door to the stone slide. Well, at the very least she could be sure that it couldn’t have been kept for its artistic value. It had a lewd leer that would make satyrs blush, lolling tongue included. It was also priapic to the extreme degree of being able to stab passing people accidentally with its stone member and make it hurt too.

“Well, is this the ideal dating spot if you were angling to get punched?” She couldn’t help asking.

“Pardon?” Tom was more pre-occupied in checking the bricks behind the alcove. Some pulling, a tap with his wand and muttering made the gargoyle walked aside. It had a disgusting swagger too. Why on earth would anyone want to think that level of detail for this, this…thing?

“The gargoyle. I doubt that any girl is flattered by statuary that looks as if it wants to molest you.”

“The less you know about the artistic aspirations of Romulus Rowle, the happier you’ll be,” he muttered. “He wanted to make a set of statues based on Dante’s Inferno, and yet all seven of them seem to represent different aspects of Lust than any other sin, with the last one ending in an orgy of demons. I understand the need for consistency, but why does every sculpture have his face, even the succubae? I assure you, that is actually scarier than an inferi. The other six in the series is stuffed away Merlin-knows-where in Hogwarts. This is the only one that’s been declared fit to be displayed.”

She scoffed. “They declared this fit to be displayed?”

“The second most decent one after this has an animation movement that includes vigorous thrusting.” He deadpanned.

Hermione burst into a partly-hysterical laughter at the absurdity of it before she saw that his expression was completely serious.

“You know all this? You’ve read about the guy who made this and actually know the details of his ‘masterpieces’—are you actually masochistic?”

He took her hand and lead her to the slide but didn’t exactly meet her eye.

“When someone asks you whether you wish to know all the secrets of Hogwarts, try not to say yes immediately and skim the book first. If someone insists that you have to read every page to know the hidden message, it is a good idea to rip through his mind first and see whether he’d already found said hidden message already. If you can’t manage that, then aggressively persuading him to agree to give said hidden message is also plausible.”

“Ah, the good old ‘code-breaking by blunt objects’ method.” Hermione said. “So, you were conned into reading the book.”

“In my defence, I was thirteen.”

She sat down next to him and they slid down together.
They were fashionably late to lunch.

This means that they looked great striding in with their robes billowing behind them, especially when they had the audience to gawk. (She figured out now why Snape seemed to enjoy doing it so much). The downside to that was they were late. Almost everyone was on their respective tables and noticed them and they took the idea that Hermione was intentionally making a Statement.

The problem being of course that everyone had their own idea of what that Statement is, and now each of them was intently spreading what they believe was truer than anyone else’s version to their neighbour.

“Would you like to join me at the Slytherin table?” Tom asked.

She gave him a look that sat between ‘are you serious?’ and ‘do you want to bathe in scorpion venom?’ A split second later she remembered that Tom Riddle would feel comfortable among the maddened crowd of the Coliseum as they cheer for the beasts to eat some prisoners. He wouldn’t think that there was anything unusual with the Hogwarts dining room crowd today. Asking him a question that relied on sparing anyone (even himself) from the baying of the hungry crowd was beyond the capability of his non-existent conscience or mercy.

“Maybe later,” she replied instead, and he displayed his good manners by escorting her right up to Eugenie on the Ravenclaw table.

The blonde witch shrank a little, implicitly wishing that the earth would open up and eat her right now as practically all the heads in the hall turned with almost zombie-like precision in her direction.

“Hermione,” Tom said with a nod. Hermione returned it just as briefly.

“Tom.”

The empty spot was apparently between Eugenie and Lakshmi. Lucretia was…nowhere to be seen? Hmm. The dark-haired Ravenclaw fifth-year, however, was lounging like a sultana with nary a concern on her face.

“Ah, Hermione. Welcome! We were worried you lost yourself on the way here.”

“As you can see, I’m fine. I had a perfectly capable guide.” Hermione eased herself between them. She pretended that the other conversations hadn’t suddenly gone softer to better eavesdrop on hers, or that her words made several girls send her suspicious glances.

Lakshmi turned her head towards the Slytherin table with an appreciative smile as she watched Tom take a seat.

“It is precisely because you have such a talented guide that I thought you might as well use the opportunity to ask him to take you to see the heights.” She said, turning back to Hermione. There were a few more red faces on the table than there’d been before. Perhaps the tea was too hot.

“Take a personal tour of Hogwarts?” The brunette witch asked innocently.

“Yes. Do take a personal tour of Hogwarts. Make sure you memorise all your favourite spots—after all, you might want to…revisit them later. Of course, if you’ve studied the route properly, you’ll find that you can get there faster and with less stumbling over a wrong turn. You can hit
more highlights in one trip.”

There were suddenly more choking sounds on the table. But of course, it might just be completely unrelated. They might have found pieces of bone in their beef, no matter how perfectly easy to chew and swallow it had been all this time. She thought she recognised that tall wizard that suddenly turned towards her and looking incredulous. *Oops, I think that’s Verrault.*

If Lakshmi’s smile was full of meaning, Hermione’s grin was just wide and bright. She was doing her best not to laugh by pinching her own thigh. Repeatedly.

“Mmm, my favourite spots, you say? Well, I’m quite sure I’ve found one of his secret spots today.”

Several people down the line from them, a seventh-year sprayed apple juice all over his complaining friend. Galleons changed hands for at least three different people that Hermione could see. There was actually an outraged shriek somewhere from around the Gryffindor Table that was closest to them. Not that either of them really cared to turn around to check.

Eugenie was whimpering in her spot as she buried her face in her hands, murmuring something about how she couldn’t take her friends anywhere, not even their own House’s table. Hermione saw that Lakshmi herself had started to bite her own lip to hold back her own laughter.

“You did? That’s good for you!” The dark-haired witch congratulated with an almost insulting amount of cheer.

“Well, I know it’s good for him. I mean, the poor man certainly needs to release the tension and I was there.” Hermione paused to drink some water, ignoring the coughing seventh-year witch staring at her scandalously (a prefect, she suspected). “Merlin knows he’s been holding back his opinion on that awful statue for a while.”

“Oh, which one?” Her friend continued without missing a beat.

“Romulus Rowle’s gargoyle,” Hermione said. “A most terrible excuse for a lack of artistic vision. That spot has a great shortcut for going down, but awful cover.”

“What are we talking about, again?” A Ravenclaw third-year asked out loud, looking confused. Hermione gazed at him with an amused look. Almost everyone around him shushing and glaring at him.

“Hogwarts’s abundance of secret shortcuts,” Eugenie answered with a perfect deadpan. “Apparently, Riddle knows one and now Hermione knows it too.”

Lakshmi and Hermione turned to her in surprise. The blonde lifted her shoulders in a Gallic shrug. “What? I do pay attention, you know, even if I sometimes choose not to play.”

The dark-haired witch leaned across Hermione’s lap and grinned, trailing a finger down Eugenie’s cheek. Hermione huffed as she leaned back slightly because Lakshmi’s bust simply took up space.

“But darling, it’s so much more interesting when you do.” She purred, her kohl-rimmed eyes half-lidded.

Eugenie blushed to the roots of her hair, and several boys have poured juice to their lap instead of their glasses. Or have juice poured over their head by their annoyed girlfriends. Hermione grinned.

“Oh, relax, Lakshmi. We can always persuade her properly later.” She winked at her roommates.
At least one sixth-year student had to pinch his nose due to a nosebleed as he desperately asked his friend to *do something* about it. His friend handed him a napkin.

“You know, I’m beginning to miss the peace and quiet I get when I don’t understand you at all.” Eugenie commented dryly, even with the colour still high on her cheeks. Her roommate laughed as she went returned to sitting normally.

“What peace and quiet? You just didn’t notice all the fun and riot going on around you back then!”

Chapter End Notes

Well, Hermione was going to crack sooner or later. Fortunately, she channels it into a bit of harmless trolling. (*Or is it?? Dum-dum-dum*).

Also, if you notice shades of Isaac Asimov's fictional science of psychohistory from his novel *The Foundation* in the works of the modern arithmancers that work with higher maths (as Hermione is implied to be one), you're not wrong.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Attractors***: (mathematics, dynamical systems) An attractor is a set of numerical values that a system tends to evolve towards, for a wide variety of starting conditions of the system.

(more technical detail) an attractor is a particular region in the n-dimensional space of the system. (Mostly paraphrased from Wikipedia)

*(This is exactly the same as the end note I wrote at the end of Chapter 1).

Additional Trivia:

*God, he could’ve just made a band *instead of* going on a killing spree—that’s what *every* other British guy with an identity crisis did. He could’ve made it big as an international star along the same wave that carried the Beatles.*:

Well, seeing that the Beatles became a band in 1960, her suggestion is misplaced by at least one-and-a-half decade. But that’s always the risk run by a time-traveller from a rather distant future. What looks like a distant extreme to the locals (‘more than a decade of difference!’) looks smushed together from the viewpoint of the much farther future (‘well, those events do occur around that time, right? Looks close enough’)

Not to say that her idea wouldn’t be interesting, though, but if we're going period-appropriate, the 1940s, especially after the war, is the era where pure jazz and crooners/vocal pop took off (Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Edith Piaf, Vera Lynn) after big-band swing died due to, well, its members getting conscripted into the US army.
**Lucretia Black:** Seventh-year Ravenclaw, firstborn as well as daughter of the main branch of the Black family (hence the appellation whispered among other students that she is the Black Princess is rather apt). Her father, Arcturus Black (the Third) is the current head of the Black family, her mother is Melania Macmillan. Her younger brother, Orion, is the heir of the Black family and currently in fourth-year (Slytherin) and betrothed to his cousin, Walburga Black. Lucretia and Orion are cousins to the current generation of Macmillans from their mother’s side of the family.

**Lakshmi Chakravarty (OC):** Fifth-year Ravenclaw. Her family moved to Britain from the Kingdom of Assam around a year before she entered Hogwarts. As Hermione had observed in-story before, I’d like to point out that the national identities and boundaries of the wizarding world does not always line up with that of the non-magical world. While non-magical India (which is most of India) is currently a British colony under the British Raj, the magical world is generally ruled by the Indian Empire, a loose confederation of magical kingdoms. She is named after the goddess of prosperity, good luck and beauty, the wife of Vishnu.
Chapter Summary

An insight to the pureblood perspective. The Slytherins socialise and we meet one Orion Black. A glimpse into Advanced Potions and into Hermione’s thoughts.

Chapter Notes

In case anyone is wondering, I would like to point out that I laid the Hogwarts’ House tables for meals and other related business in the following order: Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Slytherin.

Why? Well, obviously, the Gryffindors and Slytherins are going to anchor both ends, as the more distance between them, the better. Placing Ravenclaw and Slytherin next to each other when the academically ambitious kids are mostly split between those two Houses? Not a good idea. Gryffindor is certainly more laid-back academically compared to the previous two, so putting Ravenclaw and Gryffindor side-by-side is pretty safe as they don’t have that as many points of contention. All that remains now is Hufflepuff. Ever the peacekeeper, their spot is now to buffer Ravenclaw and Slytherin.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
confounded some of the overly-inquisitive people on the Ravenclaw table into a confused silence, or at the very least, prompt them to stop talking as if she wasn’t there to hear it. Of course, she hadn’t considered the sheer insulation of one seventh-year that seemed to be the queen of her little clique.

“But really, I thought she’d have better sense for...you know, someone with her unfortunate background. I know I would.” She said it to her little group of personal echoes, who nodded and parroted her opinion back and generally agreed with her.

“Who’s that?” Hermione asked under her breath.

“Stephanie Selwyn, sixth year,” Eugenie said. Hermione thought she could see the blonde’s knuckles whitening when she gripped her knife too tightly.

“I mean, there’s leaving yourself open to opportunities and there’s offering yourself up desperately, you know?” The witch was pretty, but somehow shrewish-looking. Her voice wasn’t subdued enough to be ignored and just at the right pitch to be grating. “She would be ruining both of their futures that way and it’s such a shame for Riddle if she did that, isn’t it?”

“She has delusions of grandeur—she believes her little pocket of sycophants is actually the entire Ravenclaw sixth and fifth years.” Lakshmi said with an affronted huff.

“Someone needs to tell Riddle he’s making a mistake. The perfect wife to support him to the top is certainly a pureblood witch, and he can join her family.” Stephanie went on to a chorus of nods. A few Ravenclaw wizards was either rolling their eyes or putting on a most exasperated look. This included that Ravenclaw that was in Hermione’s Advanced Transfiguration whose name escaped her right now. It started with S. Sid? Shawn? Siddiq?

Hermione was patting Eugenie’s hand. “I’m sure I can find something to shock her beyond talking some time. I’m fine, really, no need to worry about me.”

“But Stephanie isn’t exactly wrong, Hermione,” the blonde softly said.

She turned to her friend curiously. “What do you mean by not wrong?”

“Her idea of any possible permanent ties between you and Riddle as *mésalliance*.” She pronounced the last word the French way. Lakshmi continued for her when she fell into silence once more while passing some pudding to both of her dormmates.

“Neither of you, after all, have the family to back up his hypothetical career in politics. His path would be a hundred times faster with the right witch at his side.”

“Why do you think he’d enter politics?” Hermione’s question was more curious than serious.

Lakshmi waved it away with a sniff. “Please. He’s the rising star of Slytherin. What else is he going to be, a shopkeeper?”

Hermione snorted at the irony. She wondered what Lakshmi would think if she knew that Tom Riddle did end up as a shopkeeper once, in the future she knew.

“On the other hand, I think she’s severely underestimating your capabilities as well as Riddle’s. No one who hasn’t been walking with their hands over their ears and yelling loudly would miss that he’s managed to spin himself some influence in Slytherin.” Lakshmi finished. “Of course, describing Dear Stephanie as anything other than ignorant is wishful thinking. But if you should know, she might be ignorant, but she’s not the worst out there. She still wishes to give you *helpful*
advice to you and Riddle’s advantage, in case you didn’t notice. Most pureblood who hadn’t been paying attention to the two of you would even agree with her conclusion.”

“That you shouldn’t marry each other.” Eugenie helpfully clarified.

“I find it extremely bizarre that the student body finds that deciding on my marriage is the most important issue they need to decide on. And on the first day I join it too,” came Hermione’s dry reply.

“Welcome to what it means to be the idle rich, Hermione,” was Lakshmi’s bemused reply, “and the reality that pureblood alliance-making starts early.”

“As fascinating as it seems to find that I have my own Lady Catherine de Bourgh, I still don’t understand why they need to interfere so much and why I should even care.”

Lakshmi’s amber eyes narrowed as she lowered her voice.

“Well, perhaps you should care, Hermione, if you wish to make your way through the British wizarding world. Reputation is the foundation for connections and social progression. Without it, your post-Hogwarts life would be exceedingly difficult, to say the least. Or, it would be embarrassingly plebeian.”

Eugenie’s brows furrowed. “Who’s this de Bourgh person?”

The tension between them was broken as Hermione bemoaned the lack of people that can understand her literary references. Lakshmi’s chuckle was good-natured.

All of a sudden, she missed Harry.

At the very least, Harry had been an unexpectedly avid reader too (he even read Dickens, to her surprise, and had gone a few chapters into *War and Peace* even as he sheepishly insisted that he was just really, really bored at the time). He knew her references and was known to unconsciously slip a few of his own, to Ron’s chagrin and Draco’s disbelief. Being without access to television during the summer meant Harry had actually gone through the local library collection at a startling speed. He was merely less obsessed than Hermione when it came to school work.

Her other dormmate’s voice was almost kind as she spoke up to Eugenie.

“I’ll lend you my copy of Pride and Prejudice, dear.”

Orion Black was neat as a pin except for his hair, whose thick waves can only be half-tamed had made at least one witch swoon and declare it as either Byronic or Heathcliff-like. He had his father’s aptitude for politics and was a near-identical clone of Arcturus in cold calculation that most forget he was still a fourth-year. His grey eyes were dispassionate when they met Tom Riddle’s.

“Good afternoon, Tom.”

“Good afternoon, Orion,” he greeted back with polite ease and nodded to the rest of Orion’s entourage. “Gentlemen.”

An assorted murmur of “Good afternoon, Tom,” rose from around him. A few may be grudging, but the rest has the good sense not to. The prefect took the seat right across the Slytherin fourth-
year. He did not blink as Fintan Gambol and Humbert Jape scrambled to move aside (and elbow people to their respective left and right to ‘move and make space, you slow berks’) to give him room to sit down. He barely even noted that the fourth-year muscles of Orion Black were taller than him already.

“I had thought you weren’t going to come to lunch at all.”

“I had to settle some of my affairs first.” He said as an empty plate appeared where he was sitting. The house elfs were certainly diligent. Gambol and Jape passed him plates of food without needing him to ask, sometimes their solicitousness was only prompted by the slightest of glances. *If only Abraxas could be so discerning with his choice of minions*, Tom thought.

“I see that you have been escorting an interesting lady.” Orion observed.

“I’ll be the first to say that the rumours can never do justice to her intelligence or capability.”

The two student exchanged glances that seemed to convey more than several lines at once before they continued to focus on their food. It was a contrast to the hubbub that was currently rising and falling somewhere in the vicinity of the Ravenclaw table, presumably around the end where most of the fifth-years were clustered at.

“I’m sure we’d like to know about her capabilities.” Someone muttered.

Gambol and Jape froze. Flavius Flint and Brock Bulstrode who sat to Orion’s sides kept their calm better. It was expected of people with the smarts to be his right-hand and left-hand, but there was no mistaking the slight tension in their frames. The Black heir’s look towards Tom eloquently conveyed ‘do you see the fools I have to work with?’ Tom allowed a smile to slowly spread across his face as he tried to recall the name of the lantern-jawed idiot of a fourth-year.

“Do you, Knatchbull?” He asked. “Would you really like to know?”

Iago Knatchbull sullenly looked up to his right. Fintan Gambol was quietly pulling himself back so that he was not between Tom Riddle and his target.

“Well, if she was brassy enough to prance around in daylight like that with you, it makes sense that she has the skills to be proud of, *if you know what I mean.*”

A few low laughter broke out spontaneously before they were stifled. But the smirks and knowing glances some of the boys were exchanging were clues enough. Tom Riddle found himself growing colder at the sheer gall they were displaying. His anger had been explosive when he was younger, but as he’d learned since then, emotional outbursts gets you nowhere when you’re a no-name nobody’s child. A well-planned and well-executed vengeance, however, is a most satisfactory dish.

Best served chilled, naturally.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid I have no idea what you mean, Mr. Knatchbull.” Tom pleasantly replied as he met the other student’s gaze. Iago lowered his voice.

“Well, *you know.* She certainly has a lithe-looking figure, eh? Pretty too.”

If Gambol leaned back any further, he’d fall off his seat. Orion was enjoying this afternoon’s show from the way he lifted his glass to Flavius’ direction to get him to refill it without taking his eyes from Iago or Tom.

“What would you know of that, Mr. Knatchbull?”
“Some Gryffs saw her when she’s out with the veela on the grounds—”

Knatchbull started choking at this point, his hands desperately grabbing his neck, trying to loosen an invisible knot that was not even there in the first place. His nails scratched his skin in his desperation and red lines marked the surface. Everyone could see the whites of his eyes as they roll up.

“Would someone please help the poor man. It would seem that his bad habit of chewing and talking at once has gotten to him.” Tom remarked, ever the concerned citizen.

Fintan Gambol took that as his cue to move closer to the other wizard’s side (as he was the one right next to Knatchbull anyway) and slap his back repeatedly. One would note that there seemed to be more force used than necessary even as his face turned a shade of puce.

“Harder, Fintan,” Orion added, scarily cheerful. “It never hurts to do your best to make sure that the bone is out.”

Knatchbull received several more blows to his back, including a few from the student sitting at his other side that took the initiative to assist Fintan in his efforts. One noticeably harsh cough later and Knatchbull managed to dislodge a wishbone from his throat onto his plate, its sides red with blood. The poor prat’s throat was probably a bit raw right now.

Tom smiled. “Well, gentlemen, we can all see that talking while eating is not a wise idea to indulge in. Sometimes it’s safer to say nothing at all.”

Several heads ducked and stayed that way as others quieted down. Gambol had returned to his meal with considerably more relief than before.

“Let us hope that the lesson is learned already without us having to witness more accidents,” Orion concluded. “Perhaps I should get Humbert to run to the infirmary for some potion to soothe the throat in case there are other accidents. It’s never a bad idea to be prepared.”

“Merlin knows one never goes broke by overestimating stupidity,” Bulstrode scoffed from his left. For all his square jaw and big-boned look, he was not just a mere bruiser. The wizard plays a mean chess.

Orion’s gaze met Tom’s.

“Yes,” the Black heir said with undisguised amusement. “you have a point, Brock.”

“And discretion might have avoided a lot of fuss entirely.” Flint commented.

“Do you have something to say, Flavius?” Tom asked, his tone mild. Flavius paled.

“I, no. I wouldn’t presume, Tom,” he said, though from the way Tom’s eyebrows rose up, he clearly doubted that. “It’s just…people talk, you know?”

“I’m sure Lucretia can talk to her,” Orion said before Flavius tripped on his tongue over one trivial thing or another and someone had another dinner table accident.

“I would never think to dictate your sister’s social life.” Tom replied.

“Not at all,” Orion said easily. “We’re friends, aren’t we? I’m sure she’d understand friendly concern.”
Flavius poured the Black heir his drink just as the glass began to empty. Humbert did the same for Tom from his right. The rise and fall of the conversational noises around the Ravenclaw table seemed slightly louder than usual, but no one around them commented on it.

“Now that your schedule returns to its usual form, I take it that the study groups are resumed, then?” Orion asked.

“Of course,” Tom answered. Orion nodded in understanding.

“I’ll make the arrangements for the fourth-years. Flavius, find us a place as usual.”

Flavius paused as he did whatever it was that he needed to do to memorise that before resuming his eating.

“Now, my father sent me another long letter about the Minister, and I think I missed half of the horse-trading in Wizengamot that he was trying to describe. For all the length of his letters, he tends to forget to write the background in. Does he expect me to pluck the details about the people straight from his mind? Do I look like a seer to you?” Orion said with some exasperation. He looked every inch the fourth year this time with his look of annoyance. Tom’s expression was one of bemusement.

“One of these days, I need to write back saying exactly that.” He murmured.

“Spencer-Moon is up to his usual tricks again, is he?” Tom asked, referring to the Minister for Magic.

“One of the reforms. Hell if I know about what project he has going, though.” Orion shook his head. “What I manage to get still sounds ridiculous. General civil service examination? There is nothing they can generalise between the ministry that can use magic and the ones that can’t!”

“There are more innovations that he wished to transfer from the muggle civil service, then?” The fifth-year asked.

“You’d have a better idea of that than I do. Do you have the time to help with suggestions for some sort of counter-proposal, for whatever it is that they’re quibbling about this time?” The Black heir finally asked.

“Of course, I can. We are friends, after all.” Tom’s smile showed as much teeth as a wolf’s fanged grin.

“Much obliged, Tom.”

Orion’s smile would fit well on a jackal.

Hermione had expected Slughorn’s class to at least be relaxing. Since he was overly excited by her potential, it was not difficult to guess that he might be excessively flattering, but he would not be as obstructive as Snape had been for Harry, or even as annoyingly vague as Dumbledore’s little interview after transfigurations class. He’d certainly call her to answer several questions and demonstrate her extensive knowledge on potions.

She had arrived late (she wasn’t going to rush through her lunch and get an indigestion—now, she thought that no class is worth getting cramped stomach). Hermione made her explanations about being previously held up by Dumbledore for discussions—not that she had worried that he even
minded. It was another plus of Slughorn’s, she supposed, especially for someone who was a natural teacher’s pet like her. The brunette witch had barely even lifted the hall pass in her hand when the potions master chuckled and assured her that it was completely unnecessary because he believed her.

Her eyebrows rose up. That was really accepting of him.

“Sir?”

“There’s no need to stand on ceremony with me, Miss Curie, I understand what happened very well.”

Really? She hadn’t said anything else beyond she was held up talking.

“You are a talented witch, a credit to your parents and your previous school! It is simply a matter of course if Dumbledore wanted to see just how knowledgeable you are. It is only natural.”

Hermione had felt increasingly uncomfortable as she stood in front of Slughorn’s desk while he apparently paused his class to sing her praises. It was akin to the discomfort of having your parents being too liberal with your praise to your teacher when the whole class is listening in with all the fascination of watching a trainwreck. Her misfortune was such that she couldn’t even send pleading glances to the teacher to just make it all stop.

Slughorn was the teacher and the one playing the parent role in one.

Tom, to his credit, somehow managed to find a natural pause in Slughorn’s monologue. He had unobtrusively slid to her side and gently tugged on her bag. She’d relinquished it to him without even realising it. Merely moments after that, he managed to find the space to speak up.

“Professor Slughorn, I’m sure Hermione is eager to begin the class,” he let that sink in, “as is everyone else.”

“What? Oh! You’re correct, Tom! Of course, of course. You may go back to your seat, Hermione! Now, where were we?”

Tom Riddle had placed her bag on the seat next to his. Of course. She rolled her eyes but went with it anyway. She was late to the class, and she certainly didn’t have time to look around and scout for a convenient spot now. Not to mention all the stares (and probably a few glares) she could feel at the back of her head meant that any other place was guaranteed to be more awkward. She certainly wasn’t looking forward to being gawked at through the class if she’d chosen to sit next to the wrong person.

Slughorn had, thankfully, stopped paying attention to her and returned to his lecture.

“Thanks for saving me a spot, but aren’t you overdoing this?”

Tom was still staring forward, his attention to her the flicker of a side glance. He did not seem the slightest bit perturbed.

“What am I overdoing?”

“Your escorting me? I think this is reaching overprotective levels. The other students won’t bite me, Tom, but they would notice your excessive care and wonder why.”

“Let them wonder.” He said.
“Tom—”

“It’s not a problem at all,” he assured. “I’ve taken care of it.”

What exactly it was that he needed to take care of was something that pricked her curiosity. Since he was apparently aware of the attention he was drawing, she thought she’d warned him enough. Something about Lakshmi’s warnings on rumours and reputations still unsettled her and made her think, but she decided that she could shelve it for after class.

Her prediction on being asked to answer Slughorn’s more difficult questions were spot on. She answered smoothly, easily replying even as it resembled less of Slughorn questioning her and more of a back-and-forth between a master and an apprentice. This was especially true as the complexity of the topic increased. She’d corrected him at one point on the plants used, particularly when she knew there were two closely-related species of nightshade that are easily mistaken for one another.

(Why Neville wasn’t good in potions when he was great in herbology was something she found inexplicable. In the end, she merely chalked it up to the failure that is Snape’s pedagogy).

“While I’m sure this discussion on the different uses of the nightshade family is interesting, I’m sure we can get return to the different variations of the dreamless sleep potion, Professor?” Tom cut in.

Slughorn snapped his fingers. “Right. I knew I was forgetting something. Thank you, Tom. Hermione, another ten points to Ravenclaw!”

With that, the potion master was off once more to the front of the class and Hermione breathed her own sigh of relief. “Thanks. I almost forgot myself there.”

“You’re welcome.”

Not long after that, Slughorn, in his unfathomable mystery, decided to have Hermione assist him in brewing his potion because he was sure something this standard would be no problem for her. It unfolded with the same sense of inexorable doom as a trainwreck.

“I’m sorry?” Hermione asked, not quite sure about what she heard.

“We can brew the potion together,” Slughorn replied cheerfully as he gestured to his cauldron in front of the class. “Based on your accomplishment, I’m sure it would be a great example for everyone else in class!”

The Ravenclaw witch could feel the eyes of almost everyone in the room turning to her yet again. Some, she was sure was glaring daggers or giving her a frosty reception. She was used to being a teacher’s pet, but this is something else altogether! She could already hear some people muttering what could be so special about her. Did Slughorn even realise that singling her out like this was only going to isolate her from the class and make it harder for her to approach her classmates?

“But Professor, I don’t think I’m anywhere near your level,” the brunette began.

“Nonsense! I know the standards for OWLs around Europe, and a little Dreamless Sleep would be no trouble for you at all.”

Damn.

She was wondering what else she could say when Tom raised his hand next to her.
“I’m sorry, Professor, I think what Hermione meant to say was that she would be nervous to brew in front of the class, with you. You’re not an ordinary potioneer either, Professor, as your profile in last month’s *The Quarterly Potioneer’s Review* shows. I’m sure even Hermione would like to be able to learn from you first and see how you work your magic with the cauldron firsthand before she would even consider herself well-prepared to work with you.” Tom said all this smoothly, with a calm and even tone.

“You will not rob her of such an opportunity, would you, Professor?”

His smile was the right balance of respectful and friendly.

Slughorn chuffed at such blatant appreciation of his talents, but more importantly to Hermione, *he actually backed down.*

“Ah, you’re right, my dear boy. How good of you to remind me!”

Tom’s reply was only a polite nod.

“Yes, yes. I cannot possibly take the opportunity to learn away from you. I’m sorry if I was too rushed in my enthusiasm,” Slughorn beamed at Hermione. She managed an awkward smile back.

“It’s alright, Professor.”

He nodded and turned back to the rest of the class. “Very well, we will start with…”

Hermione deflated the moment she no longer could feel the eyes of the entire class fixed upon her like floodlights on a stage. Tom only gave her a side-glance and an amused smile.

They’d both returned to their potion preparation as Slughorn started describing the process in front of the class. Tom had conveniently taken and weighed all the required ingredients before she arrived at class, and now she was reaping the fruits of his diligence and efficiency. They had split the preparation process between the two of them, and soon each of them was busy with their own chopping, cutting and shredding.

“I bet you could take over the world and manage it well,” she said conversationally, still wide-eyed and mildly shocked after being battered with Slughorn’s excessive exuberance and good will all this time.

Hermione had noticed his good mood from the first time she sat beside him and it had not abated in the least. She could not figure out its cause, though, and it vexed her slightly. She considered it a personal failing to lose track of his motivations.

“Really? What makes you say that?” He asked.

“Hmmm. Let me think about it for a moment.”

It was not hard to note the echo of a smile on his face, not for someone who’d talked to him often and was familiar enough with his quirks. She had all those days of being stuck in the infirmary with him being a constant visitor after all, talking about the materials of the advanced classes—yes, she knew she was a swot. Hermione had made her peace with her peculiarities and stopped feeling bothered about them. Of course, if *she* was a swot, it meant *he* was just as bad because she hadn’t managed to bore him.

“Where do I begin? There’s your silver tongue. It’s in the way I’ve seen you defuse various situations with ease. I envy your ability to maintain the peace or move people with no one the wiser
about what you’ve just did. If I could do what you can…” she mused.

Her last sentences surprised him. Oh, he did not even pause in his movements, dropping one ingredients after another to their cauldron without stutter. There was a slight shift in his movement, though—as if he’d been focused before and was now more routine, done by rote because his mind was elsewhere.

“Why?” He started, before shaking his hand in dissatisfaction, grasping for words that he couldn’t find. “That is…I don’t understand.”

Her lips quirked at one corner. “Well, I don’t understand you either, so we’re even.”

She knew it was petty, but it was hard not to feel a little gleeful about his frustration. His potential for destruction, his strangeness and persistence, had frustrated her often enough that she thought a bit of turnabout would be welcome.

“That’s not exactly what I meant,” he finally said. She was disappointed that he took a deep breath instead of outright huffing at her.

“Well, it’s exactly what I meant, so I see no problem with it.” Hermione replied.

He huffed. (Yes! She mentally tallied her victory).

Several more ingredients had gone into the cauldron, either of them taking turns stirring when they weren’t chopping. They made for a pretty efficient team, Hermione had to admit that. None of their movements were redundant.

“You mentioned ‘maintaining peace’,” he spoke up again, apropos of nothing. “For one who said she’d seen me destroy the world, who’d said that you’d stop me from doing so…you use the word peace so easily in relation to me.”

Hermione stopped in her movements, only now realising what had baffled him. She picked up her activity again, because the potion certainly wasn’t going to make itself. She ran through her memories as she went on to weigh and crush some seeds with the available mortar and pestle.

Tom had been in the infirmary once when Dippet was also visiting Hermione. Dippet was worried about the prospect of facing further assassins, possibly sent to eliminate Hermione and perhaps even now scouting in Hogsmeade. The headmaster insisted that they certainly must start improving Hogwarts defences—perhaps linking the old Hogwarts moat to the lake would be most ideal? Before he could start looking for workmen to renovate, Tom started to quote one Hogwarts: A History factoid. He informed them that old moat had been disused precisely as the Hogwarts became unplottable and the anti-apparition wards went up. A previous headmaster had considered it redundant already, Tom said.

In the end, he managed to talk Dippet down from his nerves. (And probably saved Hogwarts who knows how much from unnecessary repairs).

Hell, even Maggie Edelstein found it hard to dislike him as he bore the brunt of her questioning (inquisition, more like) with good humour and the old British stubbornness—to Hermione, it rather seemed as if he was setting a challenge to himself to surpass, that he could ‘play normal’ for a long while. Maggie had grudgingly admitted that he does seem to care about Hermione and he wasn’t a coward about it. (“Well, at least he has character. He’s not someone who’s going to bore you or just give-up midway because it’s too hard,” Maggie finally said).

The Slytherin prefect had a light touch with Eugenie that the blonde wasn’t completely awkward in
his presence; he knew how to give her space and yet not completely ignore her. Then, there was the unexpected way he’d managed to set two of her dormmates on her. He managed to get them to keep watch over his interest (her), at practically no cost to him, and still make it look like he was such a caring person instead of being the interfering lummox that Hermione thought he was (and still did, she merely tolerated it right now).

Tom Riddle was a diplomat through and through.

“But it’s true all the same,” she stated again, with even less doubt than before. “You do have a talent for it.”

His disbelief was palpable. Hermione raised a hand to stop his possible reply and continued.

“One of the things I’ve lost in the war is my ability to lie to myself. Oh, I still do; everyone thinks very well of themselves regardless of truth, for one, but I can safely say that mine is no longer as large as most people’s.” Hermione shrugged with a cynical sense of self-deprecation, lips quirking up.

“You get to…see things in war.” She drifted off for a moment.

They were both off at their own sides, busy with their own work, but she knew he was still listening.

“After that, you either accept the initial pain of learning to live with it or it would eat you from the inside. Of course, you can also go with denial, but I find that it constrains the growth of the self too much that I don’t like it—because that’s what denial is, you know?”

“You force yourself to stay still at one point in time, damn all the experiences you’ve gone through.”

(He and Ron had always been great together during the war. He had a head for tactics and ended up quite good at strategy while Hermione had the logistics in hand and was no slouch on the strategic level either. Then again, one can easily argue that she meshed just as well with Harry—her planning for his improvisation, her mastery of hard facts to his ability to inspire and lead. Yet as peace rolled in and came around, her career and Ron’s only pulled them away from each other.)

“It’s like…those middle-aged women who wore thick powder and rouges as if it could bind their vanished youth to them. To live a fake existence… To live as a version of yourself that no longer exists, to be a ghost of yourself. That’s just sad, you know? I know I don’t want to ever end up like that. Better to continue to fight in battles and even die in one.”

She was rambling again, was aware that she was rambling. Yet he didn’t interfere even once. He was a stranger to her battles, personal or otherwise, and she knew he would not judge. It was so easy to release some of the old bitterness she didn’t even know she still held.

“Do you think being suicidal is better?” He asked.

Hermione was about to give him an exasperated look when she noticed the quirk of his lips. He was teasing her. She gave him a flat, jaded look instead and returned her attention to her cutting board.

“No. I think that to continue the fight is better. Even in times of peace, there’s always something that needs to be done. Don’t let the past drag you down. Just…be in the present. See the present.”

The brunette witch was lost in her own thoughts for a while there.
Ron enjoyed watching or playing quidditch and Hermione still wanted to bring books to the field. Reading was her go-to activity on Saturday night. Their activities didn’t match much either. She and Ron tried hard to find a common ground, to maintain the ties that bound the relationship.

At one point, she was able to step back and admit that she and Ron didn’t have that much in common for a life together. To continue to force it was to consign them both to misery. Yet it was still the beginning of the end, even if it was neither of their faults).

“So… Not being able to lie to myself much—it’s one of the few losses I don’t regret.” Hermione said.

She raised her head and observed him quietly, from the patrician line of his nose, the Grecian curl of his black hair to his lips that she’d found diverted her too easily. (Hormones. It’s all just hormones).

This was him in the present—her present too, now. Slytherin prefect, excellent student. Still more human than monster. Hermione is alive instead of dead, and she considered that to be all she needed to fight for the future one more time. Tom felt her attention and looked up; she wondered when his dark blue eyes no longer seem so unreadable or cold. His focus and curiosity were obvious to her.

“You’re saying that I will destroy your world and I have a talent for peace. It’s quite the contradiction that you’re making.”

Hermione shrugged, unconcerned. The world, she had found, does not always like to fall into the neat little boxes and categories she made for it. And it was fine now even if it used to drive her nuts before.

She’d accepted that.

“We are all walking contradictions, Tom. That, I think, is the greatest advantage of being alive.”

Hermione could see his lips pressing into a thin line. Evidently, he was not quite satisfied with her answer and irritated with the awareness that she had nothing else to say. She smiled without doubt or reservation, enjoying the feeling of petty triumph from confounding him yet again.

Chapter End Notes

Some perceptive canon devotees may realise that the spell Anapneo exists in canon, from the Greek word αναπνέω which meant “I breathe”, that is specifically designed to clear blocked airways. Yes, I’m aware of the spell’s existence, no need to remind me. Why no one who knew it even thought of using it on the unfortunate idiot that is Iago Knatchbull in this chapter, is something I’ll let your observation on the scene inform you.

So, we’ve just seen Orion Black, younger brother to Lucretia and betrothed of Walburga, and he’s a canon character (Sirius’s canon father, if you want to know). Like Lucretia, I didn’t make up his age. He’s either in third or fourth year, and I thought, why the heck not fourth year? It would only help if he’s of a closer age to
most of the cast.

Additional Notes:
(EDIT: Yes, yes, I know I've just recently edited this and this wasn't here the first time I published this chapter. Don't mind me, I just realised why Hermione's words sounded so familiar in my head. It was an unconscious attribution. Thought I might as well clarify here now that I remember).

“We are all walking contradictions, Tom. That, I think, is the greatest advantage of being alive.”: Hermione's final phrase is an unconscious echo (an inexact quote) of the title of e. e. cummings' poem, "The Great Advantage of Being Alive." Hermione certainly wasn't thinking of anything romantic when she said this.
15 Si Vis Pacem Para Bellum

Chapter Summary

A bit of Herbology. The world intrudes into Hermione's idyllic existence and she remembers that this is still 1942. Hermione synthesizes more uncomfortable truths in her mind.

Chapter Notes

Happy Chinese New Year everyone! Now, on to the mood whiplash.

Things get worse. That is all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

15 Si Vis Pacem Para Bellum

Hermione had never really thought why she decided to take Advanced Herbology. It was just there, along with all the other advanced classes she could take. She hadn’t taken it before, but considering that she had taken the majority of all the others, she didn’t think that actually taking one new class was going to make much of a difference on her course load. Not to mention that she’d picked up more than her share of useful spells, knowledge and other related gardening tricks from Neville.

It had been a completely casual decision, made without much thought.

When she was in the class, though (a class that Tom didn’t take, and thus parting their company),
the smell of the earth was a bit like sanctuary.

(It was like Neville’s greenhouse.

He never minded if she dropped in all of a sudden and he never asked for explanations either. Usually she started to ask him about his current project and he’ll happily explain. Soon enough, she’d ask about what she could do, and he’d hand her a shovel, a pot, a pair of hedge trimmers—any tool that happened to be required right then.

Then, they would garden, and Hermione could leave the outside world behind for a few hours. Sometimes Neville’s wife would join them. At other times, she simply watched them with a fond smile and baked cakes for tea.

Hermione still can’t remember her face or name.)

“Miss Curie?”

Hermione was holding a potting in her hands. Professor Spore was looking at her kindly and she could feel the wet tear tracks on her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Professor. One of my friends has a greenhouse and I…” she trailed away, not quite able or willing to explain.

“It’s alright, dear, take your time. You can continue when you’re ready.”

With a firm pat on her arm, Professor Spore moved on, surprisingly nimble in her wellies. Hermione herself hadn’t thought twice about exchanging her footwear for the rubber boots when offered. A few annoyed wizard and witches apparently had not thought about how well their shoes would fare on the loamy ground. She couldn’t help a small smile.

Really, even the regular Herbology classes happened in a greenhouse. Were they expecting something else?

As she pulled her attention back to Professor Spore, Hermione could almost imagine Neville sitting at one of the front rows. As her gaze fell on familiar plants, even the voice that recited the facts back to her inside her head sounded like him. She could almost imagine his arms being the ones that were raised when she asked the question.

Her eyes felt slightly damp, but her smile held genuine joy as she raised her arm. She had only realised now that she took Advanced Herbology because it was her link to Neville.

It was strangely relieving to finish Advanced Herbology and see that Tom Riddle wasn’t waiting for her. It confirmed that he had a life of his own and that he hadn’t somehow become obsessed with her and she could drift alone towards the greater Hogwarts. The afternoon sun was golden and she almost wished she was free to frolic by the lake again and just enjoy the good weather while it lasted. The other students, it seemed, were either shy or cautions with her, but neither were they hostile. She thought it as much more bearable than the frenzied jackals the lunch mob had almost been.

Her thoughts drift back to the class.

Most of the other students in the class had been mostly unobtrusive and no one was trying to draw
her out and start talking about Tom, or whatever current incarnation of the gossip had become. Well, it lasted until she took a box out of her bag and pulled her live crown of flowers out. Then, the attention sharpened and she did her best to ignore it. It helped that she had the orange blossom and honeysuckle fragrances to focus on.

Professor Spore asked whether she had something to share with the class and Hermione said she knew what she wanted to make for her final project.

“Well, let’s hear it then, Miss Curie. We’ve already heard one or two ideas before now, it would be interesting to hear yours.”

She spoke clearly to Professor Spore about what she’d already managed to create, of how she grafted additional honeysuckle blossoms when she thought the branch didn’t have enough flowers yet. She spoke of how she’d found out that Florescentia worked to induce the orange sprigs to add blossoms as long as the branch was allowed to root and given water—she did clarify that she used spells for the rooting and the water. (She was going to give Tom credit for that later, when she could speak to Professor Spore in private and not feed the student body’s overactive imagination).

The gazes that were sent in her direction was more curious now. They were also focused more on the flower crown than on her.

“It seemed that you’ve been quite successful with what you’re creating,” Professor Spore said with approval. “Yet I don’t understand what is it that you wish to do for your final project.”

“This is merely for the first proof-of-concept that to graft separated plant parts into one with magic is possible. I wish to go further.” She insisted. “I want to try grafting plants from different genus. I was wondering if I can get peach, plum and cherry blossoms in one plant. If it’s not those plants, then maybe hawthorns, raspberries and blackberries. If I can manage this, then the ideal goal is to be able to plant one shrub that can grow several kinds of berries—the perfect potted plant.”

Hermione knew that she had them now.

At least one student was salivating at the idea of a bush filled with a variety of succulent berries, while others were simply interested at the possibilities that could be open if it succeeded. Professor Spore agreed that with her initial success; it was both a viable idea and a good idea, a combination that is not always easy to find. She gave her blessings for it before proceeding with the class.

The brunette witch was serious about her final project, but it hadn’t exactly required her to make public her description of how she managed her flower wreath (which she now safely returned to the carrying box she’d made in a hurry). As Hermione added a sticking charm to the box’s top for good measure before she sat down, she hoped that she managed to head off Lakshmi’s concerns about the importance of reputation in this era.

This, at least, could stave off some of the more ridiculous rumours, right?

The more intelligent students would hear from their friends in Advanced Herbology and realise by now that she made the garland, and it was a nifty bit of magic too. She hadn’t managed to get the feel of this time yet, to study her surroundings. It would be annoying if she still had to spend more time and effort managing gossip instead of taking the pulse of history and planning what to do ahead. Really, this was most inconvenient.

She blatantly hoped that there was something else that can distract the students with. Maybe another scandal.
If her first day of attending classes had been marked with dodging the undue interest of the student body, her second was marked with fire and ashes.

She had been one of the earliest students that came to breakfast and thus the emptiness did not come as a surprise. Then, Eugenie sat down, pale-faced, and even the usually insouciant Lakshmi seemed serious enough that she didn’t comment on the dishes at all. Hermione came down to earth and pulled herself from her class plans to check the Ravenclaw table and beyond. Lucretia had just walked over from the Slytherin table, where Hermione suspected her cousin Walburga was at. She herself was not so sombre, but her expression was one of understanding.

“Where do your other relatives live, Hermione?” Lucretia asked kindly.


She wasn’t quite sure where Lucretia was going, but a good chunk of the Grangers had been Londoners through-and-through. The kindness was unsettling—not because she thought Lucretia was not genuinely kind, but because she saw pity there. Her gut feeling raised her goosebumps at it.

“Maybe you should check the news when you’ve finished breakfast?”

Hermione could only nod as Lucretia sat across the table from them, joined by another female seventh year. She turned to Eugenie’s pale form.

“What happened?”

The blonde took a deep breath, seemingly to fortify herself before exhaling slowly. Her voice was wavering when she spoke. “What has been happening for a while.”

“Here.” A different voice added, saving Eugenie from having to speak further.

Lakshmi passed her a copy of the Daily Prophet as she took her tea and toast. Hermione gazed past the bombastic headline of “Attack Attempted at Ministry – Our Brave Boys Repels Them!”

Her brows raised, she began to read.

Hermione had written a note requesting to borrow muggle newspapers from the library, back when she was still stuck in the infirmary. She also checked the back issues too. She knew that Madam Pince appreciated information in all forms, so Hogwarts subscribed to them too (through a third-party remailer in Diagon Alley). Even with her vague memory of how WWII went for Britain, she’d figured out by now that the Blitz had gone on and failed. Britain had been bombed, but it had managed to pick itself up, bruises and all, and now stood proud and defiant. Other than eating up an extraordinary amount of ordnance on both sides of the attack and counter-attack parties, it also took a big chomp out of the Luftwaffe and the RAF still maintained its air superiority over England.

Then, there was the major what-the-hell moment of 1942 as Nazi Germany turned to start hitting Russia and opened up yet another front for them to face, sucking their resources in that direction.

No invasion of Britain was forthcoming anytime soon.

Grindelwald, it would seem, had decided to take matters into his own hands instead of waiting for the magical government to fall along with the muggle one. He had lead a strike team on his own.

Twenty-four dead, forty-five wounded with another nineteen missing, Hermione read. The size of
casualties surprised her—at least until she saw the partly destroyed and burned façade of the Ministry of Magic. A smaller headline on the front page alerted her that three other locations hit last night.

Hermione squinted at the photograph, the wizard and witches low on the foreground still busy running around and silently screaming.

The type of damage didn’t make sense. Most destructive magic was also elemental in nature. The easiest was fire. A witch with a good knowledge of the nature of how water expands as it turns to ice can also do a lot of damage with water by flooding, freezing and then melting them in quick succession (that was one of her favourite bunker-busting techniques).

A lot of the damage to the building was kinetic: destruction of brick and stones by a large force hammering down at it. There was no mention of giants or other races brought in with the attack, so it could not have been thrown boulders. What could’ve been—

“The muggle penchant for violence and war has now spilled into our peaceful home as Grindelwald forces us to yield to his ambitions. The Ministry had been heavily warded, and thus any hostile apparition had been prevented. Unfortunately, it is certainly most understandable that our public servants did not consider that they needed to defend against muggle means. When Grindelwald came with his pawns and started attacking and exploding the front of the Ministry, the Aurors are quick to respond. Unfortunately, the attack came at a time when people were leaving their office, and as such…”

The Prophet was annoyingly unspecific, but as Hermione checked the photographs she had the chilling realisation that the holes and gouges in the walls were the result of explosives. The high number of casualties were owed to the ‘exploding sticks’ of the muggles that had a high rate of fire and unexpectedly breached any attempted shield that anyone attempted to put up. Many mediwitches and mediwizards that came later did not always immediately understand how fatal the small-looking wounds could be as they followed their first reflex to stop the bleeding. At least three of the victims that died later in the hospital were due to unobserved internal bleeding.

Stephen Shacklebolt was the first Auror to straight out use the Killing Curse in desperation, but it was his example of taking out the shooters that rallied the others to immediately start on the more vicious curses they know at whichever violent attacker they found, wizard or muggle. The newspaper was derisive of one of the eyewitness/victims that said that some of the muggles weren’t ‘moving right’ and that he suspected the Imperius.

“It was overly-complicated speculation, as we all know that muggles truly do not need much prompting or excuse to descend into violence…”

It all devolved from there.

When Hermione raised her head from the newspaper, she saw her grim mood reflected in the visage of the other students who had taken a seat at the House’s table. The ones who’d just arrived, whether idle or half-awake, was soon pulled into awareness by the sense of emergency from others who were desperately seeking a newspaper copy to read. Someone was sobbing, not far to Hermione’s left. A look at the back page of the paper gave her a casualty list.

She didn’t know why her gaze crossed the hall and ended up on the Slytherin table.

Tom was…there was no other word for it, Tom was holding court. There had to be several seventh years near him, explaining something in low voice, and few other sixth years. The majority of the people were fifth-years, some of the faces she’d even come to recognise from her advanced classes
Tom Riddle met her gaze and held it for two seconds before he made a most imperceptible nod and then returned to his entourage.

The High Table was filled to full capacity today—all the teachers were in, with varying expressions of solemnity.

“Good morning, everyone!” Headmaster Dippet was using the Sonorus charm, his voice reverberating down the entire hall. “Good morning! Can I have your attention, please?”

The tense hubbub of news exchange, of rapid-fire question-and-answer about who knew who survived from where, had simmered down. Yet it was only to be replaced by a sombre and suffocating silence that wasn’t more comfortable.

“Now, I’m sure you’ve all heard of the unfortunate news,” he paused, looking down. “The Ministry has been attacked.”

The noise level rose again with the panic and concern and the silence that grew while Dippet faltered did not help. Hermione could not blame the headmaster, as he was clearly as stunned as everyone else in the room. She saw the teachers exchanging glances with each other, and Flitwick suddenly stepped up on his chair.

A burst of songbirds exploded from his wand, trilling and chirping over the conversation. When they flew away or disappeared, it had quieted enough for the headmaster to continue.

Dippet began with acknowledging the morning’s news but without going into much detail beyond how the Ministry had been attacked by Grindelwald, and that there was another place or so that was also attacked. With a seriousness she had scarcely seen from him, he stated that they all grieve with London and that he and the entire Hogwarts staff offered their condolences for anyone whose family was affected. Those with affected family members were exempt from class today. He also kindly suggested that they contact Madam Edelstein in the infirmary if they wished for some draught of dreamless sleep or other reasons. He assured the students that they were still safe because Hogwarts was the safest place to be in the wizarding world, and that this was a great thing for everyone to adjust to and all classes from now until lunch is heretofore cancelled.

As Dippet sat down again, everyone returned to breakfast. Hermione thanked Lakshmi and returned the newspaper to her and she easily passed it to the next desperate and late-arriving Ravenclaw. The chatter rose all around her like the rising tide. It was probably morbid curiosity driving her, she knew, but she couldn't help silently casting a spell to help her pick out and focus on farther conversations easily. It gave Hermione the same directional acuity that allowed an owl to pick out the sound of a scurrying field mouse from a tree three stories high, and an even better ability to tune out the conversations she wasn’t interested in.

“These muggle inventions are very frightening, aren’t they?”

“Well, apparently they might not have magic but they’re very creative at killing each other.”

“Grindelwald brought muggles? That’s against the Statute of Secrecy!”

A sarcastic laughter followed. “What Statute of Secrecy? Who in the Ministry could even enforce if against him? Who in Europe can go against him? Besides, the punishment was for when the muggles found out about the wizarding world, nothing was said about wizards finding out new
aspects of the muggle world! Like new ways to die!"

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” a flatter voice opined. “The muggles were mostly dead, right? And there are those obliviators for if they’re not.”

“We should strengthen the magical barriers between the muggle and the magical world.”

“Slytherin got it right, y’know? The muggleborns are just trouble waiting to happen.”

“Hey! Muggleborns also died yesterday! It wasn’t as if Grindelwald care!”

“Yes, but they’re your people, aren’t they?”

“What do you mean they’re my people? Of course not! I’m a wizard just like you!”

“And Minister Spencer-Moon had the temerity to suggest the need to make the Ministry ‘more equal’? Please. We’ll be letting in violent mob like those people in before we knew it.” That one was actually from the Gryffindor table.

“Which reforms is he trying to pass again?”

“Something from the muggle civil service? I think it’s outlandish. Why should we adapt to them? They should adapt to us!”

Hermione didn’t have much of an appetite, but her habits of automatically preparing for countless of raids attached to Harry and Ron’s team helped her. The first was food—her body needed the fuel, so she would provide it and shovel it in. She didn’t have to taste it, she just has to put in enough to keep going. After that she’ll check her potion kit (it was her field healer’s kit), her emergency floo powder, her emergency portkey bracelet, her…

Her hand stopped at her bare wrist.

She was forcibly reminded that she wasn’t home, that she’d never get home.

Hermione tried not to heave at the casual hatred she kept hearing, the vitriol against muggles that was creeping into that against muggleborns.

Through it all, her brain worked.

(Because there was no time when Hermione’s brain wasn’t working unless she was unconscious).

She had always wondered how Voldemort managed to successfully rise in wizarding Britain.

Hadin’t everyone just gone through Grindelwald? Why aren’t they jaded of yet another dark lord, spouting what seemed to her just slightly different nonsense? What made him different from Grindelwald that his followers gladly gathered themselves under his banner? She didn’t seem to be able to find books from around the time period of his ascent that tried to delve into the sentiment of the people, the perspectives of the era. Of course, Hermione had often found most wizards and witches to be supremely uncurious about the roots and foundational principles of magic, what was being uncurious about history compared to that? She hadn’t thought about it much, back when she was still in the future.

(As far as she remembered anyway, but her gut feeling told her that she would probably agree with that assessment even if she had her missing memories).

Now, she found herself revising her initial view. It wasn’t merely bigots who flocked to
Voldemort’s banner—well, at least not at the beginning when he was rather sane. In the wake of Grindelwald’s attack, most people would easily agree with any opinion that stated that muggles are dangerous, or that wizards need to have ways to protect themselves from muggles. Perhaps still many of them would agree if someone expresses the sentiment of ‘we need to make sure of muggleborns’ loyalty’.

*For every action applied, there is an equal and opposite reaction.* Newton’s third law.

It was the same way that the Counter-Reformation movement was set off by the sweeping wave of the Protestant Reformation. Voldemort’s rise did not happen in a vacuum where nothing of significant happened. The wizarding world was not static. Grindelwald rose in England, left for the continent and never forgot his dreams of conquest over Britain. Somehow, he had acquired a muggle’s cat’s-paw. Somehow, he’d performed attacks with muggle forces and acquired muggle technologies.

(Somehow, everyone is still talking about the bloody goblin wars in *her* Hogwarts history class—does no one see the need to actually include the last wars in it so people could learn from it?? Hermione made a note to herself to do something to change the history curriculum in the future.)

Add Minister Spencer-Moon’s reforms (whatever they were) that were apparently seen as biased to non-purebloods and the neo-traditionalist factions had real concerns, real tragedies to rally the crowd behind them. They can rightly argue that the muggle world was dangerous, but they’d easily bent that perspective to its false opposite by insisting that everything traditional had higher value than anything new. Everything that came from the wizarding world held a higher meaning than those that came from the muggle world. This cracked-mirror comparison will go full circle once they start including ideals of blood purity into it, in which they declare that those with pure magical blood are inherently *better* than those that came from muggle background.

Dumbledore might have fought and defeated Grindelwald at one point in history, but he did not seem to notice the cracks that had been developing in society in the aftermath of the War. He left the people discontent, grumbling and eyeing each other with suspicion.

She gasped. That large strange attractor she’d seen in her preliminary arithmantic forecast for the 1940s in the future? She may have found it.

“…Hermione?”

Lakshmi was clapping her hands in front of her face. She had a suspicion that her house mates had been calling her name more than once. Hermione shook her head.

“Sorry if I’m a bad conversationalist right now, but I really need time to think.”

“Oh. It’s alright. We understand.” Eugenie said.

With one last weak smile, Hermione’s thoughts turned inwards once more.

She began to wonder if Voldemort’s first attacks could even be classified as acts of terror or if he was rooting out known Grindelwald sympathisers that the DMLE couldn’t touch. If so, he would have seemed like a hero, a saviour. He is Richard Lionheart, favourably thought of by the common people as they see him fulfilling a noble cause when he left for the crusade.

Voldemort swooped into the wizarding world like a victorious general.

He is Caesar, leading his triumphal procession and walking up the steps of the senate of Rome to be crowned Emperor. The difference here being the senators either love him or fear him too much.
to move against him and stop the fall of the Republic. Yet in the wizarding world, he managed to achieve what Caesar didn’t, as most purebloods fall in line behind Voldemort and helped him wage his war.

Voldemort was lauded by an inflexible society consumed by fear. He was the populist head of the mob, yes, but he was also chosen because he represented their deepest desires and the ideals they hold. His name and his image were the answer to the Rorschach ink blot of their worries.

Ecce homo.

Behold the man. Behold your saviour, which you made (chose (selected)) in your own image.

He is an autocrat because that was what many in the wizarding world saw as needed to fight the phantom that is their fears. Muggles. Untrustworthy muggleborns. Envious Squibs. Opportunistic blood traitors. They love his fearlessness because they are fearful. They are beguiled by his confidence because they lack conviction in their society.

It was the anxiety of a people that drove his rise. This bubbling, seething mass of suspicion, this rot that tainted all it touched, was a carcass that drew any sharp-eyed scavenger. She suspected this social discontent might even begin the closest thing she’d ever see to a nation-level hysteria—and that this was the strange attractor in the system.

Poisonous ground breeds poisonous trees. Later on, the number of horcruxes increased and the spiral of insanity began as he and his followers grew more and more extreme in their positions. Violence became a common solution to problems now. The people are mostly split into two—those who saw nothing wrong with that, and those who were too afraid to say anything. The ones that are actively opposed to him are too few, too easily ignored by the rest for now.

The conquering hero had turned dictator, the feedback loop of brutality has reached its predictable extreme and the demagogue finally showed his true face. Everything had gone full circle and the wizarding world had a full-fledged dark lord once more.

Live long enough and you’ll see yourself become a villain.

That adage was certainly true of Tom Marvolo Riddle.

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Chapter End Notes

Short chapter compared to my usual, but this is the natural point to stop.

In which I did my best to show myself that the title is relevant to the story, instead of tacked-on term I picked from chaos theory and dynamic systems. I’m also trying to write a plausible (reasonable) way for someone like Lord Voldemort to have risen in a post-Grindelwald wizarding world. There has to be a reason why they seemed to accept exchanging one dark lord for another.

There is also a reason as to why one of the story's tag is slice-of-life in times-of-war instead of plain ole' slice-of-life.

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List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Luftwaffe:** (WWII Military History) The aerial warfare branch of the combined German military forces during WWII. Note that I say *combined*? This is because Hitler believed in the importance in keeping air superiority, and interpreted that to mean that all the air combat capability should be lumped under one branch. What does this mean? This means the German navy doesn't get airplanes. The inter-service differences made coordination a bit lumpy, because all those coastal and carrier planes the navy needed are technically under the Luftwaffe and are only being lent to the navy. I didn't even touch the turf wars yet. If you think the English bureaucracy was a pain in the rear during this era, as the air barons argue over budget and design with the Ministry of Aircraft Production and the Treasury, you haven't seen the Darwinian way Hitler pits his underlings against one another.

Yeah, don’t ask me, ask the dude with the weird moustache.

**Si vis pacem para bellum:** (Latin) *if you wish for peace, prepare for war.* I see it more like, there’s no way you can live peacefully as a nation if your neighbour thinks you’re easy picking and decides to invade one day. Peaceful is nice; being seen as harmless is hazardous to one’s health.

**RAF:** (WWII Military History, Military) The Royal Airforce, the RAF is UK’s aerial warfare force. Formed at the end of WWI, replacing the old *Royal Air Corps*, it has continued to exist and thrive through WWII and all the way to the present. Unlike the Third Reich’s insanity, the UK *does not* restrict the ownership of planes to the RAF; even the Royal Navy pre-WWII has its own air fleet that covers carrier-bound planes, among several other types.

**The Blitz:** (WWII History) The systematic bombing of London by the Luftwaffe during WWII, lasting from 7th of September 1940 to 11th of May 1941 (8 months, 5 days). It’s at the tail end of the *Battle of Britain*, the greater battle for air superiority over England between the Luftwaffe and the RAF. They started attacking London when it was clear that the initial plan of bombing the British war industries and logistical infrastructure wasn’t working. Then again, the bombings weren’t concentrated or systematic enough to deliver knock out blows.
16 Mobilisations and Responses

Chapter Summary

The smell of fear in the morning. A scene from the Slytherin common room. Hermione goes to the infirmary. There are guests. Shanghaied!

Chapter Notes

From this chapter onwards, you'll figure out why I tagged this story with 'fantasy medical stuff'. I consulted with my sister on the details, but any remaining mistakes are mine rather than hers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

16 Mobilisations and Responses

Tom Riddle moved through his common room with the ease of a shark swimming through the water. Where the slightest swirl of blood can trigger a shark’s frenzy, for Tom, it was the levels of fear he could almost feel thrumming over his skin as his gaze flicked from one student to another. That hunched shoulder, the posture of someone curled into himself—anxiety, emotional pain. Grief? Possibly. A student was wringing her hands as she talked to her friends. One was solicitous with her hand on her arm, the other was holding a handkerchief for herself.

The room was so high with fear and Tom held back his smile. He loved the smell of fear in the morning. Fear was opportunity. The fearful masses looked up to a strong leader to save them.
A second year outright crying—

He altered his path casually and stopped in front of the girl.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s my mother. She works at the Ministry and—and—and I don’t know—”

She wailed. Tom patted her shoulder while he deftly looked out for another female present. There was someone he would rather not interact with for any extended period, but needs must and all that.

“Miss Avery, I’m sure you can help Miss…” he gazed down, and her garbled muttering of her name managed to jog his memory. “Miss Spavin here with her mother.”

Thin, with a highly polished façade, Jemima Avery was the last thing on earth that was motherly. Still, she wasn’t going to turn down the opportunity to talk to him. She smiled, showcasing pearl-white teeth behind painted lips.

“Oh, of course, Tom.”

Tom gave her a perfunctory nod and walked away, always keeping at least two paces between them. Last year, she’d ‘accidentally tripped’ when he was walking past her and she clung to him like a howler monkey until he carefully unpeeled her fingers from his self. He preferred to never repeat it. She didn’t seem to have enough intelligence to actually learn from just the first or second application of the Cruciatus Curse, and he really wasn’t in the mood to spend the time needed to break her and train her.

There were more interesting and important things to do.

She swayed a little too far to the right at one point and seemed puzzled to have encountered nothing, but Tom had long since passed her.

“Tom,” a long-faced seventh-year greeted him and made no move to walk away. He was actually rather thin and non-descript, but there was a purpose to his movements today.

“Oswin,” he greeted back with furrowed brows.

He remembered there was no unfinished business between them. As for Oswin, his family were the Orpingtons. Career bureaucrats to the bone, there was always at least one Orpington in the Ministry of Magic at any one time.

“We have a developing situation at the Ministry. We need to respond to the emergency.” Oswin said.

Ah, we have the source of fear now.

“Gather everyone from the sixths and sevenths then.”

Oswin nodded. “I’ll set the meeting at breakfast.”

“Tom, I think you need to see this.” Another voice called out to him.

It was Abraxas, running into the common room from the outside, the Daily Prophet in his hand. “The Ministry of Magic has been attacked by Grindelwald. You know what the craziest thing is? He brought muggles, Tom, muggles!”
Silence fell over the room before it exploded as everyone tried to speak up at once. It was only Tom’s cracking of a fire-whip towards the ceiling that quieted the room. He released the spell from the end of his wand.

“Thank you, Abraxas, for actually inducing panic in the common room,” Tom’s smile did not waver, but Abraxas blushed to the roots of his hair all the same. The few of Tom’s fellow fifth years that had come to stand by him had to hold back the urge to step back as they felt a distinct chill running through the air. He turned to the crowd that was now hanging at his every word.

“Now, the first thing you need to know is that you’re safe here. There is scarce any other place safer than Hogwarts.” He repeated almost word-for-word the lines he’d told Dippet a week ago. There was a strange kind of irony to it.

Orpington’s partner, the seventh-year prefect Emma Eccleston, had stood next to him with some information of her own and they were comparing notes in low voices.

“We have no idea how bad the situation is, but—” Tom raised a hand to forestall the questions, “but that is merely a temporary situation. We’ll find out more as the news are updated and we of Slytherin House will support each other. We have people whose parents and relatives are in the Ministry and who may have contacted them last night and may have news. Some of these are Messieurs Orpington and Montmorency over there along with Miss Eccleston—please do not rush them.”

There didn’t seem to be a change in his tone, it was still as polite and level as before, but there was a snap of something in the air stopping them from mobbing the three seventh and sixth years.

“They will confer with others who may also know, and they will make a list. After breakfast, they will either put up a list in a roll of parchment on the common room noticeboard, or you may ask them if the list is still unfinished then.”

He took a deep breath.

“As for now, we will go to the hall for breakfast and we will not let Grindelwald scare us. We are wizards. We are witches. We can all cast a spell at the flick of our wands, can’t we? We can summon fires, call up shields and conjure beasts? What do we have to fear?” Tom asked, his smile seemed to draw in the audience and they soon find themselves nodding if not outright answering his question to themselves.

“Each of us with a clear mind can defend ourselves well. Panic, and you might as well lose your head.”

He paused to let this sink into everyone’s mind. He could see postures straightening and tremors easing up. Shoulders wound down and wands were no longer held in such a tight grip.

“Now, let us descend upon the Great Hall with our heads held high. We will show the difference between Slytherin House and everyone else.” Tom said this with such confidence that they couldn’t help but believe in it too.

“Slytherin! Slytherin!”

There was a rousing cheer at that. It was noticeably started by the usually unassuming Melchior Nott before it was picked up by Fintan Gambol and Humbert Jape at some unseen sign of Orion’s. The crowd was sufficiently fired up to follow on its own after that and predictably spread it to everyone. Tom stood to the side along with Orpington, Eccleston and Montmorency—the other
two Slytherin prefects had also appeared alongside them. One of them were unfortunately Jemima Avery, but one works with what one has. They took their turns to talk to any Slytherin who wanted to talk, who needed further assurances. Tom applied slightly more strategic selection to this activity than the other prefects as he was greeting members of notable houses.

“Good catch, Tom,” Orion commented as he passed.

“Thank you, Orion.”

Their knowing smirks could’ve easily been mirrors of one another before Orion continued on his way at the head of his own entourage; the younger Flint and Bulstrode near him, Gambol and Jape followed somewhat loosely behind as they picked up their pace to catch up.

Alphard Black (fifth-year Slytherin) on the other hand, was too enthusiastic in the way he pushed through the crowd and shouldered Tom in delight as he stood beside him. His hair looked as if he had been standing on a cliff and had it blown all over the place before he came in, though how it looked dashing instead of messy no one knows.

“Tom! We haven’t seen you for a while what with Slughorn monopolising your time, but once we do, you’re gentling the beast! Calming the masses!” Alphard crowed. It could be argued that his voice was powerful enough to carry to the whole common room. “That was a truly fantastic call to House unity!”

Tom’s smile was slightly fixed. “Well, we all have our duties to perform.”

“Nonsense! That was well beyond duty and you know it.” He gave Tom a light pat to his back; it was still of significant force as he had inherited the big bones of the Crabbes from his mother. His smiles were entirely good-natured and easy.

As Alphard was the heir of a cadet branch of Blacks, Tom only took a deep breath with forbearance. Besides, the other Black heir truly bore his house members no ill-will for their success and was genuinely happy for them. Tom’s success delighted him most, perhaps more so than if it had been his own. He was not a scheming young man. In a way, Tom could appreciate someone who was not complicated to read.

Abraxas who’d been standing right next to Tom before Alphard had shouldered him out of the way was grumbling under his breath about line-cutting Blacks.

“Don’t you have breakfast to be getting to?” Abraxas grumped to Alphard.

“Ha! Don’t you have breakfast to go to? I’m completely fine here.” He took the opportunity of hanging next to Tom to greet and wave any familiar fifth-years that also happened to be passing.

The other Black heir was completely chipper even as Abraxas shoved him back.

Tom gave Abraxas one look to remind him that he was still on the other side of Alphard and still had to suffer the indignity of that shove. The awkward and pale grin he gave in return was accompanied with him pulling Alphard to the side slightly as he reminded the other wizard.

“Stop crowding Tom, you dolt.”

Alphard snorted even as he gleefully pulled Abraxas into a headlock. “You’ve been ‘crowding’ Tom just the same before I came. I think you’re just jealous I replaced you!”

Abraxas managed to elbow his way out of that, but he was too annoyed not to start roughhousing
“Why should I be jealous of you?” He scoffed.

Melchior Nott loudly harrumphed at their display of childishness and was of course, soundly ignored. Tom continued to chat with other members of his house, mostly the heirs and firstborns.

No one had thought it strange that it was the fifth-year prefect that was making the general House-wide announcement than the seventh-year Orpington. Oswin himself was quite content to be in the shadow of a much more charismatic leader than he was.

The prefects Orpington and Eccleston had begun to lead everyone away, thankfully including Jemima (the pair of them were quite good at being discreet). Alphard waved at Tom and the rest as he headed out first, most probably because he wishes to catch up with his cousins. Of course, he might also be dodging his sister Walburga (seventh-year), who was just coming up and took it as her personal responsibility to praise Tom’s steadfastness. She’d been monologuing him into boredom before she finally left.

Tom trailed behind them all with Abraxas Malfoy and Melchior Nott.

“That was some excellent impromptu speech,” Abraxas congratulated.

Nott snickered. “You thought that was unplanned? Why, dear Abraxas, I have this bridge I would like to sell you…”

“Oh, come on. You’re just guessing, right? Is he guessing, Tom?”

Tom knowing smile said it all as the three of them walked out of the Slytherin common room. “One has to always be prepared for the worst.”

“You can’t have prepared for the Ministry to be attacked,” Abraxas said in disbelief.

“I have to be prepared for something to be attacked. How long has Grindelwald been sowing chaos in the continent as well as making promises to come back?” Tom asked. His every moment was deliberate with no uncertainty in them; this was a wizard comfortable in his own skin.

“Well…five years, at least?”

“Then an attack really was just a matter of time,” Tom murmured easily. He still received disbelieving looks from the blond Slytherin.

“But that’s…”

“Plenty of time to be prepared,” Melchior finished, eyeing Abraxas’ lopsided tie with distaste. It was enough to prompt the blond to start checking himself in a standing suit of armour. “Though, to keep all that speech in one’s head for more than a year? To perhaps even improve it from time to time? That takes dedication.”

“Actually, I don’t memorise it verbatim either,” Tom said with amusement.

“I…no, you know what, I don’t think I can believe that either. It’s too smooth,” Abraxas said, shaking his head in denial.

Tom’s chuckle followed Abraxas’ many proclamations of either disbelief or impossibility, while Melchior poked and prodded at the blond’s arguments with his sharp wit but never quite offering
one himself either. When asked by Abraxas, he easily conceded that no, he couldn’t imagine
pulling the speech off so naturally without remembering it by heart either.

He ignored Abraxas’ outraged complaints. “You just bloody guessed! I should’ve known!”

“I certainly didn’t guess.” Melchior insisted.

“You just said—”

“I know what I said. It’s just that I always considered Tom as the exception to…well, anything that
crosses my mind, really. So, it’s just natural that he’s planned for this.”

There was a knowing glimmer in Tom’s dark blue eyes, but he neither confirmed nor deny Nott’s
words.

Hermione was in a daze.

She asked Eugenie, of course, making sure that she was fine and that her family was also fine as far
as she knew—Père Delacour didn’t work at the Ministry, and the French Ministry-of-Magic-in-
Exile certainly wasn’t listed as one of the places attacked yesterday. She couldn’t help sighing in
relief for her friend. Checking that was the least she could do for the witch who’d been so helpful
during her time in the infirmary. The brunette had only glanced at Lakshmi before the other witch
smiled and assured her that she had no worries.

“Well, it’s not as if I still have many family members to lose, really. It’s not that hard to keep track
of the remaining ones.”

Hermione raised her head sharply at that, but Lakshmi’s slight amusement instead of worry eased
her own concerns about her friend.

“Really, I’ll go back to the Tower with Eugenie while we wait for more news, yes? And you can
go off and do whatever it is that you do to try to fix this—”

“Lakshmi, what happened to your family?”

“My father can’t get any deader than he already is. He’s already in more peace than all of those
people in St. Mungo’s, same with my oldest brother, my two uncles and their families,” she insisted
with her usual bluntness. “Now, Hermione, I’m sure you have a plan?”

“I…” well, not a plan exactly, but she couldn’t sit still and do nothing. Even without all of her
memories she remembered enough. She kept seeing flashes of wounded people; cuts going straight
to the bones, severed limbs. There was the time she kept trying to resuscitate a young Auror until
someone pulled her off the dead body, and the way Harry’s eye popped as an undead starfish of
the darkest magic gouged it from the inside—

“Hermione!”

Lakshmi’s voice pulled her back and she knew what she could do. “I need to do something and I’m
not sure if St. Mungo’s prepared to deal with the effects of some of the muggle weapons. I was
thinking of going to Nurse Edelstein and compare notes. Maybe we can write a recommendation
for St. Mungo’s, or something quite like it.”

“And you know all of what a muggle weapon could do?” Her friend asked.
“I know how to treat some of the wounds, and I think that’s better than nothing.”

“I trust you. Now go to the infirmary and work your overactive brain.” Lakshmi patted her hand.

With a smile that she didn’t quite feel, Hermione stood up and left.

‘-

“Hermione?”

Maggie Edelstein looked up, surprised to see her longest ex-patient walking down the length of the infirmary hall once more. Hermione watched a few straggling students walk out. They either had minor injuries, or they were only here to ask for potion of dreamless sleep.

“You haven’t been a nurse for too long, right?” She asked without preamble.

“Hey! I’ll have you know, Missy, that I’m a competent professional!”

Hermione shook her head. “That wasn’t what I meant. I mean, you haven’t left school for long, so your medical education must still be up-to-date, right?”

She paused. “Yes, I suppose. Why?”

“Do they make a point of teaching the trainees and novices how to treat bullet wounds?”

“Bullet wounds?”

“The muggle’s ‘exploding sticks’,” Hermione waved away impatiently. “They have ammunition that they spit out at high velocities. If the mediwitch or mediwizard on the spot just heals the wound without checking since it seemed so small and clean. Goodness knows if the bullet had hit a bone on its way in and fractured or broken something. And I haven’t even started on the internal bleeding.”

She could see Maggie Edelstein paling even more the further she spoke.

“Are you sure?”

Hermione met her gaze dead on, her voice had stayed no-nonsense, professional. “I suggest that no one use Accio to pull the bullet out. This is not a mere splinter of wood, it’s a piece of metal around the width of your fingernail. You’ll probably tear an exit wound that way—Morgana help you if the lung or guts is in the way. Punctured lung can easily be patched temporarily with magic…if it was noticed in time.”

Her smile did not reach her eyes at all. “A leaking gut is a different issue entirely, isn’t it?”

She could see Nurse Edelstein closing her eyes for a moment, her decision was clear the next time she opened them.

“Alright. You make some very good points. How do you even know these things?”

Maggie Edelstein had started walking towards the Head Nurse’s office. The brunette followed her brisk pace.

“War.” Hermione shrugged when the nurse looked askance at her. “If you’ve seen your best friend screaming as his eye popped out like a rotten grape when someone summons an undead ancient starfish into the vitreous humour, well. Suddenly you want to train up a particular set of skills.”
She could see Maggie’s jaw tensing from the side, right up to her temples. The nurse pushed the doors to the office open and Hermione walked right in behind her.

“That’s…I don’t think I’ve even heard of that spell.”

Hermione’s determination had a dark edge. “Off the top of my head, I can tell you ten spells with similar effects that still weren’t exactly the spell I was looking for. Give me a parchment and ten minutes and I can recall the rest I’ve researched trying to track it down—just a few more spells short of thirty and half of them obscure. I still haven’t figured out what it actually was, though that’s probably because I haven’t managed to gain access to some truly extensive libraries of dark magic.”

The older witch folded her arms in front of her chest. Maggie was shaking her head.

“I’ve been wondering about this for a while, Hermione. There’s first aid knowledge and there’s medical one. What you know have gone past the first category for a while now.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “And this matters right now why? I’m not asking to lead an open brain surgery here! Merlin knows I’m not a specialist. I’m not even a full mediwitch and I know it, but combat injury? I’m sorry to say that I’ve seen enough to last several lifetimes. I’m just asking for you to listen. Have I said anything wrong before? Mislead you?”

The two witches held each other’s gaze and neither was backing down. Maggie was the first to sigh deeply, one hand weaving through her copper hair that shone brilliantly under the morning sun.

“Slughorn made notes about your comments on your own condition on your medical file and he praises it.”

Hermione’s smile was lopsided. “And we all know that Slughorn is known for his impartiality.”

Maggie snorted at that. “Well, no, but he’s not completely blind on the medical side for some types of injuries. He can still give some slow interns I know a run for their money. If he says you know what you’re talking about, then you do.”

“Thanks. So, how are we going to do this? Are we going to write a report and stamp your name and Slughorn’s on it?”

Nurse Edelstein frowned. “What?”

“Slughorn’s name and yours, Nurse Edelstein. I’m just a mere student. It would be more believable if the name on it was someone more well-known like Slughorn, or a medical professional like you.”

Maggie shook her head. “No.”

It was Hermione’s turn to be baffled. “What?”

“If we’re doing this together, then your name is going to go on it as well. I’m not going to claim credit when it’s not due.”

“But most people wouldn’t think—”

“Most people will bleed to death if they don’t listen to medical professionals,” she firmly stopped Hermione’s line of argument without another thought. “Now, tell me what you know and we’ll
hash out what to write down together. I can contact several of my colleagues by floo to hear what they know and don’t know, and I bet we might even have something done by lunch.”

It was hard not to be floored at the amount of trust, of belief that the nurse had in her.

“Thank you. You won’t regret it, I promise.”

Maggie’s grin was confident. “Oh, I know. I’m just going to enjoy knocking down some of the snooty medics that I know off their high horses.”

Nurse Edelstein was a force of nature in her own right.

Oh, Hermione enjoyed the parts where she floo-called several other nurses and mediwitches and mediwizards that she knew that happened to be off-duty and free to take her call. The nurse asked them about what they knew or heard about the types of injuries from yesterday’s attacks, and it was soon clear that not all of the people in the field recognised what had created the injuries. There was one perceptive mediwizard (internist) and one senior nurse who had seen the bloody Crimean War who started checking the condition of the internal organs of the people that were too weak or losing consciousness, even if it seemed that they didn’t have any injuries. The number of tests Madam Álava ran was frankly intimidating to hear even to Hermione. Unfortunately, the two highly-skilled professionals were the exception to the rule. Most seemed satisfied if they didn’t see any surface wounds or see any bruising.

Ironically, it was perhaps the ease with which magic can close up bullet wounds that made the worsening conditions of some of the patients harder to check.

When Nurse Edelstein reached back to the healer and the senior nurse and told them what she’d found, that most had no idea, they were furious. Furious enough, in the case of nurse, to stepped right into the fireplace and arrive at Hogwarts.

“What do they teach in schools these days?” Esmeralda Álava strode with the confidence of her experience, her all black outfit and tall black hat gave her a quintessentially witchy image. Her grey hair was bundled tightly in a bun and her lips were pinched. Maggie couldn’t help but grin.

“Oh, you know there wasn’t even much of a nursing school when you were young!”

She sniffed. Her voice was still strong, still strident. “It doesn’t mean we should all be barbarians and let the standards fall. Oh, hello, dear, I didn’t see you there.”

The witch turned her head in a distinctly bird-like gesture, her still sharp and observant eyes fell on Hermione.

“This is Hermione Curie, the student with the idea that we need to disseminate the knowledge on wounds from muggle weapons. Hermione, this is Esmeralda Álava, our Grand Duenna of the Order of Nightingale.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Ma’am.”

“Good.” Her reply was brisk and her face seemed to naturally be severe. “And please, what grand order, Maggie? We’re nurses and we keep people from dying. It’s as simple as that.”

“She singlehandedly established professional nursing standards in wizarding Britain.” Maggie mock-whispered to Hermione.
Esmeralda harrumphed. “Rumours and exaggeration. Grow old enough and they collect like hairballs from a cat’s vomit.”

Hermione blinked at the salty language.

“Well, they don’t just happen like that for everyone. It’s only around you, Madam Álava.” Nurse Edelstein insisted.

“Granny.” She corrected. “You’ve actually volunteered across the Channel. You’ve earned it.”

Maggie’s expression was almost fond. “Alright. Granny Álava.”

The fireplace lit up again and soon a distinguished, middle-aged man with brown hair took his hat off. His wire-rimmed glasses were made of gold and seemed both functional and expensive.

“Oh, Madam Álava is already here? Well, this promises to be interesting.”

“Maggie is up to her usual tricks again, and I’ll be damned if I don’t get a front seat to her muckraking.” Madam Álava explained.

“I’m not muckraking.” The redhead insisted.

“Well, if you prefer we stick to the word ‘scandalising’ as your old nursing matrons would like to put down on your reports, we can do that too.” The senior nurse bluntly said. “Orpington, let us watch as Maggie scandalise some of St. Mungo’s old guards. If she can throw in some subtle and even not-so-subtle questions about their competence, I’ll treat everyone to dinner.”

She was not the slightest bit moved by the colour that started to flood Nurse Edelstein’s cheeks.

“You’re part of St. Mungo’s old guards!”

“I’m Emeritus, dear. I can be as critical as I wish, and they have to shut up, listen and call it wisdom.” Esmeralda said, her eyes gleaming with silver.

“So, you were saying that a common effect of these exploding sticks is internal bleeding?” The mediwizard asked, clearly taking the safe road of not engaging with Madam Álava at all.

“Yes, Healer Orpington. This is Hermione Curie here and she has experience working with wounds from muggle weapons. Hermione, this is Oleander Orpington, Healer of St. Mungo’s.”

“Charmed, I’m sure.” He nodded. Hermione returned his greeting with a half-curtsy of sorts.

“Well, I had been canvassing any colleagues I can contact. It’s mostly anyone that’s not on shift right now,” Nurse Edelstein said. “And apparently, there’s no protocol in place for wounds by muggle weaponry and they’re probably missing a lot of internal bleeding. The more obvious broken bones are fortunately, more easily detectable, and anyone found by rubbles would be checked for fractures and broken bones, so those are fortunately not an issue.”

“If someone is crushed nearby, then they should have checked for internal bleeding!” That was Madam Álava again, eyes flashing.

“Well, perhaps there is no sign that the person has been under any sort of rubble,” Healer Orpington gingerly started.

“You wouldn’t even think of being that careless.” She flattened his efforts to allay her concerns.
“Well, it wouldn’t really take much time and it’s better safe than sorry. So—”

“Exactly. This is untenable.”

“There’s also the risk of pulmonary contusion,” Hermione added, once she thought there was a pause in Madam Álava’s rapid-fire sentences. The medical professionals in the room turned to her.

“I saw the photographs of the Ministry of Magic. They used muggle explosives there, didn’t they? Whenever you have people in the vicinity of explosives, you’d have to take into account that some would have primary blast injuries. It’s the shockwaves from the explosions—they create a high-pressure wave moving at supersonic speeds. It’s too easy for the capillaries in the lungs to burst or tear the alveolus tissue. It would fill the alveoli sacs with blood. I suppose someone’s bound to notice when some of the patients cough up blood, though, but that’s not a guaranteed symptom in all cases so some critical patients might still be beneath notice.” Hermione’s brows furrowed slightly.

“Speaking of supersonic shockwaves, as it’s the propagation of energy through air, it would be worse in a closed room than in the open where the energy can be more easily dissipated into the environment.”

“The effects of muggle explosions are similar to some of the more percussive spells, then?” Healer Orpington asked.

Hermione’s brows rose. “Why, yes. Except more severe, as the energy is multiple times larger. Oh, I remember something else—air embolism. You’ve got to watch out for possible pockets of air developing during the explosion. I suppose if it had blocked an artery, my advice would be moot as anyone suffering such would’ve died soon afterwards.” Her following smile was more bitter than not.

“You’re exceedingly well-informed on these types of injuries, Miss Curie.” The Healer noted.

Hermione shrugged. “War. You have an entirely different sort of drive to learn when you know you’re the one standing between your friends and greater harm.”

“Anyway, you don’t have to believe what I said. I’m sure we can collect the continental newspapers like Der Spiegel—wait no, that’s a muggle one—Die Knöchelknochen, I think. Sooner or later, there’d be wizards and witches wounded by muggle weapons in their reports. Maybe there’d even be a description of the wounds. I’m sure there’d be many similarities.”

“Well, we can’t just sit around,” Madam Álava said, promptly standing up. “Come on, then.”

Maggie only sighed, but she stood up and took her coat from the hanger. She even took Hermione’s coat from the hanger and handed it to her. “Come on Hermione.”

“Uh, where are we going?”

“Why, to St. Mungo’s, of course.” Madam Álava said.

“But I have classes,” Hermione replied, more confused than anything.

“You can owl Dippet some sort of dispensation letter, can’t you, Oleander?” The Senior Nurse turned to the Healer. He was entirely too calm in the face of her demands, as if he was used to hearing them.

“I’ll get my secretary on it as we get back to St. Mungo’s.”
“Excellent.”

Esmeralda Álava took a pinch of floo powder from Maggie’s pot, knowing exactly which one it was, threw it into the fireplace and stepped in after calling St. Mungo’s as a destination. Healer Orpington turned to them.

“Well, ladies, I’ll go first since I probably will have to coordinate on the St. Mungo’s side.”

“You have to stop Madam Álava from scaring the interns and terrorising the low-level administrators, you mean?” Nurse Edelstein asked dryly.

He placed his bowler hat on his head again.

“Well, you need to coordinate our party’s movements with St. Mungo’s.” His smile was wry and he left in the same way that Madam Álava did. The fire crackled in the grate, the last of the green colour had already vanished as it returned to its reddish colour.

“Right. Our turn, then.” Maggie said.

“Us?”

Nurse Edelstein gave Hermione a side glance. “I did say that we’re doing this together.”

“But, but you already know what I needed to tell you.” The brunette said, with not a little amount of surprise. “It’s mostly just that. I’m sure you can follow the consequences of explosives and high-velocity projectiles and come up with a list of possible injuries to check and—oh, come on, Maggie, you’re a nurse. I’m sure the rest of the healers and nurses at St. Mungo’s aren’t complete idiots either. Not with someone like Madam Álava among them. They’ll figure it out.”

Maggie’s smile was fond. Hermoine glared at her when she started patting her head, though. Never mind that Nurse Edelstein had several inches on her.

“You don’t get it, do you?”

“What?”

“Madam Álava doesn’t just take anyone with her on her rounds. If she thinks you’re good enough to be an intern or a nurse, no one in St. Mungo is going to gainsay her.”

“What?” Hermione still couldn’t quite understand what Maggie was saying.

The nurse huffed. “She didn’t correct you and she let you finish without interruption. That’s high praise coming from The Duenna. That means she thinks you know enough that you might as well follow and learn more of the healing craft to be even more useful. Come on, she’s going to be ornery if we’re slow.”

Chapter End Notes

Alphard Black enters the story. Oh, in case you were wondering about him? Yeah, he’s canon. There really is a lot of Blacks in this generation. Walburga, Alphard and
Cygnus are from a cadet branch of the Black family and the children of Pollux Black and Irma Crabbe.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

Père: (French) Father. Or, to use the in-text case, Père Delacour refers to Delacour the Father, which is clearly Eugenie’s dad.

Some Notes on How I Interpret Wizarding Culture (Random Sociological Detail):

Even if one were to assume that the past is probably more sexist than the present, we still have a solid evidence of how witches can advance their career in canon in the form of the line of UK’s Minister of Magics. JK Rowling set this.

Now, compare the gender ratio among the various ministers with the gender ratio of the prime minister of UK up to 1942. There are no females on the second list. Nil. Zilch. Nada. (Thatcher’s term starts at 1979). Of the first, there’s Artemisia Lufkin, Josephina Flint, Ottalone Gambol, Hortensia Milliphutt, Evangeline Orpington, Priscilla Dupont, and Venusia Crickerly—that’s seven women as Ministers of Magic, along with seventeen male ones. That meant around a quarter of all Minister of Magics are women. It’s not close to a 1:1 ratio of female to male ministers, but it’s a sight better than what the muggle world has managed to accomplish up to that time.

We can take the strong societal preference for young people to get married soon in the wizarding world based on all those young marriages in canon’s epilogue that somehow lasted decades (100% survival rate for teen marriage! Unheard of in places where a wife is not just the property/an extension of her husband. Odds are, I’ll try to rationalise/deconstruct this as well in a later chapter).

As the female ministers of magic implied, a married witch that also happens to hold a respectable occupation is not as extraordinary as a non-magical woman trying for a career in the 1940s. It probably helped that you can’t use the old excuse of woman being ‘the weaker sex’; when magical might does not correlate strongly with physical one. Also, there’s no such thing as time wasted on the road/commute when your civilisation relies on floo travel and apparition, which is a plus for work-life balance and spending time with the kids (for both parents). Hence, there’s also less pressure for witches to become full-time, stay-at-home spouses.

Additional Trivia:

Die Knöchelknochen: (German) the Knucklebones. Look, the Mirror (Der Spiegel) is already a real newspaper (and media empire in the present day) in Germany. I have to make the wizarding world equivalent with a naming theme that’s close to the Brits’ the Daily Prophet. Why knuckle bones? Because one, the name has that funny rhyme in German and two, knuckle bones are one of the methods of foretelling the future. It’s also not something that was all-too-obviously imported into German culture. I mean, oracles? That’s clearly Greek, dude. Crystal balls? Not ancient enough and pretty sure it was imported too from cultures that figured out how to make smooth crystal balls...
first—that’s also another hint of how pretty modern it is.

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**Emma Eccleston (OC):** Seventh-year Slytherin prefect. Her last name, as one would note, is not one of the Sacred 28, but I thought even Slytherin house can’t be filled with *all* Sacred 28 family members. It’s probably not a muggleborn name, though. Emma is a shortening of old Germanic names that began with 'Ermen'. It means 'whole' or 'universal'.

I have been reminded/warned on a different story I wrote (different fandom, different site and account), that I am rather oblivious to the importance that some people in the fandom attach to the names of the actors and actresses that play the popular characters. I didn’t realise that my sister was associating Emma here as looking like the twin of Emma Watson, and as an extension, Hermione, until she asked about it. Seriously, *no*. If she looked like anything, it’s probably Ise Nanao in *Bleach*. Anyway, this is my first and only warning about that.

So, if you think I used an actor’s name for an OC on purpose…no, it’s almost always a coincidence.

This end note is getting too long. I’m dropping Oswin Orpington's mini bio at the end of the next chapter that he appears in.

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17 Detours in St. Mungo's

Chapter Summary

A slight detour to quantum physics. A little more is seen about Hermione’s past (Harry and Ron at the DMLE). A demonstration at St. Mungo’s. Hermione returns to Hogwarts once more.

Chapter Notes

I’m adding another tag/category to this fic now that we’ve passed Chapter 16 — Connecticut Yankee. Yeah, that’s some clue to where I’m taking this, isn’t it?

To those who don’t know what a “Connecticut Yankee” category implies, let’s start at the root. It’s a shortening of the title of a novel by Mark Twain “A Connecticut Yankee in King’s Arthur Court”, in which a Yankee engineer somehow gets displaced into, you guessed it, King Arthur’s Court. The label now implies a character that arrives at a new environment/milieu/world, or alternate dimension, or different time in which he/she has advantageous knowledge that is beyond what is known in this new society due to coming from a more modern/technologically advanced civilisation/future. Then, the character proceeds to spread/transfer that knowledge to improve the society around him/her.

Of course, the characters may try, but the writers never said they guaranteed success….

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Suppose you were an Unspeakable. If you were about to consider doing some sort of measurement on time and history, then the first thing you need to do was to get a thorough grounding on quantum physics.

Hermione was pretty proud about the way she managed to write a proposal and argue her way up to the Department Head and got paid to take classes at Trinity College, Cambridge (Newton’s almamater! Yesss. She took way too many pictures around the campus with a glee that most people won’t understand).

It wasn’t about being an actual, honest-to-goodness, theoretical physicist (that would take entirely too much time, and Hermione already had too many things to do). But if you’re trying to work with time, then why not first keep up with what the people who’d figured out how time interacted with the universe’s most basic particles? Especially when they’d figured out that time was just another dimension—with only one direction accessible at the macroscopic scale than both directions like the three spatial dimensions, sure. Yet considering that Hermione was a witch with practical experience of being sent back to a past position in her own timeline, she certainly had a leg up compared to the poor physicists.

Of course, her use of the time turner never went back farther than 24 hours. Too close to her original timeline to accidentally alter something that would be dire for her in the next 24 hours (or create a paradox). It wasn’t as if she wasn’t given lengthy and precise instructions to its use, and warned that even if she acted rashly, she was the one to suffer the consequences as history is persistent and tends to correct itself.

In physics, she found out later that this was called the Novikov self-consistency principle. In which no object sent into the past can alter the paths that allow it to be sent to the past, because it would create a paradox; if the past is now different so the object does not get sent into the past in the first place, then does that mean that its actions now can’t have happened? Time paradoxes are pretty headache-inducing and a pox on the causality of the laws of physics. The self-consistency principle thus imposes a welcome order on the universe and restores causality.

So, no effort to shoot your own parents would work. Perhaps it may turn out that the man who raised you wasn’t your biological father after all. Wasn’t that interesting to note? And whoops, no, bad mistake, that woman you just killed wasn’t your mother either, though now you think of it, they do look unusually alike. Would you like to try to kill more people now? Not that it would help. The universe, basically, is self-maintaining (or self-correcting) in the direction of the primary, consistent timeline.

The main assumption held in the principle is that there is only one timeline, no other alternative timelines exist, or if they do exist, they are not accessible from this timeline.

This is not the only interpretation of quantum mechanics that exists. There is also the Everett interpretation of quantum mechanics, better known as the many-worlds interpretation (Everett turned away from physics when his theory was dismissed from the mainstream of his time; he died at 51 as a successful defence contractor and an alcoholic).

Where classical mechanics is deterministic (e.g., Person A travels at so-and-so kilometres per hour in one direction—you’ll always be able to find A as long as you know how many hours has passed), quantum mechanics is probabilistic. You don’t know where the electron is around the proton, what you do know is the shape and size of the electron cloud. Whether a particular spot you picked has the electron or not depends on the probability. Is it a low probability spot, or is it a
high probability spot? Or maybe, it’s just not your lucky day, and even after choosing a high probability spot, you don’t find the electron there. Better luck next time.

The Everett interpretation reconciles the probabilistic nature of quantum mechanics with the deterministic one of classical mechanics. Suppose there’s a $\frac{1}{4}$ chance that the electron is in spot A, $\frac{1}{2}$ chance that it’s in spot B and $\frac{1}{4}$ chance it’s in spot C. Where is the electron now? Well, why do you even have to choose? The electron exists in all the spots. It’s just that those events occur in three different universes. Three different timelines.

How did all these timelines even exist in the first place? Do they just suddenly pop out of nowhere?

*Well you see, as Everett would have said, you’re looking at this the wrong way. You’re too fixed on what you see as your own reality.* The ‘real’ reality is not any single alternative reality that the electron takes—it is not the one where it ends up in A, or in B, or in C. The real reality is the electron’s original, universal wave function that describes all three paths as possible outcomes. Reality A, or B or C can be considered as three different aspects of a higher-dimension reality.

A, B and C are mere sides to a triangle. The *triangle* is the actual reality itself.

It’s a simplification, but the main idea is the same. The problem is that humans are beings of 3D space and 1D time. We’re bound to our 4D world, and as such, we can’t easily conceive higher dimensions (if they exist), and the higher universe that Everett sees as the true universe, of which ours is only one side, is something like that.

Our version of the universe, our timeline, is a mere facet of the (hyper) diamond that is the much larger true universe.

In Everett’s interpretation of quantum mechanics, to travel through time is to move to an earlier point of your timeline, true. But if at one point in the past you’ve acted in such a way as to prevent yourself from being sent into the past (a paradox), what it means is that now, you’re no longer moving on your original timeline. You’ve just shifted to a different one; you have moved to a different side of the higher-dimensional true universe. You’re on a new facet of the diamond-shaped universe.

Say hello to an alternate timeline now.

But see, this is where things get *interesting*, because Novikov’s principle and Everett’s interpretation actually leads to the same conclusion in the case of time travel.

*Do as you wish.*

If Novikov’s principle is true and there is only ever a single accessible timeline, then it’s self-correcting. Either what you do won’t matter, or ironically, for the world as you know it to develop, you have to do all the things you ended up doing in the past. (If a time-traveller ever figures out that they are their own childhood hero, that’s a special kind of head trip).

If Everett’s interpretation is true and that any significant changes you make will only shift the timeline you’re on into a new one rather than stay as your original one, then you might as well do all the changes you want to do. Because, why the hell not? It’s not as if you’re affecting your original timeline, anyway. (Of course, what you do might still look scary to people from your new timeline, because to them, it would seem as if you’ve gone to the past and *erased your future self*, as opposed to hopping into the past and swimming up to a new river of time than to continue on your old one).
This is why even as Hermione accompanied Nurse Edelstein to St. Mungo’s in confusion, trailing in the wake of the formidable Esmeralda Álava, she didn’t hesitate even once when she was asked to inform a group of young nurses what she knew about wounds inflicted by muggle weaponry alongside Maggie Edelstein. Healer Orpington had apparently started to organise groups of nurses or healers that were either sent in her and Nurse Edelstein’s direction, to Healer Orpington himself, or to Madam Álava.

The higher-skilled healers and senior nurses certainly ended up with Healer Orpington or Madam Álava. Hermione wouldn’t even pretend she can address more than two-thirds of the questions they might field—and that was an optimistic estimate. The trainee nurses and interns don’t scare her, though. She’d seen young Aurors with even more bravado, making up in bluff what they have yet to have in experience, and it only amused her (if she was in a good mood), or was annoying as hell (if she was having a bad day).

But after several doubters on the damage that a bullet could inflict, Hermione has had enough. She stopped Nurse Edelstein from chewing the idiots out because she thought she might have a better idea. She asked the nurse if there was a free space that they won’t be disturbed at, and if anyone had collected the muggle’s exploding sticks.

The glimmer in Maggie’s eyes seemed to imply that she knew what Hermione was planning. Maggie managed to pull some Aurors into bringing what they managed to collect to one of the back courtyards of St. Mungo’s. There were copious references to Madam Álava and occasionally also to Healer Orpington, but they got the guns. Hermione cast stasis on them and floated them carefully in front of her. An accidental discharge was the last thing anyone needed. Since the few junior Aurors that Nurse Edelstein had bullied into getting the guns were grumbling, Hermione offered something to salve their annoyance; they’re also invited to watch.

“Watch? Watch what? You’re going to heal some people?” One of the Aurors squinted down at her. The way his freckles stand up on his nose and his hair was only marginally better in tidiness than Harry’s didn’t help at all to make her take him seriously.

Hermione didn’t roll her eyes even if she was very tempted to. “A demonstration. You want to know what can be done with these too, right?”

That perked him up immediately.

“I can get some friends too, right?”

“Oh, invite anyone you like.” She assured him.

He bounded off with enthusiasm. Hermione and Nurse Edelstein continued on at the head of their little entourage. Outgoing patients and the occasional visiting family member or nurse watched them pass with curiosity. Hermione’s boots barely made a sound on the marble floor, and she was glad she’d bought them the last time she visited Diagon Alley with Professor Merrythought.

“Do you know how to handle those things?” Maggie asked.

“I know how to handle some models. Not sure if any of these is one, but we might as well try, right?”

She ignored the sceptical expression on Nurse Edelstein’s face. Sometimes, the best way to get people to follow you was to act like you know exactly what you’re doing and that you’re completely confident in your success. That was the second lesson in being a leader. The first one is
of course, to actually know what you’re doing.

Well, she did. She was about to try finding a gun she knew how to shoot with and shoot with it. That sounded like a plan.

At least she knew that these were no longer early guns, where she actually had to pour gunpowder into the barrel from some gunpowder horn and then manually shove the ball in. No, these come with cartridges, and unless someone left them out in the rain, they’d still be fine. No Auror was going to leave all the guns and cartridges in the rain, right? That seems to be too careless.

“Anyway, do you think we can get some tea, cakes and biccies for everyone?” Hermione asked.

“I might be able to do it,” Maggie mused. “Why?”

“it might take some time. It’s certainly easier than waiting around with nothing to do.”

“Well, alright. I’ll see what I can do.”

Several of the young people following them perked up. In fact, it that seemed to cheer everyone slightly and made them more favourably disposed to her. She almost laughed. Her real reason was simpler, in a way. She didn’t know how much time she’d need to figure out how one of these guns or rifles worked, and they were more liable to wait if they had a distraction at hand. For these young wizards and witches in rather junior positions in St. Mungo’s? That was definitely food. She would guess that several of them might have even missed breakfast in a hurry.

They reached the courtyard in a rather disused wing that Nurse Edelstein had been directed to.

Of course, before we proceed here, there were several things that needed to be kept in mind.

Guns hadn’t come naturally to Hermione. She was still a witch, first and foremost, and unlike spells, there’s no ‘less harm’ mode for guns. Any instructor would have told their students the same thing—don’t aim a gun at anyone you don’t want to kill. It was because the risk was always there.

She had flashes of memories about some of the new dark zealots they were fighting against. Some had started hiding in muggle areas. The more annoying part was that they had even started creating enough chaos in the muggle world to have muggle law enforcement going after them. There were many of them that it was a strain on the obliviators—especially with how cameras became more and more ubiquitous. It wasn’t even civilian cameras that first gave them an idea of their trouble. It was CCTVs. It invited investigations to any violent altercations that was recorded by CCTVs.

When obliviators insist that they can do it to any and all of the police officers sent, Hermione had to ask them if they had any plans for the paperwork it was going to leave behind. The detectives and officers might lose their memories of the event, but once they get back to the office, they’ll see that there is this case that they were supposed to be working on, that they now have absolutely no idea about. Then all they need to do is see the video evidence and start it all over again. If they keep obliviating investigators, the police will just send more, and if they keep doing that, it will alert the muggle authorities that something unknown, memory-altering and possibly dangerous is happening there.

“Do you want to get investigated by the MI5? Because this is how you get investigated by the MI5.” Hermione had snapped.

She’d had to remind them that the Minister for Magic is still answerable to Downing Street.

The Prime Minister is certainly one muggle who knew about the wizarding world and how the
Ministry of Magic is structured. He was not going to be a little ticked off that they were doing large scale memory wipes of his law enforcement for no good reason—he was going to be bloody pissed off.

What she suggested was to cooperate with muggle law enforcement.

Harry and Ron could absolutely get behind that idea. Hermione had argued that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement didn’t even need to use the word magic in their alternative name, or even demonstrate magic most of the time. They just need to be officially acknowledged by all branches of the government as a specialised agency dealing with specialised crime, and that cases in their odd jurisdiction (magic) can be safely handed off to them and the more normal side of law enforcement no longer needed to deal with it.

The Department of Magical Law Enforcement had thus joined the 21st century British bureaucracy by officially becoming a member of Her Majesty’s Government. They were mostly hidden and classified up to the eyeballs that most people still don’t know they exist (of course). But for the times when they have to officially take over high visibility cases from the local police or the Met, they have a badge to flash and a name to use and the case flops over, no obliviation necessary (except for the eyewitnesses, but that’s a given). The CCTV record is now theirs to use (or destroy, as it were).

The DMLE did perform the courtesy of telling the conventional police they took cases over from whether an arrest was made, and whether the case holds up in their ‘special courts’, but again, most details fell under the heading of ‘classified’. The boys in blue might complain about the DMLE and nickname them ‘the Black Hole’ (as in, cases come in, nothing comes out), but they passed their cases all the same. It made things easier in the age of constant cameras.

Harry and Ron were chuffed with the idea that they had real badges that they could show to both muggles and wizards and have it mean something. They made a good show of swaggering into the office with their badges out and wands ready every other day, like some absurd parody of American cop movies, shouting ‘freeze’, ‘you’re all under arrest’ and insisting that the office snack of the day to be donuts. Hermione was laughing the first several times around—the boys were too ridiculous. Sure, the formal name for the DMLE was intentionally so long and obscure that most people would have no idea who they were or what they do, but if people actually tried to check, it was there. The plan was a hit with the muggleborn wizards and witches at the DMLE who now didn’t have to explain so much to their parents about what is it that they do for a living. One muggleborn even retold with high amusement at lunch one day that his parents thought he was some sort of counter-intelligence James Bond, what with how secret his work seems to be.

Harry and Ron sold the idea of learning how to shoot a gun as something they need to do to ‘blend in’. It was also enthusiastically backed up by Draco (he was certainly corrupted by the boys). Draco had been kidnapped to more than one movie nights in actual muggle movie theatres—for all of his snobbery, the Slytherin was always weak to getting persuaded by his friends. Hermione also had no idea how they get the support of Terry Boot, or Blaise Zabini (did it even matter? They were in some far-flung corner of the Ministry, for goodness’ sakes, not the DMLE) and other old Hogwarts colleagues as well as those from different years.

But it worked. All those arguments and support and lobbying worked.

Basically, training how to shoot a gun became mandatory in the DMLE (it helped them blend in when they liaise with muggle law enforcement, and they’re not as helpless in situations where they can’t publicly display magic). It was optional for other Ministry employees—of course, no one else from other departments was required to keep up the skill as they were wizards and witches. It was
entirely optional. Hermione took one for thoroughness’ sakes. She never really carried a gun to the field and never felt the need to, even if she did accompany the boys to the range from time to time to practise.

Now, as Maggie Edelstein transfigured two blocks of wood into pig carcasses, Hermione was about to demonstrate that knowledge for posterity.

“What is she doing?” One of the interns mumbled to another, but still within hearing range of Hermione.

“I don’t know. She’s fiddling. Can she use that thing?”

“I’m more concerned whether we’re safe.”

She recognised the cardboard cartridge boxes. The 8L on the label probably meant they were 8 mm. Hermione sighed over the dampness of one box and set it aside. The rest seemed to be alright. She found one rifle that seemed reasonably dry among others. She cast a quick-drying spell just to be sure and did the same for the box of cartridge.

Alright, I could do this. The cartridges go in here and…wait, this seems to have more space. How many could fit here? One? Push down and wait for the click—yes, that’s it. Two, three…oh, it could fit a few. It’s just not obvious at first because there’s that spring mechanism at the bottom that pushes up. Well, I suppose it would be impractical if it could only fit one or two, right? Another one and…sheesh, how many shots are you going to take anyway, Hermione? Four is fine. Or maybe I should add one more in case I slip and didn’t quite hit where I want? She had to speak to herself, the mental ramble was somehow soothing. If she didn’t, her hands might tremble slightly with nerves.

She just wanted to hit some place on the pig carcass that had bone, just to demonstrate the effect. It was probably a good idea to aim some of the shots at. She didn’t notice that the noises had actually quieted down.

“Nurse Edelstein?” Hermione called out.

“Yes, Hermione?”

“Can you please make sure that no one’s going to walk onto the courtyard? Do we have some means of isolating it?”

“We’re isolated enough as it is. It’s fine. These fine gentlemen would stand guard, even.” She motioned to the freckled Auror that had returned and brought some of his friends. They were staring at Hermione with undisguised curiosity. She waited until they took positions and confirmed it back.

“No one cross the courtyard, alright? I repeat, no one cross the courtyard while I’m firing.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” Nurse Edelstein confirmed.

She made some ear muffs out of her scarf and settled it around her ears. Hermione did her best to ignore the moving people, clearly still chatting from their hand gestures and moving lips. She raised the rifle and settled the butt on her shoulder. It’s not even that far, she noted about the target. This is shooting fish in a barrel. She chose four spots on the first pig carcass and started. Two holes appeared on the chests, the carcass now swinging slowly. Hopefully, one of the shots had hit the ribs. Another two shots went on the stomach to demonstrate the effects on the guts. There’s still another shot she could take. Another one for the ribs, then, in case she’d missed the earlier
When she lowered the rifle and pulled her impromptu earmuffs down, she could see more than one young nurse or intern demonstrating fear of her.

“She could…she could use that thing. She’s a muggleborn, isn’t she?” A voice murmured.

Hermione ignored then and walked towards the carcass, raising the volume of her voice to carry well.

“Some of you have questions on the amount of damage an exploding stick, a gun, can actually inflict. Well, here it is. Everyone, move forward. We have a first-hand demonstration.”

She floated the pig carcass out of its hook and laid it on the ground. Hermione knelt and checked the location of the wounds. She mentally scanned through several cutting charms she knew and chose one that cut in specific depths. She made a Y incision on the pig’s chest and opened the skin flaps when she was done. Her audience had started to drift towards the carcass out of sheer curiosity.

“Look at that rib, it’s pulverised. This is why it’s always prudent to check for broken bones and fractures when someone gets shot, because it is completely possible. Now, let’s see the next one. It only nicked a rib and went straight through the lungs.” Hermione picked two leaves from the ground and transfigured it into a pair of plastic gloves. She wore it to reach for the pig’s lung and lift it. “It’s gone straight to the back too. Guess what happens if this is an actual person? The patient has a sucking chest wound. Guess what happens if the surface wounds are healed?”

Hermione pulled the plastic gloves off and threw it on the ground as she picked up her wand again.

“It’s no longer a sucking chest wound, but the lung is still leaking. Now, what happens if someone’s lungs have been shot in more than one place? Congratulations! You now have someone who’s slowly drowning in his own blood, but no one around the poor sod even has a bloody clue.” She snapped. “Of course, maybe the wound doesn’t bleed into the lungs, maybe it bleeds out. Well, good, that means you have blood pouring into the thoracic cavity!”

“Now, who’s still a smart ass enough to say that closing up the wound was the best thing you could do and that everything is minor wounds beyond that, hmm? I’ve seen more than one friend gets shot, so anyone thinking this is just something you can walk away from is asking for it.” She knew she wasn’t being fair to most of them, but she has had it. Seeing the guts and viscera again, even if it’s just those of a transfigured pig, was starting to get to her. Not many dared to meet her eyes as she stared them down one by one.

“Shall we see what happens when the colon gets perforated? Well, that’s next. I got two hits in at the abdomen, at any rate. If we don’t get to see the colon get perforated, then it’s probably the intestine that has a hole or two. If we’re lucky, it might even hit the stomach—gastric acid leaks for everyone! Let’s see Mr. Piggy here get his insides peeled by the acid!” Her tone had gotten increasingly sarcastic the further she went.

Nurse Edelstein had sidled up next to her.

“I think I get this,” she said softly. “Want me to take over?”

Hermione let out a gust of sigh. She had only been going over the gross injuries and hadn’t gone into the minute details that they also need to know. Then again, her patience was fraying into something dangerously ragged already and it was probably a side-effect of that.
“Yes, please. I thought I could do this, but I forgot I really can’t stand fools.”

Maggie patted her shoulder. “It’s alright. You can have your tea and crumpets before you teach the next group, and I can walk this one through the rest of the internal damage.”

“And then we get to the effects of explosives,” Hermione added with false cheer. “Goody.”

“And then we get to explosives.” Maggie confirmed.

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Hermione calmed down after the first group.

The tea and cakes probably helped, and the crack of the rifles probably reminded the gaggle of young medics and nurses that the exploding sticks, the guns, were actual weapons instead of toys and they now took it seriously. The other groups that arrived later were less rowdy than the first one, to Hermione’s relief. She managed to teach two more without Nurse Edelstein having to step in often to add factoids that she might have missed or forgotten.

Madam Álava came sometime around the third session, followed with orderlies who carried actual pig carcasses. They were calmly moving and hanging it against the wall. Behind her came Healer Orpington, the white robes of the healers of St. Mungo’s along with the nurses.

“I hear what you’ve been doing, Hermione.” Madam Álava said. “And I thought to myself, what if even more people still disbelieve the effectiveness of these weapons? Well, I thought we should leave them more permanent reminders.”

The freckled Auror whose name she still didn’t know moved forward.

“We agree. You can use however much of these things you need to use to demonstrate.”

Hermione turned to Nurse Edelstein. “I’ll trust you to secure the area, Nurse Edelstein.”

“Of course, Hermione.”

There were five carcasses this time. She slowly moved to her previous spot, pulling her temporary earmuffs back to their place and knelt on the ground. There was a chair that she’d dragged close. She supposed she was going to use that again too for support. The chatter of the world receded and she could focus on the boxes of cartridges. Hermione absentmindedly dried them and took the rifle she had used before. She blocked the outside world. All the eyes, all the people and the attention, they weren’t there. There was just her, slowly pushing cartridges in, listening to the tell-tale click before taking the next one and pushing that in.

She raised the rifle and decided to shoot from the left. One shot, two shots, three. She let the carcass swing a little, got used to the swinging pattern and made two more shots. Eject the spent cartridges, she reminded herself. Wait for the click, she’d say as she placed new cartridges in.

Hermione had made the exact same shots that she did before—she aimed to hit at least one rib and hit the guts twice. The last shot was always a bit random, depending on her whim. She did this until the third carcass and realised that the fourth and fifth still had their heads. Well, that would be a good opportunity to study head wounds, right? She decided then that the heads would get two shots from now on, the gut only one, and the chest two.

Ron was right. It was easier doing this if she didn’t try to think about anything in particular and just lose herself in the rhythm of the movements. Besides, these were not people, they’re just pigs.
When Hermione lowered her rifle for the last time and stood up, she saw the proud look in Esmeralda Álava’s face, true. She could also see Maggie’s satisfied smirk, probably because she’d just won an argument against some of her friends or colleagues about Hermione.

It still didn’t make it any easier to see several of the gazes that were filled with fear.

She clenched her fists. It was ridiculous. The wand was also easily an instrument of death. In fact, she would use it with far more ease than she could use any gun, and she couldn’t even run out of ammo! And yet it was the latter that prompted their fear, it was the latter that made people see her as something larger than life. Of course, there were always the murmurs.

“I think she’s a muggleborn.”

“Scary, aren’t they?”

Somehow, that old appellation became much more sinister here.

When Hermione stepped out of the infirmary office’s fireplace, she was surprised to see Lakshmi and Tom there, sitting calmly as if it was normal for them to greet each other and chat. The sun was already low in the sky, and the east-facing infirmary office was not so bright without direct afternoon sun.

“Eugenie was here for a while, but the Free French Mages wanted to convene again and she couldn’t say no to them either.” Lakshmi clarified. “Bunch of sodding Gryffindors, I tell you.”

“Welcome back.” Tom said.

Nurse Edelstein stepped out of the fireplace behind Hermione, but she herself was too surprised to move.

“I…I’m back.” Hermione said with relief. “I’m back.”

Lakshmi stared at her curiously. “St. Mungo’s can’t be that bad. What happened to just explaining about wounds?”

She hugged the other Ravenclaw without compunction, and she laughed because she didn’t feel like crying. Even when surprised, her friend just went with it and patted her back.

“What, they tested you first before letting you explain things? It couldn’t be that hard for you, could it? I saw what you call your bedtime reading, Missy.”

“Well, you guys can go catch up with each other. I’m going to go find someone else I can gossip with.” Nurse Edelstein said. Hermione released Lakshmi and waved at her absently.

“Enjoy your break,” the brunette said.

“Absolutely. You too.”

The nurse walked out. Tom was watching her carefully, and it almost reminded her of their early encounters when he was always trying to read her intent, her possible moves.

“Hermione?”

Oh, what the hell. There was just Lakshmi, she thought, and oddly enough, Tom was also a friend
at this point. Where he expected her to perhaps take his hand, she launched herself into his arms
and buried her face at the crook of his neck. His cologne was very muted, something of oak and
forest, and it was mostly only something distinctly him and soap. She found she preferred that
compared to guys who doused themselves in it that her eyes watered and she could swear her
olfactory cells died by the thousands.

Tom was tense for a moment before he slowly relaxed again and held her back without a second
thought. Hermione was sure she heard a snort from the other witch, but she was unexpectedly
quiet. He was rubbing circles into her back, and as comfortable as it was, she owed them some
explanations.

“People said ‘muggleborn’ behind my back as if it meant something close to ‘monster’”

He stiffened for a split second. The sentence wasn’t exactly what she wanted to say, but Hermione
couldn’t find it in her to regret it. It did describe the situation enough. She still hadn’t pulled herself
away from his arms as she said it. He was solid and supportive and it was nice and warm to be
held. It’s nothing personal, she told herself. Really.

“What? Who on earth are those idiots? You’re the last person I’d blame for anything, you’re just
that compulsive a do-gooder. It’s actually tiring seeing you walk around and help anyone who trips
into your path.”

She almost rolled her eyes. Lakshmi’s outrage was unexpected, but the exaggeration and
backhanded compliment was all her. Hermione lifted her head and sighed.

“I don’t know if I can blame them, though. I mean, the first group had a lot of doubters and were
getting really annoying. So, I thought I can stage a little demonstration for them.”

“Demonstration?”

Hermione sighed. “I can use guns—those exploding sticks, yes. I’m not actually used to it. I have
never carried them and I will probably mess up in maintenance, but I can use it in an emergency.
Preferably at point-blank range.”

She could almost hear Lakshmi’s forehead scrunching even when she wasn’t looking. There was a
pause in Tom’s movements. She certainly gave him something to think about.

“Why would you even know that?”

“War.”

Her Ravenclaw friend snorted. “That’s your answer for everything, isn’t it?”

“And yet it’s true. Even my pureblood friends learned out of curiosity.”

Things were quiet for a few more moments. She couldn’t really see what was happening, but Tom
hadn’t stopped running his hands down her back. It was nice.

“Alright.” Lakshmi finally said. “I’ll pass your news along to Eugenie and Lucretia, and maybe
anyone else who needs to know. Anthony, you should go wherever it is you two lovebirds go when
you avoid the whole world. Our Cleopatra needs to stay away from fools and idiots for a while.”

Hermione frowned. “You know that those two ended up dead, don’t you?”

“As do all of us,” Lakshmi replied philosophically.
“We can take care of ourselves, Chakravarty. Don’t let us detain you.” Tom finally spoke up again.

Hermione heard a huff. “I certainly won’t. I’ll see you at dinner Hermione, Riddle.”

Chapter End Notes

I didn’t make up all the stuff about Novikov self-consistency principle (the man was trying to find a non-paradoxical solution to Einstein’s general relativity when it came to closed time-like curves). Everett’s interpretation of quantum mechanics also exists, first posited by Everett in his PhD dissertation. Poor guy was shot down by the physics luminaries of the day as the Copenhagen interpretation* was the order of the day back then. In disappointment, he turned away from physics entirely (hence him being a defence contractor until the end of his life).

So! I hope that answers questions anyone might have about Hermione not ‘preserving the timeline’ (what timeline? It either preserves itself, or it doesn’t).

Additional Trivia:

Ironically for Everett, one of his critics ended up as supporters of (some form of) his theory, but he was already disillusioned that he didn’t return to physics and related research more than a decade after that when doors began to open to him once more. These days, his interpretation is not considered as out there as it had been when he first posited it. Sure, it wasn’t in its original form. Yet the general gist of his idea, that reality might be deeper and stranger than what we can get from the meagre interpretation allowed by our weak senses, is pretty much accepted in physics.

*The Copenhagen interpretation basically says that the macro-physical world that we can sense is the real one, with all those weird things implied by quantum mechanics wave functions are just mathematical artefacts instead of clues about the world’s deeper structure that humans just can’t perceive without instruments.

Esmeralda Álava (OC): She is a nurse Emeritus at St. Mungo’s and several other hospitals. Founder of the Order of Nightingale and definitely one of the people responsible for the establishment of the wizarding version of the nursing profession. Grey-haired, with a sharp mind honed by decades of experience and an even sharper tongue, she is also well-known to be cranky. The bane of slow and inefficient hospital bureaucrats, she does not suffer fools gladly.

Margaret ‘Maggie’ Edelstein (OC): A nurse that had several years at her job when she heard of the vacancy as Hogwarts’ head nurse. She applied with enthusiasm at the thought of being able to visit her (English) mother more often. Was disappointed when she realised that unlike Beauxbatons, Hogwarts ‘head nurse’ has no staff under her. At all. The position seemed more junior than the title would imply. Fortunately, she’s come to terms with her disappointment right now. A pretty young woman with copper
hair, she’s cheerful, nosy and highly competent.

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Chapter Summary

Tom had lunch. In which Tom and Hermione talks about Punch and Judy. There is a dinner for two. Very interesting discussions happened. A short chat at night in the Slytherin common room.

Chapter Notes

In which I have just noticed that this is also one of my longer chapters. Hopefully, it would be entertaining and enlightening enough.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

18 Afternoon Entertainments

It was at lunch when Tom noticed something was wrong.

Orion had gone off sometime earlier to arrange a casual game of quidditch. He certainly had a love of the game, for he was on the Slytherin House team as a chaser along with Alphard. There was no shortage of people who joined him; it might simply be how everyone seemed to be high-strung this morning, or the remaining ones who weren’t might simply be bored. With not much to do, he was not the only person feeling restless. The last time Tom checked, Orion might have even picked up some people from other houses.

The day’s classes were written off as a loss. While on the one hand Tom welcomed the extra time

Strange Attractors

CHAPTER 18

Afternoon Entertainments
to plan and coordinate schemes, he was still somewhat annoyed by it. Why were they in Hogwarts if not to study magic? He can certainly read up ahead of the class, but he’d be missing the potential discussions, the opportunity to raise interesting questions and even direct the class’ interests. It was rather inefficient for everyone else, just because some of them might prefer not to go to class at all.

It wasn’t a surprise that the hall was rather empty even as lunch began. Everyone must have thought that they’d have all the time to eat. Almost by habit, his gaze flicked past the Ravenclaw table and he saw that Hermione and her friends were missing. Eugenie Delacour was unexpectedly sitting on the Gryffindor table, and Tom easily picked up why that was.

It was the loose association of French expatriates—most of them had ended up in Gryffindors. Not that Tom was surprised with the way they were generally angry at what they call the fake French Ministry of Magic currently extant in Vichy France. He wondered whether any of the French Exiles’ locations had been attacked last night, but he waved it off as something he can figure out later. Chakravarty, he noted, was with Lucretia and her seventh and sixth year hangers-on.

He couldn’t see Hermione anywhere.

She might just be late, he reasoned, as he sat next to Melchior. Abraxas, he presumed, was also off the at the quidditch game. Yet even as lunch continued and other students began to trickle in, she was nowhere to be seen. The volume of her hair itself would’ve rendered her easy to notice. The usually high-spirited Vespasian was fortunately sitting near the exuberant Alphard and the higher years of the Slytherin quidditch team, drumming up not a little noise with their enthusiasm.

It did make his particular spot at the Slytherin table more peaceful.

He knew he was falling slightly in making small talk when Tybalt Yaxley settled to talking with Mulciber and Parkinson. Mulciber and Parkinson, whose usual stellar contributions to conversations with him and Malfoy were either grunts, a slow expression of incomprehension, or tentative effort to ask if anyone followed the results of the last major league quidditch game.

How Abraxas didn’t feel his brain was dribbling out of his skull when he talked to the two of them, he didn’t know.

“They’re actually rather alright,” he remembered the Malfoy heir saying once. “A bit simple, but they still have their likes and dislikes. It’s just that you scare them so much they’re always nervous around you, Tom.”

Well, he was sure he scared Gallus Rosier too, but being partnered with Gallus at Potions did not fill Tom with the resignation of Sisyphus that always came over him whenever he ended up partnered with either Mulciber or Parkinson. They were certainly boulder-like enough in form and he was always the one pushing them up an intellectual hill. Whether they stayed at the top when he was done was up to the whims of either a malicious god or an uncaring world (newsflash: they were always at the bottom of the hill when the next potion class rolls around). It was most fortunate that neither were taking Advanced Potions, though Rosier certainly did.

He had gone halfway through main course, and yet another check at the Ravenclaw table showed that Hermione had still not arrived.

Abraxas had arrived, freshly showered, and Tom could see Orion trudging in the general area of the fourth-years, nodding as he passed. Tom noted that neither of Hermione’s friends seem concerned of had even been checking for her arrival. Odds were, they knew where she was and they didn’t think that she’d even come at all. A thought struck him then.
Was she back at the infirmary?

He turned to Nott.

“Mind saving some of the dessert for me?”

“No problem at all, Tom. Wait, you’re going somewhere?”

“I’ll see you at the dorms.” Tom replied, before standing up and leaving.

The infirmary was empty.

The rows of empty bed stretched from one end to the other, on both sides of the hall. That was not usually his concern, but it was when even after straining his ears, he couldn’t hear any other sound. Usually, there’d be the faint footsteps of Madam Edelstein surveying her domain—he was familiar with the distinct click of her high-heels after visiting the infirmary for two weeks. Sometimes, he’d hear the clinking of bottles if she was checking potions.

Tom’s strides quickly took him to the infirmary office, but even before he pushed the doors open, his instinct told him that it was as empty as the rest of the place.

There was a note pinned to the cork board.

*Out to St. Mungo’s. We will be back by afternoon.*

It was signed by one Madam Edelstein and Hermione Curie.

The casual nature of the note and the fact that Hermione signed it along with the nurse belied the possibility that the Ravenclaw had been taken to St. Mungo’s because her condition worsened. If that happened, only Madam Edelstein would have signed the note, and Hermione’s friends would most probably be worried instead of eating lunch with ease.

It was a conundrum. He did not like conundrums as he much preferred to have answers.

He walked back out of the office and saw the generous curves of one particular Ravenclaw just entering the infirmary. Her amber eyes did not change when she saw him and she continued to make her way towards where he was standing by the infirmary office. He simply waited for her to approach him.

“I thought I’d find you here, Riddle.”

“Miss Chakravarty,” he greeted back.

“She’s in St. Mungo’s.” Lakshmi Chakravarty said.

“Well, yes, there was a note.” He replied. “A rather *unspecific* note.”

“She couldn’t bear not doing anything, and she was familiar enough with the effects of the muggle weapons on the human body.” Chakravarty might not realise it herself, but her shoulders had tensed as she said this before slowly easing back to her languid pose. He dispassionately noted that it was one that subtly drew the eyesight to her significant bust. Tom’s attention was still on her eyes.

“She thought she’d talk to Madam Edelstein about what she knew and check if St. Mungo’s
already knew about it. See if they already have an established procedure for wounds by muggle weapons.”

“It turns out they hadn’t,” Tom finished, somehow not surprised at all.

For all the practicalities that the wizarding world had over the muggle one, other common-sense solutions escaped them entirely. If the wizarding world was a person, it would be an idiot savant.

“She sent me a note by house elf. I’ve informed Eugenie and Lucretia, and I didn’t see you all morning.”

Tom did not comment as he knew she would not have scoured all Hogwarts just to find him. She did not owe him that much and Lakshmi Chakravarty had never struck him as someone who would do favours to other people just because it was the nice thing to do, and she was not one who cared much to have endless favours owed either. Even her sinuous body language was simply one she slipped into naturally instead of any active effort to seduce him. She was already quite satisfied with where she was.

Chakravarty was thinking, trying to recall things.

“She said that if she’s not back for lunch, she’d probably only be back by tea, at the earliest.” The dark-haired witch said again. “I suppose we’ll just find other things to amuse ourselves with.”

Her smile was alluring.

“Well, I suppose we shall,” Tom said, right before he bid her farewell and she returned it easily. He made his way to the infirmary door first.

“I did notice that you didn’t thank me for informing you,” Chakravarty said this lightly. She was walking some three steps behind him, also on the way out of the infirmary. As she was being yet another meddlesome female, he didn’t bother to turn around.

“If you have managed to reach me this morning, I would certainly have.” He said.

He only gave politeness as much as was due. She let out an unexpected peal of laughter.

“Hermione was right. You do have more sharp edges than you allow others to see, Mr. Riddle.”

“As you do,” he noted.

“I think everyone knows exactly where I keep them. That’s why most of them are so adept at avoiding it nowadays. You, however…you’re too perfect. You have no apparent flaws. Most can only say good things about you.”

“Well, one must take care not to scare the children, mustn’t we?” He noted dryly.

That gained him another chuckle from her.

“Oh, I like you, Mr. Riddle. I really do.”

‘-

Now, there were only the two of them remaining in the infirmary office, as Nurse Edelstein had been kind enough to go off earlier. As Lakshmi’s steps faded in the distance, Hermione felt Tom gently prying her from him.
She would have sent him a questioning look if his hands did not cup her cheeks before he covered her mouth with his. Her eyes fluttered to a close while her right hand rose up, all too happy to play with his silken hair again. He bit her lip and took the gasp that came with it as an opportunity to take her open mouth. If the way she ran her nails over his scalp came with the added bonus of getting him to kiss her deeper, she really wouldn’t complain.

One of his hands glided at her side, gently following the outer curve of her breast. Yet when his thumb tweaked her nipple over her clothes, it sent a jolt of pleasant surprise and she moaned. Tom paused and took half a step away. He glanced at his hand with the perplexity of one who couldn’t quite figure out how it got there. He still didn’t remove it.

“Did I hurt you?”

Hermione blushed. “That’s the farthest sound from hurt I could get.”

“Really?” He was observing her carefully as he asked.

She didn’t understand what he was asking until she felt his thumb moving in a circle in exactly the same spot it had been. She took a sharp intake of breath and bit her lip. That was when his eyes grew darker, far closer in colour to black.

“I think I’ll have to try a few more times to be sure.”

He stepped forward once more to kiss her with more fervour than before. This time, Hermione wasn’t shy about placing a hand over his backside. *He should wear robes less often,* she randomly thought as she caressed the firm curve under her palm. The advantage of muggle clothes was certainly in how form-fitting they were. *Jeans—he should absolutely wear jeans.* But then Tom was placing open-mouthed kisses down the side of her neck, and suddenly she found thinking to be wholly superfluous and unnecessary.

Hermione had been pulling his tie all this time—the man had a lovely neck—and was already working two of his buttons open and easing his collar to the side. She leaned forward to the juncture between his shoulder and neck and gently bit down. He hissed. Another moment later, she was up against the wall and he was pressed along the entire length of her body. Her skin was hot where they touched and then he kissed the life out of her and she welcomed the heat. Something distinctly hard was pressing against her lower half. She really needed to stop now before they couldn’t find the willpower to stop at all.

When they separated, they were both breathing heavily. She leaned back in a daze while he dropped his forehead against the wall. He was not in a much better state.

“Well,” he murmured, “this is a pleasant surprise.”

Hermione chuckled as she rested her head against his shoulder.

“It is,” she agreed. “It has been a good day in some aspects but a terrible one in others. I’m just tired of everything. I’m not looking forward to coming to dinner and maybe hear the whole speculations about muggles and muggleborns again.”

“I was about to say that muggles do seem to have a penchant for war, but I gather that you’re not in the mood to discuss it right now.” Tom noted. She retaliated by kissing his jaw, enjoying the way his hand on her waist tightened as he tried to control himself. She was not unaware of how he’d been pulling it out of her skirt.

“You’re right. Thanks for being here. It’s nice to be able to *not think* about things for a while.”
He was watching her face with that perfectly neutral expression that made him unreadable to many.

“Would it be the same if Delacour or Chakravarty had been here? Or perhaps some other Ravenclaw, perhaps Verrault?” There was a particular intensity to his tone that she didn’t quite get.

She certainly remembered the sixth-year Ravenclaw prefect. Verrault was a serious wizard, but he did not think twice in passing her his notes on Ancient Runes yesterday, just so she can get caught up. She handed it back to him within ten minutes, to his surprise. Still, she wouldn’t even have remembered him at the top of her head if Tom didn’t mention it. It confused her. Why would he—

Oh. Oh.

“Oh not, Tom. You’re…”

Well. What was he again? She was pretty sure that if he was just a friend, she didn’t exactly make a habit of snogging Neville.

“You don’t know either, do you?” His tone was amused when he said this. She narrowed her eyes.

“And what do you know, Mr. Riddle?”

“I know that other people aren’t quite real, witches included. You, Hermione, are real.” His hand curled underneath her jaw, holding her with unaccountable care.

Hermione didn’t quite understand what he said, but the depth of his gaze was unmistakable. It floored her. It wasn’t love. She couldn’t quite imagine him ever being someone selfless, to act in a way that would not serve his own interest at the same time, but she had found the beginnings of something deep and unfathomable nonetheless that was centred on her. She had the sensation of someone who waded into a natural pool by the beach, only to find themselves in an inlet open to the ocean. There were depths and undercurrents there, coaxing her to stop holding on to anything else and follow them into the abyss. Suddenly, anything she’d thought to say felt inadequate.

“I was rather annoyed this afternoon because Chakravarty had not seen fit to inform me of where you were gone to until then.” He said, out of the blue.

“Next time, I’ll make sure to leave a message for you, then.” She answered without thinking.

It was an easy question to answer. It was just taking precautions. It didn’t force to her to find meaning to a storm of thoughts and emotion she did not know how to begin to appease. His thumb was stroking her jaw line and her throat felt dry.

“Why am I real?” She asked.

He shrugged. “You just are. Perhaps it’s how you refuse to be afraid, or how you will not back down from what you believe. Then again, your mind is a rich labyrinth, Hermione, with unexpected treasures waiting at every turn. Your defiance is not an empty boast because of it.”

“I’m hardly the first to choose not to fear you.” She said.

“You’re the first who chose to stay close despite knowing what I am.” He said, the answer brilliant in its simplicity.

Hermione’s breath caught in her throat because for the first time she thought she saw more of his facets than before. She was familiar with the intelligent student and she’d seen the dutiful prefect more than once. Like the young man who showed her how to cut bread in perfect thin slices, this
time, she saw echoes of the abandoned orphan again. Did he really have to show all these sides so easily to her? What could she do about it, anyway?

Why her? Why?

She didn’t know what her expression looked like, but the second he caught it, he couldn’t help himself from kissing her. It was neither chaste nor sedate—perhaps it could never be perfectly chaste between them anymore, not after they’d tasted each other like today. Yet it was sweet and thick with the promise of something more, like a long draught of honey wine in summer.

“I…” she took a deep breath, her mind still a-scatter. “How are other people not real?”

His blue eyes met hers as he contemplated her question. Tom seemed to be weighing something as he answered slowly, carefully.

“They never are to me. You remember watching Punch and Judy, don’t you?”

Hermione nodded, remembering the puppet shows of her youth. The humour was slapstick, it was silly and Mrs. Punch (Judy) always ended up hitting Mr. Punch with a stick and vice versa, but it was enough to absorb a young child’s attention.

“You see any puppet show on a stage and you can clearly see their sticks and strings, the hand inside. You know where the puppet master is and where he’s directing them, but you don’t interfere because you find it entertaining. Now, the world? There are many puppets with various masters, most of them useless, and after that they don’t even give you the courtesy of being amusing.” He stated.

“I’ve always thought, I might as well start taking over their strings and pulling them if it was the case.”

“Strings, Tom?” She asked, finding herself fascinated with the topic against her better judgement.

His focus returned to her, but his hand was stroking underneath her collar bone. “Most people are rather transparent, don’t you think? This one has popularity for strings, and that’s what other people pull him with. Another one has wealth. This one need social approval oh-so-very-desperately that they’ll allow anyone who can grant it to move them as sock puppets.”

“Many, of course, are varieties of power.” He finished.

Tom was curious enough to taste her skin with his tongue, to follow the line his hand had been tracing. Hermione tilted her head back at the sensation with a surprised gasp.

“And it makes them not real?” She asked.

“Hermione,” there was something wry in his tone now as he drew back to meet her gaze again. “If a person moves to the right when you direct them to the right, leaps to the left when you wish them to, and jumps up when you set the bait above his head, wouldn’t you also doubt the notion of free will and intelligence?”

“But they have their own life,” she began.

“Puppet shows. All of it.” He answered with a dismissive tone.

“But that’s not—”
“Hermione, you did ask me about why they’re not real, didn’t you? I’ve just told you.”

“And I’m not just another doll with my own puppet show?”

Tom chuckled, and Hermione found herself unable from stopping herself from touching his face. “You create whatever you wish, pulling any puppets around you into your orbit. You easily destroy several others’ strings and you take other people’s sock puppets with barely a thought. You’re a force to be reckoned with. You’re the last thing from weak.”

“Why do you not care that I can kill you?” She asked, baffled.

“Yet you’ve chosen not to, haven’t you? You told me yourself, Hermione. You’ve stayed your hand and now you can’t stay away. Your curiosity won’t let you—I’ve begun to take your measure, dear. You simply have to move closer. You wish to see what the monster you’ve let go can become, now that you’ve gifted me with your foresight. Perhaps you feel responsible.”

He was elated with what he saw in her eyes. “Ah. You do. You clearly do. You don’t need to worry, Hermione. It’s the same way I’ve found you too interesting to leave alone or kill.”

“You’re not a monster, Tom. Not yet,” she murmured, her hands sliding under his blazer. She was enjoying his warmth, contented in the way he unconsciously leaned into her touch.

“Yet you’re the one who first brought me up as Jörmungandr.”

Why did he even have to remember her offhand comment on world-eating snakes? She was really only referring to his Slytherin background and Parselmouth skills. Not that he knew that she knew.

“And now?”

“Now we’re two stars falling into each other’s orbits. It’s especially true when you can hardly find someone who can talk to you on your level, clearly someone whose massive intellect can distort the world around them. When you do, it’s rather hard to stop, isn’t it?” His voice was completely casual.

She was agreeing with him on more than one level as his hand began to slip under her shirt and up her back.

“You’re looking for someone who is not a puppet?” Hermione asked, wry.

“Yes.”

“And yet you don’t mind that it’s someone who can kill you,” she observed.

He pulled her close, his lips a hair above her ear. His voice was intimate. “I’m sure if you were that unrefined in your methods to stop me, you’ll find that I’m also completely able to kill you to preserve my own life. I don’t see you avoiding me just for that reason.”

Tom was completely unconcerned. Then again, Hermione supposed she really shouldn’t cast aspersions against him when she wasn’t exactly worried about him standing between her legs either, his hair mussed and his smile as charming as the devil’s.

“Maybe I just haven’t decided yet.” She murmured.

Where a naïve virgin might be fooled into thinking that sexual attraction and love are the same thing, she’s not an actual innocent, is she? Hermione was quite aware of how different the two
feelings are. As such, she found it foolish to deny that she did find him attractive, that his intelligent conversation made him so fascinating to her compared to most people. After all, it did not change the fact that she will still bring him down if he tried to become a dark lord.

“You have to admit, we’re quite well-matched, Hermione.”

“That’s just your silver tongue talking, isn’t it? Are you persuading me towards an attachment, Mr. Riddle?” Hermione shrewdly asked, but not without her own grin.

“What is life, without taking a few calculated risks?”

- Tom found himself in good humour that night.

He’d easily agreed to Hermione’s suggestion that they eat at the kitchens, because she was not in the mood to face the Hogwarts student body yet. The decision was swift as it presented him the opportunity to monopolise her company even longer. It also happened to coincide with one of the nights where he was free of his prefect duties. Even if it hadn’t, he’d exchange his patrol schedule with someone else’s—Merlin knows he’d accepted other people’s schedule switch often enough before to have accumulated many favours. It was worth it for a private dinner with her. It had been a while since his interest was caught by something new this completely, whether it was a new project, a mysterious tome, or something else.

Tom was not unaware that it was the result of this odd push-and-pull between them that neither felt particularly inclined to name.

He found himself pleased by the littlest things. Like the heat in the kitchen that vexed Hermione enough that she discarded her outer robes and other excess clothing until she was down to her shirtsleeves, and she rolled her sleeves up without a second thought (thank Merlin for the pragmatism her healer training gave her on the subject of clothes). The fireplace behind her added touches of gold and copper to her curls and it also made her shirt slightly see-through. He could see the fine side-profile of her breasts.

Hermione calling up his name pulled his attention back to her and he smiled before following suit, discarding his robes and blazer. As they had been taking shortcuts and back ways, he’d felt confident enough to not put on his tie on again and hadn’t done anything to his buttons either. From the way Hermione’s attention had drifted to his neck, he knew she was not unaffected.

“Missy?”

One of the house elfs had approached Hermione, its unusually large eyes wide open. In Tom’s opinion, it made her look like she was permanently concussed. He supposed it might pass as ‘cute’ to other people.

“Ah, hello. I hope we’re not being a bother.” Hermione smiled warmly.

The house elf with what looked like a patchwork apron rapidly shook her head. “Oh, no! Missy is not a bother at all. Young Miss and Master is welcome to stay.”

“I’m afraid we haven’t been introduced. I’m Hermione Curie.”

“Oh, we knows who you are. We knows much. Miss Hermione and Mister Riddle is welcome to have a good meal. Pinny will serve you. Pinny will always serve you.” Pinny nodded vehemently as she said this.
"Thank you, but you don’t really need to be aware of me in the middle of the night, do you?"

The house elf was horrified. “Pinny have to! Pinny always listens for Young Missus’ call!”

No amount of negotiating managed to make the house elf budge.

Out of all the strangeness he’d seen that day, he hadn’t expected Hermione actually becoming embarrassed at the house elf’s naturally servile attitude. In fact, he didn’t even understand why she needed to make small talk with it.

She was not only polite to the house elfs, but she was extraordinarily chatty in a way he didn’t even see with her classmates. She asked about their families, she asked about who planned the menu for tonight and why that particular menu was chosen and she promised them that one day, she’ll hear the recipes along with the stories that came with them.

As with other oddities of hers, it piqued his curiosity. He had a method to deal with many of her inexplicable actions—he simply memorised it for now to find out the reason behind it at some other time.

The food arrived. It was a more complex menu than was offered at the House tables—he was impressed. Hermione’s knowing smile showed that she was aware of it. She did not tease him about it but proceeded to explain that the house elfs never quite dared to experiment with the menu. They were considering it, yes, but they simply don’t know where to begin without a human guide to start with some baseline.

“Someone like you, I suppose,” Tom casually said. She nodded without irony at that.

“Yes, exactly. Not right now, no. I already have too many things I need to do. Still, one of these days, I’d help the house elfs revamp the menu. Then, I might even have time to help them construct a cook book and publish it.”

“A cook book,” he repeated, as he had no idea of what else to say.

“Yes. Because they perform such a wide range of services for the wizarding world but they’re so invisible that people take them for granted. I know that it’s unfortunately part of a house elf’s make up to be psychologically attached to wizards and witches. It also makes sense in a way because they need to absorb said wizards and witches’ excess magic to thrive instead of merely just survive. Still, it does not mean that their culture had to be sublimated under the wizarding world’s!”

Everything she’d said at the beginning made complete sense. It wasn’t even something that most people knew, but she was Hermione, and he’d begun to expect encyclopaedic knowledge on esoteric subjects as something normal from her. Still, he had no idea how that related to her final conclusion.

“Sublimated? Hermione, they have no unique culture of their own.” Tom couldn’t help but say.

“Exactly! If they can easily subsume any sense of self in service of their human masters, why not unique cultural expressions of their own? That’s why I’m going to help them establish their own culture, and to remind people that some things we might think as part of the wizarding world are actually contributions by the house elfs that we’ve taken in and accepted as our own.”

Tom blinked.

It seems that she was correct in advising him to not ask her about house elfs, considering that this was what a random chat about them already could get her to say. At times, she’d say the most
outlandish things that he could not quite tell whether she was serious or not, and his best method in
dealing with it so far is just to continue the conversation into something more reasonable.

Like *chimeras*.

“What do you think about creating chimeric animals?” Tom asked.

She pursed her lips in thought. “Hmm…that’s not so simple or straightforward, is it? You need to
know beyond mere Care of Magical Creatures.”

“You’d need to know Care of Magical Creatures, Transfiguration and Blood Magic, to be precise.”

“Ah, of course. I should’ve remembered that. Their organs wouldn’t work cross-species without
the blood magic, would it? So, of course it’s necessary. I wonder how the wizarding world deals
with histocompatibility…”

He stared at her, hiding his surprise well.

Hermione did not even realise that she was nowhere in the vicinity of normal as she accepted the
inclusion of blood magic without blinking, as if it was a mundane magical subject like the first
two. Some of the Slytherins he’d talked to would still even balk at it and turn to check whether
there are any eavesdroppers nearby. Hermione was completely unconcerned. The colour was bright
on her cheeks and her hand movements were lively and arresting.

“The problem with chimeras is that, it’s just that most wizards and witches are so *irresponsible*
about it, you know?”

Instead of affronted, she was *exasperated*. It took him off guard.

“I’m sorry?”

The Ravenclaw witch pointed out at the number of wizards and witches who were determined to
leave their mark through the creation of a new species. Half of them failed, and almost all of them
are definite megalomaniacs, she flatly noted. The creation of a new species was rarely ever for any
benefit whatsoever but to cater to the ego of its creators. Her tangent astonished him for a long
moment.

“It’s irresponsible and damaging to the ecosystem of whatever poor place they choose to release
their experiments to! It almost always results in an ecological disaster!”

He had to be impressed at the speed the witch marshalled her arguments.

“Most chimeras created are top predators—usually they’re too competitive and territorial to gather
or even grow in population. Their numbers are thus limited by design,” he commented quickly, to
hide the fact that he had no idea what else to say. *Ecological disaster? How did she even reach that
point in the first place?*

She huffed. “It’s not surprise that they’re usually a predator. It’s all one grand ego-stroking display,
like I’ve said. And I suppose yours would be some species of giant snake, am I right? You’d
probably want the Titanoboa as one of the basis species, in that case. I’m sure *that* particular snake
can certainly swallow an elephant. But have you thought about how the chimera will mesh in the
local food web?”

*What?*
Tom was fortunate that none of his underlings were here to see him stop and stare for three whole seconds. He had never thought that after experimenting with blood magic on magical creatures that it was important to start considering their role in the native ecosystem. Most people would ask about why he was making a hundred-feet, cunning man-eating snakes first and ask him to stop doing something so distinctly dark wizard-like.

Hermione, it seems, cast her gimlet eye towards the preservation of the natural world.

“Well?” The Ravenclaw was tapping her fingers on the table, waiting with an arched eyebrow.

It was clear that she expected him to come up with an ecologically sound plan to introduce the chimeric snake on the spot.

“And the blood magic?” He asked instead, dodging her question. He was now morbidly curious about how she thought.

“What about the blood magic?” She asked back, her brown eyes wide and guileless. Inwardly surprised, he quickly eliminated the possibility that she was joking.

“You would need to use it to create a healthy chimera. As I’ve stated earlier, the skills required is found across Care of Magical Creatures, Transfiguration and Blood Magic.”

She nodded while listening to what he’d just said. “Why, yes, I agree with you. You’d need to mine the depths of those three fields. Otherwise, you’ll have a lot of self-aborting foetuses inside wombs or eggs, and then you’ll also have major organ death due to irritated immune system—it relates to the histocompatibility like I’ve said before. MHC is hard enough to deal with in intra-species organ transplants, much less inter-species ones.”

Hermione seemed to realise what she was saying at this point as she shook her head.

“Oh, I suppose that’s too far into the weeds for your level of interest, isn’t it? Never mind that for now. I do have to say that you’re off to a good start already—you’d probably have better odds starting with a reptilian species as a basis than a mammalian one.”

“Because with snakes, you can keep lowering their body temperature since they don’t generate their own body heat. It slows down their physiological processes that you can practically check the changes you made in slow motion—what more could you ask from your experimental animals?” He added before he could help himself.

Tom had only planned on listening, to make her talk and allow him to gauge the limits of her knowledge that way. Yet some part of him did not want her to have the impression that he had not done the groundwork research for it.

His pride would not let him seem a complete novice to her, even if he knew that her knowledge of physiological processes would probably exceed his, what with her healing background.

Hermione beamed at him, her smile unexpectedly wide and warm.

“Yes! Exactly! Not to mention that reptiles generally have slower immune response than the members of the warm-blooded taxa that it lowers rejection of grafts and alien body parts to attach too. I suppose there might be some really potent blood magic ritual that can merge or blend species, but there’s really a dearth of texts that I can’t be sure…”

The brunette drifted away as she become lost in thought. Tom, on the other hand, was readjusting his perspective on Hermione yet again after she said ‘alien body parts to attach’ without blinking. It
was why he said the first thing in his mind without holding back.

“‘Ritual to merge or blend species’, really? So vague and without any example rituals mentioned?
No mention of any particular schools? That’s practically guessing by your standards, Hermione. I
suppose this means you’ve never actually read a book on blood magic, have you?” He teased.

Hermione reddened slightly, but she didn’t quite admit her ignorance.

“I couldn’t possibly miss that much from those texts. I’m sure some of the knowledge in them can
be found in other magical branches…” she muttered.

Other people might be fooled, but Tom knew that she was dithering. He also knew that blood
magic was a field where he definitely had the advantage—though he had never even expected her
to be familiar with it in the first place.

Not in his wildest imaginings.

Fascinating, he noted. He even asked her about several more-complicated blood magic rituals and
watch as she evaded and blushed at her lack of knowledge of them. Hermione settled with a glare
when she finally realised that he was teasing her.

“You—!”

“I had to figure out the limits of your knowledge somehow.”

“You could just ask.” She was definitely not amused.

“I can teach you further about those sacrificial rituals I mentioned,” he said this to distract her.

“How much do you know? Celtic or Germanic?” Hermione asked, forgetting her annoyance
quickly.

“Oh, I do study both and a couple of others,” he replied with a modest tone that Hermione no
longer accepts at face value now. She kept staring at him without blinking. “I pride myself in
being an amateur Luwian ritual specialist and I do have some Hittite ones I’ve memorised
alongside.”

“In their original languages?” Her voice was soft when she asked, solemn. She was completely
hooked.

Tom nodded and he did not expect the high-pitched sound of excitement she made. If she had been
sitting near him instead of across the table, he suspected she would’ve jumped up and hugged him.

“Really? How did you even find someone who knows exactly how it sounds?”

“I have my sources. I’ve even tried out one—turns out that a deer can power a decent blood ward
for a house.”

His grin was wide and true, with the bloodthirst of an old pagan god riding with the wild hunt.
Hermione’s understanding of how rare the rituals he’d found as well as her appreciation was one
he’d never received from other people before. Simply put, most wizards truly didn’t understand the
effort required to collect rituals in a language that died some three millenniums ago, along with the
persistence required to learn said language. The look of amazement and wonder she gave him
reminded him of the first time he drank wine.
Her adulation was intoxicating.

With her enthusiasm, it was clear that he could mine her healing knowledge for his projects and she’d assist without a second thought. Not to mention that he already had several tomes on blood magic at hand that he knew she wouldn’t be able to resist if he could place them under her nose. It was almost a shame that the couldn’t follow that particular topic for now and he had to pull them back to his first question.

“What about the Ministry for Magic’s issue with Blood Magic?”

He stumped her for a few moments before some form of understanding finally grew on her face. She gave him a bored look.

“Oh! That was the problem you were trying to point out earlier. You could’ve been more specific.”

He shrugged carelessly. She continued.

“I don’t see any problem with it because contrary to what most people thought, I know that blood magic is one of the oldest magics in the universe. It’s not particularly good or bad either—it was as easy to create a protection spell with blood magic as it was to curse someone. Of course, forcing someone to sacrifice their blood instead of using your own to power your blood magic spell is definitely Not Good.”

“No! Really, you don’t say?” He dryly commented. Hermione glanced upwards but mostly ignored his sarcasm.

“Other than that, I basically disagree with anyone using it to curse someone the same way I disagree anyone using a wand to cast a Killing Curse. But we don’t see anyone outright banning hexes, curses and jinx, do we? Why put a blanket ban on all blood magic, then?”

“The Ministry might disagree with you on that,” Tom noted with a slight grin.

“The Ministry can be a right twat sometimes and you know it too,” she answered without care. “One of these days, we’re going to make the Wizengamot be more specific about the kinds of blood magic it outlaws.”

“We will?” He asked, highly amused.

“Oh, we certainly will.” She was all confidence.

Did she realise how easily she used ‘we’ to refer to herself and him? No, he didn’t think she did. He thought he’d have more fun with this by avoiding any mention about it for now.

They did end up talking about the technicalities of constructing a chimera for a while as they eat, losing track of time as they did so. Tom began to notice this when he realised he’d taken a second helping on purpose to delay, and Hermione kept adding more dessert on her plate later as she slowed down to only occasionally nibble on it.

If they were at the great hall right now, the tables would’ve been half empty at this point.

“It occurs to me,” he said some moments afterwards as they were more than done with their meal, “that you have yet to inform me of how I could have fallen into madness.”
Hermione’s warm brown eyes met his, and he could see her coming up with words to say and then discarding them as fast as she made them. The quietness stretched into seconds, broken up only by the faint tinkle of silverware.

“It’s that bad, is it?” He asked with a smile, trying to lighten her mood.

From the way she cringed, he was probably more correct than he knew. He sighed.

“Alright. So, how terrible was it? If you continue to stall, I’m afraid I’ll also continue to be deprived of the knowledge of how to not destroy myself. And here I thought you liked me, Hermione.”

She didn’t even react to his light-hearted comment, which moved it from ‘concerning’ into ‘alarming’ very quickly. He wanted answers immediately, of that there were no doubt. Yet from the way she seemed to be lost in some disturbing vision of a far-off future, he wasn’t sure he was willing to prod her too much that she’d be annoyed enough to viciously provide him all the terrible, embarrassing details.

Hermione finally told him. The words came tumbling out with a long, drawn-out sigh. “It was the dark arts, Tom. You went too far into them to ever come back whole again.”

“That’s highly unspecific,” he replied, mildly irritated.

She gave him a warning look to not interrupt which he chose to listen to this time. He gave her the opportunity to collect her thoughts again.

“It’s the soul, you see. Many of the magics that fall under the purview of the dark arts are classified thus because they affect the soul. Contrary to what people say as they curse lawyers, it is not actually possible to be alive if you were soulless. It is still impossible to be alive and stable if you have only a small amount of your soul healthy and untouched.” Hermione noted.

“So, did I happen to destroy mine?” He asked with a cheer he definitely wasn’t feeling. “Taint my soul beyond all recognition?”

The sad, understanding look that she gave him made him feel worse, for some reason. Yet even when he knew his smile had gone cold, her expression did not waver. Her next question surprised him.

“Can I hug you?”

A beat. He continued to stare blankly at her, uncomprehending.

“Pardon?”

“Look, this is a very depressing topic, and I still haven’t exactly bounced back from all the mess of today. So, if you’ll allow me to hug you so I don’t have to feel as miserable, I think I can continue to follow this personal hole to China that you’re intent on digging.”

“I suppose I can.”

Hermione moved off her bench and slid next to his. She didn’t sit facing the same side, though; she faced the opposite. In that way, it was easier for her to slip her arm around him and lean into him. He found himself not minding the contact too much. She was warm and soft in his arms—certainly a very pleasant object to hold. He could catch the faint fragrance of roses that inspired him to give her one, along with ink, the scent of fresh parchment and something sweet that was distinctly her.
“You know, I didn’t think I ever really checked what the pieces that have fallen off you look like—in that future, I mean. We were too busy staying alive and just trying to kill you as quickly as we can. We were trying to keep more people from dying and the world from falling apart even more.” Hermione continued conversationally into his shoulder. “All those fallen pieces of your soul might be the blackest black, for all I know. What I do know is that at the end, you barely had any piece worth speaking of inside you. You’ve just torn it to so many pieces. At the end, you’re really not all there. Did you know that you were bald, snake-like and had no nose? He was —”

“You don’t need to say it.” His hand curled around her waist without thought.

“It would seem I’m still a coward about facing my own destruction after all, he thought, with a bitter sort of humour.

“I told you it was depressing.” She said this with a hint of that know-it-all tone that could be very annoying if she deployed it in full. Luckily for Hogwarts so far, she seemed to restrain herself most of the time, even in classes.

“I miscalculated just how depressing it could be,” he murmured, his nose buried in her curls.

“Now, I find myself in need of a new topic.”

She snorted inelegantly. “You’ve just needed a new topic now? I needed it a few minutes ago.”

He knew she was going to be insufferable if he let her go on for a while; Merlin knows he has enough experience with it whenever she was winning arguments against him in their discussions in the infirmary. What he did instead was to pull back and kiss her. It was a different sensation now, especially since they were only in their shirtsleeves. He could feel the faint rise of the goosebumps on her arm and had the unobstructed access to the full curve of her breast. Well, not quite that unobstructed yet, but it wasn’t as if he was incapable of remedying it soon as his hand trailed down her collarbone—

“Tom?” Hermione’s voice was breathy, and he found that he liked feeling the reverberations through her chest as his nose was stuck in front of her sternum.

“Yes, Hermione?”

“You’re unbuttoning my shirt.”

He leaned back, taking stock of his work and feeling rather satisfied. “Why yes, I believe I am.”

His nonchalance caused her to roll her eyes as she proceeded to button them back up. He was watching the tantalizing line of flesh disappear with a resigned sigh.

“I am not going to provide a free show for the house elfs.” She insisted.

“I think you know as well as I do that their wonderful virtue is that they’re utterly unconcerned about people’s personal business.” Tom noted.

“If you were going in the direction that I think you’re going, you still owe me some real dates.”

He quirked an eyebrow in her direction. “A date?”

“Yes. A date. A real dinner outing, to a restaurant, to demonstrate that you’re not a skinflint and you can actually show a lady a good time. I do like to dance, if you must know,” Hermione instructed. Merlin, she was bossy. Oddly enough, he didn’t find the annoyance he usually felt when most people thought they need to order him around—probably because when Hermione said something, she had the knowledge and good reason to back it up.
“I think I can manage a few dates.”

“Good.” The pleased smile she gave him was bright enough to light up the room. It took such a simple thing too, he mused, curious.

“Now that you’re not in such a melancholic mood, would you tell me about what happened in St. Mungo’s?” Tom asked.

Hermione tucked herself to his side and started recounting her day from the beginning. He wrapped his arm around her once more without even thinking.

Tom listened first curiously, and then with increasing interest. Her parents had considered it important enough for her to know how to operate a muggle weapon? What kind of life had her family lead in Norway before her parents died? Slughorn had only said that they were expatriates, but Tom were beginning to have his own theories that they were Ministry agents of some sort—why else had her entire family been hunted down by dark wizards? Why else did it seem that there was no news of other survivors from the British magical circle of Kopervik that she came from? After asking Slughorn of her origins, he’d checked.

All anyone could find was that it had been burned down to the ground, with casualty numbers unknown. The news had strangely never made it into Britain’s newspapers either. Hermione did not even seem to try to find news about her family and friends on the Prophet or the other papers she reads in the infirmary whenever he saw her reading the paper.

It was as if the news blackout was not a surprise to her at all.

The easy way she listed the injuries she’d seen and the risks that mediwitches and mediwizards not familiar with muggle weaponry would miss told him that her medical knowledge was beyond mere first aid needs.

He was caught up with the entire mystery that was Hermione Curie.

She was all for the cultural revival of the house elfs and she did not think that there was anything unusual about studying and utilising (some) blood magic. She could apparently operate a muggle exploding stick—gun, and she knew more about the deep arithmantic calculation required to even begin charting time for an entire society than everyone in the whole castle whose blood were ‘purer’ than hers.

Hermione thought he was most likely going to destroy the world and still chose to be near him. We’re all walking contradictions, Tom, Hermione had said to him once. He found that none were more so than her. He was going to enjoy unravelling yet another new mystery from her, to figure out more of her secrets that she might not even realise were anything special (like the way she did not even blink about stating outright that not all blood magics were inherently bad). He was not even sure what made him gave her one last kiss after they’ve put on their entire uniform again. It simply felt like a slightly different good night that was a fitting way to end the dinner.

It was convenient for him that neither of them seemed to be interested in drawing away from each other then, isn’t it? He had all the time in the world to figure her out.

It was late. Melchior and Abraxas had been minding their own business at the corner table* in the Slytherin common room when Tom found them.
*this is the distinct privilege of an upperclassman, even more so when said upperclassman is associated with Tom Riddle, who had been known to chat in Parseltongue with some of the common room’s fixtures.

“Melchior, Abraxas,” Tom called out cheerfully.

Two heads looked up. Where one head was dark, the other was light.

“Afternoon, Tom.” Melchior greeted back, which his friend followed a moment later.

Where Melchior had been reading and annotating calmly, Abraxas had been fiddling with his quill as he thought, its feathered tip frayed from absent-minded nibbling. If it hadn’t been one of the more expensive writing quills of Scribbulus’ that he used, he would’ve earned the ire of his partner for splattering inks all over their work. For all the contrast that they presented, they were the highest-ranking of Tom’s underlings and were amongst the smartly-dressed Slytherins.

“You’re just the people I’ve been looking for. You’re working on that Potions essay we need to turn in on Friday?”

Melchior was too busy thinking it was unusual for Tom to still have something to do after he finished his prefect rounds. It was Abraxas who asked first, without much too thought or guile.

“Yes, it is. What can we do for you, Tom?”

Tom slid easily into an empty seat on the table.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but your family holds around fifteen percent of Daily Prophet’s share.”

The blond Slytherin shrugged. “Thereabouts, sure. might even be more if I consolidated my mother’s holdings as well.”

“And yours are not significantly smaller either, isn’t it, Melchior?” Tom asked yet again.

Melchior had yet to say a word, still trying to read Tom’s expression. He was unaffected by the pleasant mien his liege lord wore. His face was a studied exercise in neutrality.

“Yes. If you would tell us what story you’d like to run, we can have our contacts working on it tomorrow.” He answered, cutting straight to the meat of the matter.

“Ah, but I need it tomorrow.”

The Nott heir frowned in thought, even as Abraxas nodded and said that it would be no problem. His friend would probably even say that he’d write the article himself if necessary, recklessly taking on a task he had considered neither of them had much training in. No. Personally, he’d rather delay than do a less than excellent work. He had been so lost in thought that he’d missed the witch that had come up to Tom’s right. Her cool expression and undeterred composure was familiar to most people by now. Emma Eccleston, sixth-year prefect. She had fine cheekbones, he can admit. Yet with her hairstyle, it made her look more severe and older. Not a hair escaped her bun.

“There would be no need to trouble yourself on that front. With a little help, I’ve done most of the work this evening.”

Melchior could see Abraxas’s brows creasing slightly as the witch spoke up before Tom even signalled to her, but he was more laidback on that point. She was an outsider—she wouldn’t know the proper protocols, would she?
Eccleston brandished a scroll in their direction. Abraxas picked it up and scanned the words quickly.

On the other hand, if Tom had been busy doing this, it would explain why neither of them had seen Tom at dinner. Neither Melchior nor Abraxas had disturbed him earlier this evening either, when it seemed that he was busy meeting with the Policy Swots. They decided to just play cards right then.

“Oh? Really?” Abraxas commented out loud as he read.

It was the surprised tone that did it. Melchior glanced across the table.

“There’s nothing I’ve written that isn’t the truth,” Emma stated. Yet there was an interesting glimmer in her eyes.

Tom’s smirk was as inscrutable as it had always been.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone was wondering why Hermione didn’t even blink when Tom implied he’d killed a deer for a ward, remember that she’d given enough clues that she’d studied the basics of blood magic before for pragmatic reasons. If you can come to terms killing cows and chicken on a regular basis to be able to eat meat, occasionally killing the odd deer, goat or black chicken to power protective wards and whatnot is as functional and justifiable as the first.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Luwian:** (Linguistics) A language (or group of closely-related languages, the linguists aren't settled on this) spoken by the Luwian people. The name of the Luwian people itself comes from *Luwiya*, the name of the region they live in, as they are registered in the written records of the time (usually written in Hittite). It was once spoke roughly around western and central Anatolia (present-day Turkey) and northern Syria. Part of the Anatolian branch of the Indo-European language family. Time of existence until extinction: from sometime in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} millennium BCE (Before Common Era) to 600 BCE.

**Hittite:** (Linguistics) A language once spoken by the *Hittites*, who created an empire centred on *Hattusa* in north-central Anatolia (present-day Turkey). Also known as *Nesite* or *Neshtie*. It is the oldest Indo-European language to appear in written records. Part of the Anatolian branch of the Indo-European language family. It is written in cuneiform that is adapted from Akkadian ones. Its written records exist from 16\textsuperscript{th} century BCE to 13\textsuperscript{th} century BCE.

There have been many evidence, though indirect, that Hittite died out before Luwian did. These evidences argued that in the later centuries of the Hittite Empire, the colloquial language was Luwian even though the scribes still learn Hittite to write...
official records, based on the evolution of the Hittite that they used through centuries. (See Ilya Yakubovich's *Sociolinguistics of the Luwian Language*).

**MHC:** *Major Histocompatibility Complex* (Biological Sciences, Medicine). The set of proteins that whose parts/limbs 'stick out' of the cell walls of vertebrate cells. The function of which is so that the immune system (the T-cell in this case) 'reads' the proteins. If the cell is healthy, the T-cell leaves it alone. If the cell is *not* okay (say, heavily infected), the T-cell recognises it by the changes to parts of the histocompatibility complex. This is because invading bacteria leaves a trail of many different proteins* that can be bound to one or more proteins of the MHC, thus changing its shape. The T-cell then destroys the cell it recognises as 'not okay'.

*to be more specific, peptides.

The problem arises when the cell that the T-cell recognises as 'not okay' is actually a healthy cell, like, say, *an organ transplanted from a different individual*. This is because different people have different sets of proteins that make up their MHC. The host T-cell might recognise them wrongly as 'infected cells' and promptly starts destroying them. And this is still within the same species! Cross-species transplants are even worse. Don't get me started on auto-immune diseases that basically came down to a case of mistaken identity by the T-cell, in which *no alien cells are even involved*. Type I Diabetes is one of these.

**Punch and Judy:** (Culture) A traditional, violent puppet show in Britain. I am not ashamed to say that I liked watching it when I was a kid (kids are simple—and violent). The puppets range from sock puppets, to marionettes, and everything in between. It has roots in 16th century Italian commedia dell'arte (Pulcinella and his wife). It used to be a staple of the seaside towns, (playing to the holiday crowd, I suppose).

The telling thing here is that, even as Tom and Hermione share this cultural reference, it’s also a mostly muggle thing.

**Titanoboa:** (Palaeontology) A genus of giant snakes that lived some 60 – 58 million years ago, during the Palaeocene epoch. It’s not a surprise that they’re all extinct right now. The largest fossils found is estimated to belong to a snake that is 12.8 metres (42 feet) long (by scaling them with the skeletons of modern snakes closest to it), and is estimated to be 1,135 kg (2500 lb). The further details are obviously courtesy of Wikipedia.
19 Countermoves

Chapter Summary

Tom meets the Wizarding Society for Better Governance. Hermione catches up with some news she was missing at lunch. Tom pulls her to the planning table.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

19 Countermoves

When Tom stepped into the common room of the Slytherin dungeon, he found three sixth and seventh year Slytherin prefects, waiting. With them were two others, a sixth and a seventh years that liaised with him quite regularly.

One of the winged-back chairs was empty and he figured that they had reserved it for him. Tom took the implicit invitation. His mood had been good after the pleasant dinner he had with Hermione, so he was unaffected by this small ambush. He recognised the group to be the Wizarding Society for Better Governance, better known by their colloquial nickname the Policy Swots.

“Gentlemen, Lady.” He nodded at them and at Emma Eccleston, the single witch among the five.

“Tom,” Orpington, the seventh-year prefect, began after he sat down. “We want to know what you plan to do.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What I plan to do?”

They exchanged glances with each other, with the slightest gestures of the head or a twitching
hand. Their hesitation was almost palpable in the air while he calmly waited for them to come to some sort of consensus. Once more, it was the staid Orpington who spoke up again.

“For the future, Tom. Spencer-Moon’s not a bad sort at all when you’re holding everything together in the middle of a war. He gets people to work together. He could even pull resources from the muggles, which might be because he has a good relationship with the Prime Minister.”

The wizards, Tom noticed, did not really like to think about the Prime Minister of UK much. It meant admitting that in the end, their society exists at the behest of muggles. Many wizards and witches didn’t even know that the Minister for Magic was not the highest authority in the land and that there was yet another that he or she has to answer to.

For Oswin to bring it up in the first place spoke of something urgent.

“But all these reform ideas, Tom. It’s just…it’s not going to take. He’s not even trying to canvass support from all the ranks.” Emma said, not quite believing what she was saying either.

“And no one likes how he’s ignoring the muggle issues that Grindelwald brought up.” Mordred Montmorency, the sixth-year prefect, spoke up. He didn’t have to raise his voice to be heard.

Mordred was slim, blond and the farthest thing from a fidgety person. Someone who can easily stand at the corner of the room and be forgotten in no time. Yet he was more akin to a good hunting dog, and not the ones who ran in mobs to flush out foxes either. He was the one that can wait beside you. All that quietness belied his ability to swiftly act in one burst of energy, to go in for the kill.

“Muggle issues?” Tom asked.

“Grindelwald issues.” Mordred clarified. “Most people want greater separation from the two worlds right now, because it’s clearly not safe, is it? And the Minister doesn’t seem to get that.”

Tom shook his head. “The Aurors need to be more decisive when they act, especially when under attack.”

Oswin was unusually restless. He didn’t even bother to sit down, settling for sitting on the arm of Montmorency’s chair. “It’s dangerous Tom. We’re not prepared for this, not yet. My father told me of a demonstration of muggle weaponry in St. Mungo’s today and I insisted on being allowed to get a copy of my uncle’s memories since he was there.”

His breath was sharp, harsh. “I saw the autopsy results on the pig carcasses, though I was going more with the highlights of what my uncle told my father. They tested with shield spells and their bullet went through every single one of them. In my uncle’s memories, I saw the young woman who fired the gun too. She was so quick and cold. It was as if she was only calculating her bill for lunch and how she’d have to split it with her friends.”

“A natural killer,” one of the other sixth year murmured.

It amused Tom to see as fear spread in the little group the way a winter chill had just snuck into the room. Their incomprehension was pathetic, because he did not doubt for a moment that Hermione’s efficiency in killing anything would be glorious. But he knew this was but the first challenge that Hermione would face in the wizarding world—that they would fear her for the same reason she had confounded him.

She was simply beyond any mundane categories.
On the other hand, he knew that he needed to redirect them from focusing on their fears. When he spoke next, the cadence of his voice was easy to listen to.

“This morning, as the news break over Hogwarts, Hermione Curie offered her assistance to Madam Edelstein. This is because she has an unusual knowledge of the effects of muggle weapons on the human body. For those of you not aware of it, I’ll add that she has gone through a war. Norway, after all, is still under forces affiliated with Grindelwald. It is perhaps also the reason of her hospitalisation the same day she arrived at Hogwarts,” Tom said. He could see them leaning closer, curious about Hogwarts’ newest transfer student despite their uncertainty or whatever it was that they’ve heard of her based on the rumours.

“Discussions with Madam Edelstein confirmed the depth of Miss Curie’s medical knowledge—at least in this particular field. The Nurse’s efforts to check with her colleagues who worked at St. Mungo’s gave her a mostly dissatisfying answer. Most of them had no idea of the harm. Thus, with the support of a healer and senior nurse who understood the importance of what they’re saying—one of which I’m sure was your uncle, Oswin—the four of them set off to St. Mungo’s to spread the information.”

Tom leaned back slightly, watching the group collect their thoughts. People think at different speeds. The trick is to find the point where at least two-thirds of your audience reaches understanding and step in at that point. If you wait until everyone does, someone would’ve already spoken up in dissent.

And dissent is not something you’d want to allow right now.

“Not that it’s not nice to know some improvements are happening.” Fortunately, Mordred provided the interference all on his own, without Tom having to speak up. “But what has that got to do with, well, everything?”

“The senior nurse (the name escapes me right now) and Oswin’s uncle here informed the healers and nurses. The junior healers and trainee nurses is left in the hands of Madam Edelstein and Miss Curie. As it happens, they don’t immediately believe in the dangers of what Miss Curie was describing, not even when Madam Edelstein started adding her opinion.” Tom paused, letting the dissatisfaction build.

“That’s ridiculous,” a rather heavy-set seventh-year muttered.

“See if they’d like it if they got shot.” That was…Horrocks, was it? What he did knew about the wizard was that one of his family member was a casualty in St. Mungo’s.

“I know.” Tom nodded with a look of understanding. “They’re still new, yes? Fresh out of school, they haven’t seen enough bodies yet. What they need is something to shock them out of their doubt.”

“What happens next, then?” He paused.

“Well, what happens next is that Miss Curie volunteers to give them precisely that demonstration that is needed. As I’ve said before Gentlemen, Lady, she has lived through war. Desperate times require desperate measures. One of the results of these is that under emergency, she’s quite capable of operating the muggles’ exploding sticks. The purpose, I believe, is to kill them with their own weapons if push comes to shove.” His last sentence tripped surprise and disbelief in equal measure as colours rise and expressions change. He continued before anyone spoke up.

“The senior nurse that had supported them saw what she was doing with a transfigured pig carcass.
He made a show of snapping his fingers and acting surprised when he’d remembered her name all the way from the beginning.

“Ah, Esmeralda Álava! The so-called Grand Duenna of nursing on the wizarding side of the Crimean War. Which, I’m sure you’d know, Orpington, as your Minister ancestor was brought down precisely for interfering in that muggle war.” He ignored the way Oswin coloured. “Considering all she’d done in establishing the nursing profession from the foundation up during that time, I’m sure you’re very familiar with her name too.”

“Very familiar,” Oswin murmured.

“Sometimes, people just don’t believe you unless you personally provide them with...examples,” Tom said, meeting the gaze of each and every one of them. None of them were going to mention Hermione negatively in relation to the shot pig carcasses again. He moved on to the next topic.

“Now that that’s settled, I’m sure we can return to our conversation about Minister Spencer-Moon. If his reforms are not going to take anyway, is it something that we need to be concerned about? Most of what anyone needs to do is to stall until the next Minister is chosen.”

“But people also want to see some sort of progress happen, otherwise it will increase their degree of discontent. They’ll distrust the government as an institution more, and that’s actually bad for anyone that wishes to be Minister for Magic.” Eccleston spoke up. Tom was not quite aware what department and division her mother was stationed at, but she was frighteningly well-informed on Ministry politics.

“So, we’re looking into something that can tide over. It doesn’t matter if it’s small as long as it can get past the Minister and the Wizengamot.”

The heavy-set seventh year scoffed. “Might as well ask for snow right now, Eccleston. It’s probably just as easy.”

“We also need to push it from the public side,” Eccleston added, ignoring her year mate’s complaint. With her hair in a single braid and her glasses firmly on the bridge of her nose, she looked every inch the schoolmistress. “Barely anyone has political capital to spare if they think an election is in the offing. But anyone would support an act brought by the public if they think it serves their interests too. That’s why many people were passing information to Oswin and I’s parents as they know it would get to us.”

“A petition,” Oswin sounded out the word.

“A draft for an act, brought forward by a petition and public opinion,” Montmorency refined it out loud.

Well, he had been planning on gathering the rising swell of public’s animosity towards muggles. It could be easily used in a fight against both the meddling, incompetent government and Grindelwald’s forces with his muggle pawns. To fight the latter, it was so convenient that they couldn’t hesitate to use violence—and what better violence, what better power than what he can gather from the darkest arts?

He will start as an outlaw of the people, one Robin Hood. As he struck these enemies down,
people will bow to him in reverence even as the hems of his robes were soaked in blood. It didn’t matter as long as it was the blood of the ‘wrong’ people. As long as he proved that his power brought them security, they will thank him.

It would be so easy to take the power he wanted that way.

Yet Hermione’s warnings about what happened at the end of his most obvious path stayed with him. She did say that it was an effect of his continued efforts to delve too deep into the dark arts. Now, he was forced to be more circumspect in his methods. More caution was warranted unless he was prepared to be mad. At the very least, this way, he wouldn’t turn away the moderates from his growing faction.

It was shaping up to be not such a bad idea, after all.

“Well,” Tom said, “I’m sure we can come up with something. Montmorency, you first. Tell me what you have…”

He didn’t miss the relieved expression in Montmorency’s face. It was easily mirrored in Orpington’s and a variation of it exists even on the more stoic Eccleston. They hadn’t been so sure of his interest in what they wanted to do either. It was as if they were afraid Tom might not even be interested in aiming for the Minister’s seat, preferring to take a more forceful route…

Tom almost wanted to grin and congratulate them for not being exactly blind to his previous impatience, along with the increasingly dark edge to his aura and magic.

Not that it was relevant. There’s a high probability that it wouldn’t be his path now.

Well, why not just see where this one will lead to, instead?

The day after Hermione had gone to St. Mungo’s, she found Tom somewhere after their classes. It was closely approaching lunchtime.

She had chosen to attend classes whose schedules didn’t match his for today and as such they had not been together. Fortunately, she did have the idea to follow his actions on the day of the summer picnic; she located him using sympathetic association. Her object of focus was his extensive scroll detailing the scope of her classes. This was why she was at some midpoint between the potions class and the Great Hall with her wand held like a compass needle, a scroll in hand. Hermione furrowed her brows the moment she saw him.

“You did something, didn’t you?”

The brunette could see him holding himself back from a smirk. “I did many things, Hermione. I’m afraid you’d have to be more specific.”

“The news, the rumours,” her hands were making weird shapes as she tried to find words for it, her brows scrunching up. “I’m suddenly Florence bloody Nightingale. Where did you even get pictures of me in front of a group of interns and novice nurses? I think I saw some students keeping copies of them. Then, there were also the ones where I was wearing a trainee uniform because Madam Álava recommended me to do so to stick out less.”

She took the arm he proffered without a second thought and they walked arm-in-arm in the hallways. Hermione noticed the glances sent her way as well as the double-takes.
“Madam Edelstein had been very helpful.” Tom commented.

“She…oh, of course she’d take pictures, or somehow filch them from other people.” Hermione murmured. Her annoyance somehow having subsided to a manageable degree because she couldn’t fault Nurse Edelstein for her fondness. It was…nice.

“You should be happy. She seems to care for you very much.”

Hermione peeked at him from the corner of her eyes. “I think you’re just happy because of how helpful she’s being to you by proxy.”

“Am I?”

“What are you currently working on, Tom?”

“A little bit of this and a little bit of that.” He answered, that enigmatic smile still on his face and thus indirectly annoying her. “By the way, Professor Slughorn misses you. I can see it in the way his face fell when he saw me entering class without your company.”

Hermione tilted her head to the side, trying to figure him out and coming out with nothing. She didn’t repress the scepticism from her voice.

“Really. It’s only been what, two days since I’ve last seen him?”

“He does so love to keep up with his students.” Tom remarked.

“And nothing of much significance has happened.” Hermione said.

“That would be in the eyes of the beholder, wouldn’t it?”

She could see his eyes crinkling at the corners, even if his mouth barely changed from their evenly neutral position. He was smiling and it was a genuine one. Alright, she had to admit that it pleased her more than seeing his good student façade, but the curiosity was driving her spare. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. She just could not, for the life of her, figure out why. 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“You have a suspicious mind, Hermione.” If he meant to sound disapproving, his eyes shouldn’t have gleamed. Hermione snorted.

“No, I’m just less subtle than you.”

“On that note, have you seen this morning’s Prophet?” There was that restrained humour in his
“I was preparing for Advanced Care for Magical Creatures, so no. Why?”

It was a class on the care and handling of Hippogriffs, and Professor Kettleburn was far stricter on checking the level of student’s knowledge and preparedness before even beginning to allow access to the creatures. It was completely appropriate for an advanced class. It wasn’t surprising that not many students took it. On the other hand, it caused her to muse whether Hagrid was inspired by Professor Kettleburn’s class but was underestimating the dangers when he made his own curriculum—for one, not everyone had the instinctive understanding for the mind of other species like he did.

“Ah, well. You’ll have something to look forward to now.” Tom said.

Hermione couldn’t help sending him suspicious looks, but she had a feeling it was only feeding his secret enjoyment.

‘-

“And here’s our heroine of the day!”

Lakshmi said this when she saw Hermione arriving. Lucretia also happened to be there today and smiling. Eugenie wasn’t present, but Hermione didn’t blame her for still needing to coordinate things with other French wizards and witches.

“Hi Lakshmi, Lucretia.” Hermione was staring at her friend in bafflement. “And what are you saying?”

Lakshmi turned to Lucretia with a large smile on her face. “Oh, this is priceless. She didn’t know.”

“Oh dear, I suppose that would make my congratulations to be premature, wouldn’t it?” Lucretia said. Hermione could see the gazes of various people around their part of the Ravenclaw table turning in their direction, either subtly or overtly. She decided that she might as well just take a seat while she figured out the news.

“Alright, what did I miss?” The brunette asked.

“I think it would be easier if you just read this first.”

Just like she did yesterday, Lakshmi passed Hermione her copy of the Daily Prophet.

“Madam Álava Finds a Diamond in the Rough?”

“The wizarding community has suffered a painful blow recently with Grindelwald’s attack on the Ministry, along with his simultaneous attacks to several important residences and offices. The scale of the attacks is unprecedented, and his methods are as brutal as they are crude…”

Hermione skipped two paragraphs that covered the grounds of Grindelwald’s attacks, perhaps it was there for anyone who had been living under a rock recently and hadn’t heard of the news. She just wanted to know what was going on.

“But we are not without hope. A time of great trials is also the best time for us all to come together and show the spirit of our community. As the news break in the morning, recent victim of Grindelwald attack, one Miss Hermione Curie, rose to the challenge. Her recent transfer to Hogwarts was due to her recently losing her parents in Norway, dead to the depredations of
Grindelwald-affiliated forces there. In the wake of the Ministry Massacre, Miss Curie was determined that her painful knowledge on wounds made from muggle weapons will need to be spread far and wide to save lives.

On that same morning, she made her way to St. Mungo’s accompanied with Madam Edelstein, the Head Nurse at Hogwarts’ Infirmary. Supporting her is the Grand Duenna of Nursing, Esmeralda Álava and Healer Orpington. Madam Álava had checked the knowledge of the healers on the ground of the disaster and had declared that most of them ‘were a crock of shite’—”

Hermione couldn’t help her burst of laughter, thankful that she hadn’t been drinking anything. Yes, it sounded exactly like what Madam Álava would say—she just didn’t think the Prophet would publish it verbatim.

“Healer Orpington assures us that the current teaching standards are adequate to address the types of injuries generated. It is merely the weapons that were unfamiliar, and thus some wounds had not been expected. Madam Álava would like to say that the best healers and nurses she knew did not let ‘alien weapons’ stop them from assessing their wounded properly. Both agreed that Miss Curie knew what she was talking about, and she made very good points of how first aid procedures for such wounds could be improved.

Our reporter visited St. Mungo’s to talk with the trainee healers and novice nurses that had been pulled into Miss Curie’s impromptu class. ‘She’s pretty intimidating, actually’ one of the healers interviewed admitted. ‘You wouldn’t expect it from a petite witch like her, and one so young too, but she gets fired up about all the damages the exploding sticks could inflict. I think it’s because she’s gone through it herself’. Another nurse agreed that she was ‘straightforward in class, cuts right to the meat of the issue.’ She also said that she was ‘very informative and didn’t sugar-coat anything.’

Trainee healer Coombs went on the record to say that he understood her level of drive. ‘it comes around when your patients have died on you. You wish to do your best not to experience that again.’ But is that enough to move most people to teach four consecutive classes in a single day? Because that is indeed what Miss Curie had done. St. Mungo’s assures us that the changes suggested by Madam Álava and Healer Orpington have been implemented—”

Hermione skipped the paragraph going on about St. Mungo’s bureaucracy quickly dancing to the tune of public scrutiny. Her brows were furrowed as she wasn’t quite clear why there were many mentions of her at the beginning. Sure, she taught four sessions, but she taught one class out of the three that was there, and that was the novice one. Nurse Edelstein taught it with her and there was no mention of that! She skimmed most of the rest and just went with the one at the end.

“Other healers have reluctantly admitted that Miss Curie indeed knew something, as her last tour of St. Mungo’s beside Madam Álava has the senior nurse standing aside and asking her to diagnose several of the patients wounded from the Ministry fracas. After chatting with them, Hermione Curie, correctly identified their major ailments. It has to be kept in mind that she is not even a trainee healer or novice nurse. Her wealth of knowledge, it would seem, was owed by her tragic background.

It would seem that the Order of Nightingale has a new star in their horizon. We all wait with bated breath what kind of progress she can help usher in the future.”

Hermione slapped the paper down. “Oh, that is just—”

“Magnificent?” Lakshmi asked with a grin on her face.
“Congratulations on your achievement, Hermione. We’re all glad to have your help.” Lucretia said from across the table. She was the very picture of lady.

“Thank you, Lucretia. It’s just…Madam Edelstein wasn’t even mentioned much! And she was there, supporting me all the way.” Hermione tried to stop herself from gritting her teeth. “This is bollocks.”

Lucretia coughed and the brunette sheepishly looked up. “Pardon my language.”

“Well, it’s spun to be your story, so I’m not surprised that she wasn’t in there.” Lakshmi said.

“What’s the Order of Nightingale, anyway?”

“It’s an order of nurses, mainly, though many frontline healers are also accorded the honour of also being inducted into the order.” Lucretia explained.

“You’re probably one of the few non-nurse and non-healer to have gotten in.”

Hermione blinked uncertainly. “I’m in?”

It was Lakshmi’s turn to curse and get a throat-clearing reminder from Lucretia. “Oh, goodness, girl. Did you actually read the article? You know, the bit about the ‘infinite care for the wounded’ and the ‘sense of responsibility to the community’? Well, there’s also the more boring comment of Madam Álava’s of ‘she has a good head on her shoulders and she uses it’. That one doesn’t even sound special at all.”

It was Madam Álava’s brisk assessment that brought a smile to Hermione’s face, though.

“Um, so, what do I do with it? Do I have to put in hours to St. Mungo’s? But my class schedule is already over-full” The brunette said.

Her two dormmates were staring at her as if she’d grown a second head. Actually, in the case of Lakshmi, she might even be less impressed by a second head. Two dark-haired witches conferred in silent looks with each other before they turned to Hermione again.

“You bask in it of course, you berk. You’re still in Hogwarts. They can’t exactly expect much out of you, can they?” The fifth-year witch answered.

“You might want to answer any healing-related questions our House mates might have?” Lucretia said.

Lakshmi reacted to that by saying that those idiots can certainly open a book on their own for the level of inane questions they were going to ask. Hermione sighed and ran a hand through her hair. It got stuck half way and she pulled her fingers out.

“It’s just…I’ve read the article, alright, but I still don’t understand what it all means.”

“Why don’t you ask Riddle?” Her friend asked from next to her. Lucretia was calmly drinking her glass of water.

“What does Tom have to do with it?”

Lakshmi snorted. “Please, darling, it’s harder to find what Riddle doesn’t have to do with in Hogwarts.”

The dark-haired witch raised a hand with finely painted nails, waving away her look of disbelief.
“He has increasing pull outside Hogwarts too--I’ve seen that the Ministry Swots are sticking to him like leeches recently, looking so serious you might’ve mistaken them for the war committee. Look, I’ve said that Riddle has his web of influence, right? Then let me tell you, there’s not a lot of people that can pull off a slanted piece like this on the Prophet—as far as I know, most of them don’t know you yet and I know Lucretia didn’t do it.”

Her amber gaze was sharp and bright, and Hermione was once more aware that for all of Lakshmi Chakravarty’s comments that she was a recent transplant to England, she still came from an old family (“the Chakravartys are still among the Four-Fold Families in the Indian Empire, dear”). She was used to their political games.

“I wasn’t even aware of what you were doing yesterday,” Lucretia admitted.

“Oh.”

“Yes. Lakshmi told me about you going to St. Mungo’s, but I thought it was for a check-up until I read today’s news. We’ve never really been prepared against muggle weapons, do we? And we pay for that lack of knowledge in the most painful ways. If we can help with that, no matter how small, I believe it would make a difference.”

Across the table, the Black witch was thoughtful. Her dark eyes found Hermione’s easily.

“If I had known, I wouldn’t mind helping you with such an article, though of course it might have a slightly different approach—subtler, certainly, and with related news spread out over several days. Different styles, I suppose.”

Hermione could find no words to say. She’d known that her friends were from well-known families (and Lucretia was the closest thing to a lady in the wizarding world), but she didn’t know the extent of their influence.

The old families, it would seem, play the game at a different level than she was used to.

Hermione might not know exactly how the web of patronage and alliances occurred in Hogwarts right now, she was quite aware that Tom was at the centre of several.

She had merely thought of passing the Slytherin table and telling him that she was going ahead first to Advanced Arithmancy if he was still occupied. Tom noticed the moment she was walking towards him. She saw him sitting with two seventh-year Slytherin prefects across him, with a rather bored-looking forefather of Draco Malfoy and a watchful Slytherin with dark hair that nonetheless seemed familiar sitting to Tom’s either side.

“Hermione, how good of you to join us,” Tom greeted.

Her eyebrows rose. That meant he had something to show her. She was curious enough to wish to see what it was rather than just snubbing him.

Melchior Nott (she had just recalled his name as she’d seen him in one of her classes), moved farther to the left, creating a space between him and Tom. Hermione didn’t think much about sitting right there.

“I was about to leave for Advanced Arithmancy class, actually, but I can stay for a while.”

Hermione could see the people around him observing her curiously. “Let’s start with the
introductions, then. Everyone, this is Hermione Curie. She has recently been transferred into Hogwarts as a fifth year and Sorted into Ravenclaw. Hermione, the one to your left is Melchior Nott,”

Nott nodded to her and she nodded back. He gestured to the wizard next to him, who had to lean forward to see her.

“This is Abraxas Malfoy—”

She gave him a slightly weird smile because for all his stronger jawline and bones, the expressiveness of his face was pure Draco. It was odd seeing someone so familiar and also not at the same time.

“—and the two seventh-year prefects in front of you are Oswin Orpington and Emma Eccleston.”

A calm, brown-haired wizard and a witch with glasses and ruler-straight posture nodded to her, looking for all the world like a clerk and a librarian. Some more basics small talk beyond the initial introduction were dealt with. Both Slytherin fifth-years took Advanced Potions with Tom, which would explain their highly curious glances and Hermione’s rising embarrassment as she tried to forget Slughorn’s exuberance on Monday. Nott did say that he was in Advanced Charms, while Malfoy was in Advanced Transfigurations. Both were also in Advanced DADA, so she supposed she’ll see them there.

Oswin Orpington confirmed why his name had seemed familiar; his uncle was a healer in St. Mungo’s. Hermione’s eyes widened with recognition and she said she thought she could see the similarities in their eyes.

When that was done, Tom launched into an explanation of how comments had been flooding into the Wizarding Wireless about the sense of insecurity the public was feeling after Grindelwald’s attacks. They wanted the government to do something. Alas, the government was not as nimble or prepared, and disgruntlement was rising.

“Orpington and Eccleston may have a few ideas on that.” Tom said.

“Actually, it’s not as if there was nothing. There’d been talks about the development of a stronger notice-me-not ward to distract muggles.” Orpington said.

“But it’s not going to work on Imperius’d muggles,” Hermione said.

“Well, fortunately, most people are not aware of that,” Emma Eccleston’s diction was precise, her tone cool. Many people mistake it for distaste, though Hermione had heard echoes of her own speaking style that she didn’t.

“So, is this an effort to find a real solution, or are we just going through some political theatre here?” Hermione asked. She could see Nott’s eyes widening at her blunt question, but Emma seemed to appreciate her direct tack.

“Preferably a real solution; it’s why we’re here in the first place, after all. Yet before that happens, anything that can distract the public and stop them from panicking would still be useful.” The seventh-year answered.

“Hence why the stronger notice-me-not charm is still useful to announce.”

Emma nodded. “Precisely.”
“Well, people would like to see more Aurors around, but the Aurors do have real jobs to do instead of just hanging around to appease the frightened public,” Oswin muttered as his gaze returned to his parchment. Hermione saw then that the plates of food had been mostly taken away from their area—almost everyone around Tom had their own set of parchments or scrolls.

Hermione’s eyes drifted towards the ceiling. The non-magical world was in the middle of WWII right now, albeit already past the worst of it (The Battle of Britain was over and decisively won by the Brits). The sense of impending danger that they were feeling were probably even more than what the wizarding world felt, but they still managed. On the other hand, as her grandparents had proudly told her, the Londoners had been well-trained about what to do if they hear the air-raid siren sounding. They knew where the nearest shelters are as well, knew what to do with there were no shelters nearby and well, life goes on…

“Make some drills,” Hermione spoke up.

“I’m sorry?” Melchior asked. She turned to him.

“Civilian drills. You know, what to do in case of emergency, where to go and who to find? Get the Aurors to do their own field test with the muggle weapons they have, figure out what can get through it and can’t.”

“No one can use those things,” Oswin suddenly interrupted, before he blushed.

“Well, I hear that Minister Spencer-Moon had a good relationship with the Prime Minister, right?” She waited and got several reluctant nods around the table; Tom’s was more matter-of-fact than anything else.

“Then I’m sure he wouldn’t have any problem asking to get some of his men trained in muggle weapons.” Hermione said, conveniently not commenting on the expressions of discomfort that passed on the face of more than one person. Fact of the matter was, they were trounced by muggle weapons and they needed to deal with it. Well, they wanted a solution, right? She didn’t guarantee it wasn’t going to hurt their pride and feelings.

“Though if you want an overview of what can stop the average bullets, well walls do. Always keeping at least one wall between yourself and someone with muggle weaponry is a good idea, though not getting spotted in the first place is even better. A cheap plaster wall is as useless as a shirt, though. Once the Aurors can determine the best strategy for surviving attackers with muggle weapons for civilians, they can then turn that into a drill. After that, you start gathering people. Practice it.”

She snapped her fingers. “Oh! I remember that a thick layer of water also robs bullets of its kinetic energy, so hiding inside a pond with a bubblehead charm is actually a good place to hide—unless you’re facing the highly improbable enemy of someone with a stock of waterproof explosives.”

Hermione could see the morbid curiosity in Nott’s grey eyes.

“What happens then?”

“You get flattened by the explosion’s energy carried by the water. You see, where air dissipates the energy of an explosion easily, water, with all its mass, transfers the energy easily. It can crush you. I mean, have you seen what the water pressure at 100 kilometres under the sea is like? Human bones become sponge.” Hermione explained with excitement. That was when she realised what she was doing and shook her head.
“Oh, I’m rambling again. Tom! You’re supposed to stop me when I’m *rambling*.”

She casually elbowed him. He chuckled. Now everyone was staring at Tom as if the two of them had started a Punch and Judy skit of bashing each other over the head. The seventh-years were almost frozen mid-movement (Oswin looked terrified), Nott had just choked on his food—and was Abraxas *gaping*?

“You were being informative, Hermione. I thought it would be most useful for them to listen to what you have to say.” Tom said.

Tom casually tapped Malfoy’s chin and the other Slytherin almost jumped out of his seat as he hurriedly closed it.

“Alright. To get back on topic, a drill is also useful because once you’ve started drilling some basic movements, it becomes an ingrained reflex in the advent of an emergency. Panic doesn’t have time to set in and you’d save more people that way when they already know what to do instead of, oh, I don’t know, *stamping* to the only exit and blocking it because of that.”

Oswin was making notes and it was rather gratifying to see. Emma seemed to have questions from the way she was frowning. She just seemed to be unable to find a way to word it the way she wanted yet, so she still kept quiet.

“It’s useful. We can certainly add it to the list of useful programs in response to the attacks that the government can do,” Emma finally said.

“Which is currently set at zero,” Oswin murmured under his breath. Emma was still focused.

“But we still need at least one that’s slightly higher-profile. We need something that can be a *beacon of hope*.”

Hermione’s brows creased.

“What are we planning for, again?”

“Something to rally the people behind a purpose, Hermione,” Tom clarified.

She glanced at him from the side without hiding her curiosity. “Why do I feel like your most preferred action is a direct strike at Grindelwald’s sympathisers?”

This time, it was Melchior and Abraxas whose movements faltered for a moment before they resumed. She wasn’t blind—she was quite aware that they were the core around which the later Death Eaters would form. They were young men already dreaming of glory, and they intend to seize it with their own bare hands. Their imagined path was almost operatic in its grandeur and simplicity.

*The Knights of Walpurgis*, she managed to recall from the depths of her memory, *that was what they’d been called, right?*

“Well, that would not be without its risks, would it?” He said, eyeing her in return.

“But it is admittedly the most public-relations friendly. Everyone can grasp what it means when they hear it,” Hermione said, playing devil’s advocate to herself. She sighed.

“But you’re right. I don’t like the risks—*like the obliteration of Tom Riddle into the Dark Lord Voldemort*, she thought to herself, “—I suppose I’ll try to think up of alternatives.”
Hermione’s gaze had begun to wander to the rest of the Great Hall.

“Would you still be taking your time, Tom? Because I think I’d rather not risk being late and just go to Arithmancy class right now.”

“Actually, I think I’d be leaving with you too. Well, that’s it ladies and gentlemen. We’ll continue this later.” Tom said.

Hermione was surprised that all he’d had to do was stand—she didn’t think she saw him tidying up his belongings at all. Farewells were exchanged as well as some final small talk (apparently, they were the only ones taking Advanced Arithmancy—Eccleston did, but she was in seventh year that the class she was taking was Advanced Arithmancy II as she’d taken the other class last year).

Tom barely needed to lift his hand far before she took it, the movement coming easier to her as she spent more days in the past as he slipped her arm in his once more.

“*You had something else to say,*” Tom said, apropos of nothing.

He was taking her through the smaller corridors, the back ways and old servant ways once more and she didn’t mind. It was always more convenient for their talks of questionable topics if no one else were to overhear them. It was just so easy to be misunderstood.

“It’s something that’s probably controversial, that was why I was holding back.” She said.

“Allright. Go ahead, then.”

“I was wondering of joining the efforts of the muggle war,” Hermione mused out loud. Tom’s reply was perfectly amiable, as if she was just considering a new restaurant they might like to visit.

“You’re right, that won’t be popular at all.”

“But we won’t even be starting it—it’s already underway, for one. *Grindelwald* brought the muggle war in into our world, muggle weaponry and all. Why can’t we fight back his and his catspaw? Because if there’s one thing that *would* guarantee a sharp reduction in his forces is if Nazi Germany falls. There’d be no one to supply him soldiers to be Imperius’d.”

“Don’t you think your native antipathies are colouring your perspective?”

Hermione frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Your parents, your friends and the people you know. They were in Norway, were they not? The members of the British wizarding circle of Kopervik. And yet you’re here alone…”

She drew a sharp gasp of breath. Tom might’ve said *Norway*, but she interpreted it in her mind as *Lost Future*.

“…and it’s easily Grindelwald’s fault, perhaps Nazi Germany as well. Your wish for their destruction is entirely natural.” He finished.

Well, her wish for Grindelwald’s destruction was basically because he was an arse of a dark lord and she made it a habit of taking them down where she found them. There were no two ways about it. But she couldn’t say that she had no memories of anyone from Norway to Tom. They walked in a silence that was not uncomfortable.
“If there was a way for the wizarding world to join in a way that our primary actions and purpose would always be in taking Grindelwald down instead of having to assist our muggle counterparts by providing them magical assistance, it may have a better chance of succeeding.” He finally said.

Hermione sighed. Right. Like that was going to happen.

Another minute had passed before something occurred to Hermione as her brown eyes widened.

“Information! We can begin with information exchanges, Tom.”

“Why information?”

“Grindelwald working with his muggle catspaw must be breaking all levels of the Statute of Secrecy, right? But no one can touch him when he’s surrounded by his own magical fighters as well as muggle soldiers. If he or his wizards (or witches) gave some sort of concealment charm to groups of muggle troops, then his troops would have an advantage compared to the non-magical UK forces.”

“Which is an obvious transgression against the Statute of Secrecy,” Tom said quickly, picking up the direction of Hermione’s thoughts.

“So, we’re only putting things to rights when our Aurors find his location. It also wouldn’t be completely strange if they get attached to non-magical forces to dispel the spells—because the muggles are useful to protect them against Grindelwald’s muggles.” Hermione spoke faster.

“We can also say that we’re getting the muggles to fight Grindelwald and his muggle catspaw for us, to improve our odds facing him, and all that the Aurors sent to the field are doing is reversing all his actions to advantage his muggle army that breaks the Statute of Secrecy.” Tom added. His voice was still even but she knew that like her, he was also walking faster as ideas spark one after another in his mind.

“Turnabout is fair play.” Hermione said with relish.

“It’s a direct action against Grindelwald and something Minister Spencer-Moon cannot argue against, given that he’s been in such good company with Winston Churchill. I’m sure the Prime Minister would only be too happy to try out the idea.” Tom finished.

She turned to him in surprise. “So, you do know the name of our Prime Minister.”

It was clear that he was holding back from rolling his eyes. Barely. She considered it an achievement that she had chipped that layer of perfect prefect away today.

“I’m not a blind idiot, Hermione.”

“Well, I might be fooled by that sometimes,” she said glibly, ignoring his cool stare. “Anyway, I think I have an idea to keep the wizarding world’s position to be still somewhat neutral as well. Say that we’re helping enforce the Statute of Secrecy against Grindelwald’s transgressions. If Grindelwald stops using muggle catspaw or allies, the wizarding world will also immediately stop assisting the muggle world. See? We have a clear limit to hold to. I’m sure everyone would love that.”

Tom was nodding slowly at that. “Then it becomes a strictly wizarding war once more.”

“Precisely. So, do we bring this idea to the DMLE, or the Minister, or what?”
He shook his head. “Not yet. We need to find a way to ensure we’ll be listened to. Even more importantly, we need to ensure that we’ll get full credit for it and enough public acknowledgement. Otherwise we’ll simply be someone else’s stepping stone.”

Hermione sighed. “Right. Politics. I keep forgetting that.”

Chapter End Notes

The Order of the Nightingale that I made up here is clearly named after Florence Nightingale.

As I've mentioned earlier national/state boundaries in the muggle world in this time might not precisely match that of the wizarding world. Wizarding India, for example, is not a colony of the British Empire the way that muggle India is the British Raj, hence my reference to the Indian Empire. Though it has to be admitted that they do have closer ties with Britain as a result of the muggle worlds' changes and colonialization. After all, they're a very small minority in their lands when compared to the non-magical populace, so in the greater scheme of things, they would drift following the muggle world (for example, culturally). The wizarding Indian Empire is a loose federation of various Indian Wizarding Kingdoms. How those kingdoms came to be is a story for another time.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

Florence Nightingale: (History, Nursing), to quote Wikipedia, she's an English social reformer, statistician and the founder of modern nursing as a secular profession. In the popular culture of the time, she's seen as the iconic “Lady with the Lamp,” as she tends to do midnight rounds around the hospice halls.

Additional Notes: (characters are listed in the order of their last names)

“the Chakravartys are still among the Four-Fold Families in the Indian Empire, dear”: The Four-Fold Families is what I imagine to be the equivalent of the Sacred 28 in the Indian Empire. The name refers to the fact that there are 64 family names on it (four times four times four). Considering that the Indian Empire spans an entire subcontinent, this should not be surprising.

Abraxas Malfoy: Fifth-year Slytherin, an important Knight of Walpurgis. His family is part of the Sacred 28 (obviously). He shares three classes with Tom; Advanced Potions, ADADA and Advanced Transfigurations. Even though his characterisation is purely my invention, he is technically a canon character like the Blacks, as he had been mentioned by name. He would be the father of Lucius Malfoy and grandfather of Draco Malfoy. Like many others in Slytherin, he is caught up in Tom's charisma and
Oswin Orpington (OC): Seventh-year Slytherin prefect. As you might already know, there is an Orpington that was the Minister of Magic sometime in the 1800s (Evangeline Orpington). So, even if he wasn't from the Sacred 28, I consider his family to be rather well-established. His given name ‘Oswin’ came from Old English elements os “god” and wine “friend”, so, god-friend (friend of god).

I take it to imply that he knows who’s about to be a god (or the closest thing to it) and knows how to be friendly to them. He's the kind of person who's more comfortable backstage than in the spotlight.

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Chapter Summary

A peek into Advanced Arithmancy. Hermione and Tom are in the Advanced DADA class. They fight. As usual, they seem to have a different definition of ‘friendly fight’ and ‘nothing too dangerous’. Tom channels his adrenaline rush into something else.

Chapter Notes

New readers would've noticed the new mood boards in the earlier chapters. For older readers, my sister finally put up a tumblr for this fic at timetwistedtale.tumblr.com, in which she put up most of the graphics she made for this fic (including the ones that didn't end up in this story).

I'd also like to say...welcome, new readers! Welcome back old readers! My update speed is going to drop a bit from here on. Generally it's once every two weeks, though the occasional tightly-paced chapter might still made me update once a week. I've got grad school entrance tests to prepare for, and it's been a while since I did analysis (the particular branch of math, in case you were wondering). In other words, I'd be rather occupied.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

20 Arithmancy, DADA and Risk-taking

The current Arithmancy teacher was one of the French expatriates in Hogwarts, one Professor Adele Lagrange. Her robes were colourful, lively, and the click of her high heels were clear as she walked with confidence to the front of the class. Blonde, stylish and beautiful, Hermione began to question the motivations of half the boys taking the class. She was hoping that none of them were going to drag down the quality of the class’ discussions just because they took something that above their ability level.

Professor Lagrange did gaze at Hermione for about a few seconds with interest, but she easily moved on and start the class. Hermione was still annoyed that she and Tom ended up on the second row because certain male students had arrived rather early and filled the first row of seats.

“In our last meeting, we ‘ave started talking about arithmantic arrays. Traditional numerology is all well and good if the subject of your calculation is only one event, one chance. It can also still be relied upon for the broad-brush of an individual’s well-being or general arc of life, even if the result is usually too wide and rarely of any practical use.”

Adele Lagrange had a slight French accent (e.g., her r’s are rather closer to French r’s than English, words beginning with th- shifts close to z’s), but even with that, her words were very clear. Hermione found herself nodding along the explanation easily. This was all rather basic and she’d already known them. Still, it was nice to hear that the professor wasn’t lax in covering the grounds.
"When we consider more factors that can affect an event or a person, we increase the accuracy of our prediction. Of course, at the same time, the more factors are involved, the more they can affect each other, creating their own complications. It would be most accurate to determine the direction of influence between these factors and the strengths of such influence, but alas the world is not always as convenient as we wish it to be. If that cannot be, it is almost as useful to at least calculate the degree with which they correlate and covary."

With a flourish, she revealed the previously-hidden blackboard. On it were two squares, one already filled with numbers and the other empty.

Ah, matrices, Hermione thought with familiar fondness as the professor’s words wash over her. She found getting back to the basics to be rather relaxing.

Arithmancy was one of the foundations of charting the flow of history and time, after all. Arithmantic matrices were the first step in that direction, what with all the events and people she had to keep track of. Yet even then, it was still a crude tool—it was a stone axe in her toolbox compared to the cutting laser of using phase space. Entering factors into the matrices can only work with so many variables before the correlations and covariances increase exponentially and bogged everything down (10 factors already need, what, 45 of the correlations? Yes, it just gets painful to use with large number of factors).

There was no doubt that if one were to go large scale, then one must move on to using phase space, but she truly did not mind going through some of the basics again. She didn’t want to lose her touch, after all. A restrained cough from Tom’s direction made her turn. (Coming from Tom, that was the equivalent of an outright scoff or sneer).

Just beneath his calm surface, she could see polite contempt.

Hermione followed the direction of his attention to the front row boys. A good chunk of them paled at the sight of the matrices—sorry, arithmantic arrays—and more than half of them had the glazed look of the ignorant and overwhelmed. This time, it was her turn to groan. And here I was hoping that this class would run smoothly…

She had been a little too loud, though, and Professor Lagrange’s attention snapped to her.

"Miss Curie, was there anything you wish to say?"

Fortunately, she was good at finding answers for teachers on the spot.

"I was checking the arrays, Professor. We know that we need to consider the relationships between each predictive factor as well as the main object we want to calculate predictions for. But this web of relationships is going to get too dense as the number of factors rise."

She took a deep breath and tried to go through her thoughts on this topic slowly, for the benefit of the rest of the class. If she was going to monopolise the attention for a few moments, the least she could do was help nudge the general comprehension along. She was years beyond the class, after all, it was the good thing to do.

"If we have 1 main object and 1 supporting factor, we only need to calculate 1 relationship between those two objects—that generates 1 correlation."

"If we have 1 main object and 2 supporting factors, we need to calculate 3 relationships between the 3 variables—we get 3 correlations."

"If we have 1 main object and 3 supporting factors, we now need to calculate for 6 relationships
between the 4 variables. So, that’s 6 correlations.”

“Now, what happens when we have one main object and, say, nine factors? It’s still not that large a number when we consider the complexity of the real world. But even these 10 variables already had a whopping 45 pair-relationships between all of them. That’s 45 correlations to consider on top of the 10 primary variables. It’s significantly more than the primary 10, isn’t it?” Hermione spoke the words and the numbers slowly, making sure that the consequences hit all the students present.

Hermione shook her head. “If you’re even serious about making arithmantic predictions that cover a larger group, the matrices, um, arithmantic arrays are still rather unwieldy.”

At one point, you just get tired of using that stone axe, Hermione thought. Professor Lagrange paused for a moment before a smile slowly spread over her face.

“You ‘ave a very good point, Miss Curie. Yes, once one is prepared to leap into large-scale arithmancy, then arithmantic arrays become troublesome to use. But that is beyond what most would consider in this class, non?”

The sighs of relief that went around the room was certainly not faked. Hermione only shrugged helplessly at the teacher’s inquiring glance; it was probably a silent question about why she even brought up a concern that would be beyond the needs of most students. Look, she had been working on charting history and the flow of time before this and suddenly she had to come up with something related to the advanced arithmancy class in two seconds. It was harder for her to remember quickly the more basic issues involved here than the more esoteric ones that she’d faced.

Professor Lagrange turned to Tom with a sly smile on her face.

“Mr. Riddle, it looks like you ‘ave a strong competitor for the top of the class.”

His voice was calm and collected as usual. His words, however, were not. “I find the competition exciting, Professor. Nothing sharpens your mind quite like the challenges of another intellect.”

A quite murmur spread around the class, the words to which she couldn’t quite catch.

The teacher turned back to Hermione. “Ah, the gauntlet ‘as been thrown, Miss Curie! Will you back down or will you accept it?”

Professor Lagrange was stoking the competitive fires on purpose—exactly why, Hermione had no idea. Pragmatically, she might just be trying to wake up the few dozing or wool-gathering students at the back to sit up and pay attention.

“Well, Professor, I find that if you give an inch to Tom Riddle, he’ll walk all over you. So, I really must insist on taking my victories. It’s the only way to keep his respect.” Hermione kept her smile innocent and nice. She didn’t miss the flash of amused smirk she saw from him at the corner of her eyes.

She ignored any outraged gasps of Tom’s admirers as she did what they might consider as blaspheming his character when she was only speaking the plain truth. On the other hand, that might be why that Slytherin sixth-year at her far right had just paled. Tom turned to her with what she recognised as mock surprise but others probably see as mild bafflement.

“You have no need to win anything for me, Miss Curie.” To other witches, it might sound charming, as if he’d win things for them. Not to Hermione.
“And what, I should just let you win? You really don’t like losing, do you, Mr. Riddle?” She replied sweetly.

Adele Lagrange chuckled. It was a rich and enchanting sound.

“Well, this class might be interesting after all. I look forward to your final projects, Curie, Riddle.”

Tom nodded in acknowledgement while Hermione’s smile and nod was certainly friendlier.

Galatea Merrythought, the Professor for Defence Against the Dark Arts, was not a stranger to Hermione.

She was a witch with a thick mane of silver hair that fell to her shoulders. If not for her distinctive hair, it was hard to estimate her age as she had one of those ageless faces. The fact that her posture was still straight and that she could outfight most people half her age was another. Hermione’s familiarity with her, however, came from conversing with the witch as she accompanied Hermione on a trip to get her school uniform and related supplies before she was discharged from the infirmary.

The professor even recommended the shoe store that supplied her favourite boots to Hermione—she bought one with extra grip, the strongest short of hiking boots with spikes. Hermione had bid her mary-janes goodbye with relish.

“Hermione, Tom, take any position as you wish.” Professor Merrythought greeted them.

Another characteristic of Galatea was that she did not stand on ceremony and tended to use first names rather than last.

“Um, Professor?” Hermione asked as they entered the class.

She was sure they had arrived before the it was due to start. A quick search around the room confirmed that as there were only a few students already present, and Hermione knew that Advanced DADA was one of the few advanced classes that were filled well. The tables and chairs had all been pushed to the sides. The class was the size of a normal class most of the time, but Professor Merrythought always brought down the partition at the back with two other classes when it came to practise time.

Professor Merrythought continued. “If you’ve read the previous class notes that I’m sure Tom passed to you, we’ve gone over good and bad habits in duels and fights—and making sure that you’ve begun ingraining the good habits from now. *Tarantallegra!*

Hermione’s shield was wordlessly up with the flick of her wand (she could cast *Protego* half-asleep), her expression was still mildly perplexed. When she took her shield down, she saw another layer flickering away; to her right, Tom also had his wand out. The prickling of magic build-up she could feel from his side, though, was buzzing with something darker until he flicked his wand out and dissipated the uncast spell.

Their DADA professor smiled at them both as Hermione and Tom slowly made their way into the room.

“Excellent reflexes both of you! Not to mention that was some exemplary silent casting of the Shield Charm. Five points each to Ravenclaw and Slytherin.”
“What is this about, Professor?”

“Why, I want to see whether all those lessons have stuck, of course. What better way than field test that?” Some of the newly-entering students slowed down in doubt. The sharper ones like Abraxas and Melchior have taken their wand out. The two Slytherins nodded their greetings to Tom, and then surprisingly to Hermione, to herself. She nodded back, slightly confused.

“Are we to duel in pairs, then?” Tom asked.

“That is the general idea, yes.”

“Is it to be a duel or is it to be a fight, Professor?” Hermione asked.

To everyone’s surprise, the witch grinned, flashing them her teeth. “That is a very good question most wouldn’t even consider. Have another five points to Ravenclaw, Hermione.”

Merrythought turned her attention around the class, watching the students milling around.

“Does any of you have any idea? Ethel? No? Well, let’s see…Augusta, how about you?”

Augusta was a Gryffindor witch who was built like a Spanish galleon—all grand curves and made for war. She was also at least half a head taller than Hermione. There was something familiar about her in the lines of her face. Hermione inwardly shook her head.

Never mind. It’ll come to me later.

“A duel is a formal activity. There are rules and there are protocols. A fight is…” Augusta’s smile was far from friendly, and two of the boys closest to her took a step back without even thinking about it. “In a fight, anything goes.”

“Good. Five points to Gryffindor. Yes, you’ve illustrated the general principle well.”

Three more Slytherins that Hermione didn’t quite recognise have also trickled in. They also greeted Tom before greeting her. She greeted them out of reflex and good manners ingrained in her, but it was still…weird.

Merrythought spoke up. “Since I’m still not certain about how well you’ve internalised your lessons, we’ll start with the easier of the two. You’ll split off in pairs to duel. Yes, Hermione?”

“Can I talk to you for a moment, Professor? Privately?”

Curious gazes strayed in her direction. The professor approached her without a doubt. She gave a quick glance to Tom, but Hermione shrugged. “He’ll figure it out himself sooner or later, Professor. It’s fine. It’s about duelling. I can’t duel.”

“Nonsense! Your reflexes are excellent, and based on your Charms and DADA records, I have no doubt that you have a wealth of spells on your fingertips.”

Hermione shook her head. “I mean, I can’t be allowed to duel. I can fight, and I’m used to fighting for my life in various fields, but in the highly-structured and supposedly safe duel? It only takes a flash of the wrong spell or something to take me off guard for my combat reflexes to kick in. The next thing you know, I’ve moved on to cutting spells, blasting spells, the Reductor Curse and all the works, Professor.”

Professor Merrythought seemed thoughtful as she regarded Hermione carefully. Hermione’s jaw tightened for a moment, but she didn’t back down. She knew this about herself and felt the truth
deep in her bones—her reflexes fired too fast sometimes, too deadly. She had begun to believe that she’d forgotten some terrible times at the tail end of her last life before she was suddenly thrown into the past.

“Hermione did warn me not to cast any spell on her without her awareness because she can’t guarantee that she won’t overreact.”

The silver-haired witch turned to him “What spell did you cast, Tom?”

“Rejuvenating Charm, Professor. She was looking pale and she’d just been released from the infirmary. I judged it to be better safe than sorry.”

Galatea Merrythought sighed, eyeing the brunette. “I’m sorry that you have some form of shell shock, Hermione, but you cannot enter my class and not participate in duels.”

“I know. I just don’t want to risk it.” The young witch was dejected. She felt just as depressed as the professor was disappointed.

“Hermione doesn’t have to duel anyone else. She can fight me.”

Both witches turned to Tom—Hermione in surprise and the professor in a contemplative mood.

“How about a friendly fight, Hermione?”

Hermione shook her head.

“But I—”

“I’ve said it before, haven’t I? If you can kill me so easily, then the fault is entirely mine.” His smile was less of the nice, assuring prefect and more of the unsettling smirk with darkness lurking at its edges. It brought Hermione to a pause because she’d rarely seen it in public—she’d rarely seen the real Tom in public.

Professor Merrythought laughed, thinking it was all a good joke on Tom’s part.

“Well, I have to assure you, Hermione, Tom here is very good. I think he's right and that you don’t need to worry about him.”

“Can I go last, Professor? Preferably with no one to get in the way?” Hermione asked.

Professor Merrythought’s lips quirked at the edges. “That confident, are you?”

“It’s more of a precaution than anything.” Hermione corrected.

“Since I’ve never seen you fight or duel before, fine, I’ll allow you the entire field this once. Mind you, if I feel your abilities are still easily contained, you’ll duel or fight along with all others like everyone else, Hermione.”

The brunette witch couldn’t help but smile. “If you can contain my possible excesses, Professor, I wouldn’t mind duelling anyone.”

The professor drifted away after that, arranging and rearranging everyone else around the class in pairs as Hermione and Tom stood aside and getting the occasional odd look sent their way as everyone else got ready.

“We’ll be in trouble if you can’t refrain from using so-called dark spells,” Tom started
She shook her head. “I don’t like the really gory curses. If I accidentally use one or two spells that are categorised as dark, it’s generally only because I picked it up out of an old tome somewhere and had high damage and as such gave the Ministry the willies. But I don’t think it’s something you can’t block or avoid, or anything so nasty that I can’t heal it.”

He eyed her curiously. “You’re admitting that you know dark spells?”

She huffed. “And what, like you don’t know a good handful of them? I know that you know. You know that I know. Let’s stop the ridiculous pussyfooting around and call a spade what it is. I’ve always been careful to only use spells that can be healed—I don’t actually want to cripple, maim or kill people. Then, we both know that the Ministry can be biased against some ancient magics.”

“Mmm, right. Like blood magic.”

“Which we will not talk about right now because we’re in class,” Hermione cut in. “But yes, it’s ridiculous to ban some protective magics because of their source when they don’t harm anyone and allow others of very similar purpose. Now, I think you’re not idiotic enough to start fight with any of the highly corrosive dark curses that can easily be detected and hard to cure, and I think that you know that I’ll go after you with a vengeance if I ever found out that you used them against other people.”

They were both watching the duelling students with a clinical detachment. Abraxas had rather good reflexes, she saw. One of Tom’s Slytherins was more intent on dodging than attacking—he hadn’t cast nearly as much spell as he could, but she had to give him points for not being hit even once.

The left corner of his lips curled up slightly. “You’re not going to report me?”

Augusta flattened the Hufflepuff she was set against within the first few minutes and left in a disappointed stride. She was paired up again quickly with the slippery Slytherin from before by the professor. An olive-skinned Ravenclaw wizard that was vaguely familiar actually made good use of covers and even other duellers.

Hermione shrugged. “If I knew you’d get caught and charged for it, I would report you. If I know that nothing would stick? Well…”

If she had decided that he’d get his second chance, then it was her responsibility to ensure that he didn’t abuse it either.

“Ah, your old standby of vigilantism. I almost forgot.” He mused.

“It’s not—” Hermione had to draw a deep breath and tell herself to not get baited. Tom had a good point. She was not law enforcement here. She wasn’t even law enforcement in the auxiliary way that the Unspeakables still were. “I swear you’re giving me grey hairs.”

She felt something to her right and saw Tom had lifted a strand of brown curls at the end of his wand.

“No, I don’t think so.” He said lightly as he put them down again. She rolled her eyes.

“Right. Just as long as you know that I make a habit of fighting dark lords where I find them. This is regardless if the government is going to have the same idea or stick their heads in the sand in denial.” Good is about what you do, she thought. It’s something you keep up day by day. It’s something in your actions no matter how small and not just something you talk about.
“Courage is doing what’s right no matter how afraid or alone you are,” she murmured.

Surprisingly enough, Tom gave her a few moments of peace. He’d heard her and accorded her words respect whether or not he understood them. When he spoke up again, his words might seem casual, but she knew the weight of his intent in the thickness of the magic he’d unconsciously drawn around him.

“You’re position is duly noted, Hermione.”

The duelling students began to fall one by one, the room clearing up. Hermione had stood up properly instead of leaning against the wall, memorising the dimension and details of the room, calculating them. She needed to make a quick estimate of the volume, after all. Hermione bounced slightly on the balls of her feet as she started to feel the pre-fight excitement build up.

“I know that I can heal anything from my usual bag of tricks. I assume that you can give me the same guarantee about your spells?” She asked.

He gave her a side-glance. “What if it’s something I know you’ll be able to heal?”

“You expect me to be in pain and still capable of healing myself?”

He waved it away as if it was a minor detail. “It’s just cuts that might go too deep if you don’t stop them in time. Searing burns, the usual.”

“And you can’t heal something that simple?” She asked, askance.

“I can. Yet it would be a little rough around the edges when compared to what you can do.”

She understood what he meant. He’d heard the extent of her expertise when she told him of her St. Mungo experience, after all, and had recalibrated his skills in relative position to hers accordingly. “So, you can do the primary healing in case it hits and I’ll take over the fine details if it’s not enough. Yes, that’s fine.”

“Very well. We are agreed, then.”

When Professor Merrythought called them over, Hermione was ready.

Everyone was clearly outside the line of the *Protego Maxima* that Professor Merrythought had kindly provided for them. Hermione had taken the professor aside for a moment and ask her if anything left inside the barrier was destructible. The professor smiled and said yes. That was all Hermione needed.

Neither of them waited for any signal from the professor. Once Merrythought walked herself out of the bubble, they acted.

Tom started with a chain of a curse, jelly-legs jinx, and another curse. Hermione had her shield up without thought and leaped behind the closest pile of tables and cast her staple, *Aguamenti Maxima*. With her magical potential, it was a lot of water. There were exclamations of surprise as water in the volume of a small swimming pool was emptied inside the barrier. She shielded herself against the first blasting spell, the second shredded the pile of table next to her.

Hermione cast another two of her staple; Freeze and Evaporation. “*Glacia! Vaporal!*”
Glacia was cast several times at random on the floor, Vapora cast in the air. Her boots gripped the ground true as she kept moving, never to be found where the spells were hitting. Visibility became a problem for the next few moments and both of them stopped casting spells in order to avoid giving themselves away. She could hear the slight hiss of a snake or two on the ground and smiled.

The first snake she saw she simply sent a fireball in its direction.

She sent a messenger patronus so quickly it was mostly a shining white lump. A cutting curse, a burning whip and a strong gust of wind came towards her as Tom gave up on anonymity—her patronus would mark his general position sooner or later for her before it disappeared.

As the wind pushed the steam partly aside, she threw the stack of broken tables across to him and threw an extra fiery blasting curse in their general direction to set them on fire. The second layer of his double Protego didn’t hold, and she knew the rain of burning splinters did restrict his movements for a few moments. She took a double take when she realised he managed to conjure a third Protego layer in no time. Dammit.

Fortunately, a few moments were what she needed.

Hermione decided to pull her signature move. An invisible Bubble-Head Charm came over her head. She cast her personal modification of Aguamenti to generate a few puddles of bleach instead of water while she pulled herself into the mindset, the chemical understanding necessary for her next transfiguration. She threw three spells for five of Tom’s and deflected one—his last cutting curse was stronger than she’d thought and went through her Protego to slice her forearm.

She was getting too close, but she didn’t look away from him as she felt the warmth of blood blossoming over the lower part of her left sleeve.

Hermione vaporised the bleach. When she found the space between their exchange of spells, she silently cast her own spell to transfigure the remaining water and bleach vapour to isoflurane (also a personal spell of hers) and created her own version of a knock-out gas.

She couldn’t afford to lose her focus as hexes and counter-hexes flew between them. The sting to the last wound told her that it wasn’t a plain vanilla cutting curse either as Tom upped the threat level of his curses and started dabbing in the darker ones. It was either acidic or had some gross rot in it.

She could deal with it later.

Even when he slipped once or twice on the floor, his casting precision and speed did not change. It was only a matter of time, though, and when Tom slipped the third time, it seemed that he noticed that his balance was failing. He stared at her through dark hair strewn with water, his eyes had the darkness of a wary predator sizing up a competitor about to take his prey.

“What did you do?”

Considering that both of them were casting silently most of the time, theoretically, they could chat. Even with side-stepping and dodging thrown in for good measure.

“I don’t know what you mean?” She said, trying innocence for size with wide guileless eyes. It fit very poorly with her smirk.

Tom snorted. “The steam. It’s not just air and water, is it?”

He ducked two more spells and sent back a bright, blue fireball. “I smelled the bleach, Hermione.”
She cursed, suspecting that her shield wouldn’t be able to handle it completely and went for cover. *Well, it wasn’t as if he could dodge it at all,* she reasoned to herself.

“**Knock-out gas.**” Hermione calmly said, content on making her every third spell a shield to deflect, even if it meant reducing the volume of spells she could send to attack. All she needed was to wait, after all. There were four metres between them now. “*Give it up, Tom. You only have a few more minutes before you’re out cold and I win.*”

He chuckled.

“I’ll take a chance with those few minutes.”

Unexpectedly, he closed the distance. Tom side-stepped a blasting hex, tanked a group of mini fireballs (a custom-modified *Confringo*) with a double layer of Protego before rolling forward. Hermione intensified her spells before she realised that she had to get away from him. Close quarters fighting was not her forte. Two metres. The realisation came a few seconds too late as he didn’t bother avoiding her flame whip to his upper left arm and had outright tackled her. She didn’t let go of the flame whip and pulled *hard,* recognising it as her last chance. Hermione could smell burning fabric beginning to mix with burning flesh as the whip tightened and burned. It must have hurt, but even through tightened jaw, Tom didn’t drop his wand and managed to jab it at her ribs instead.

That sharp dig made her lose control of the flame whip and it disappeared.

She held her wand against his throat, but his was still pointed at her side. She could cut him in half from the throat down and he could blast her torso open. Theoretically, they could both blow up each other at roughly the same time.

“Impasse, witch,” he declared, his voice low through exertion as he pressed down over her.

Wasn’t there some sort of rule about how people weren’t supposed to sound sexy when they were threatening you?

Hermione cursed. “*Fine. Impasse. You do realise that that was suicidal, don’t you?*”

It was only when he swayed as he stood up that Hermione hurriedly reversed her transfiguration. She forced the anaesthetic vapour back into liquid form, summoned an empty potion bottle from her own bag and then summoned the liquid into the bottle. She popped her invisible bubble-head charm and then dragged him to the nearest chair she could locate. He was in a worse shape than her—it was why she hadn’t been worried even when he had his wand against her ribcage.

From his faint grin, she knew he found all of it highly entertaining.

“You’re right, Hermione. I hate losing.”

She harrumphed in annoyance and folded her arms. “If I was someone else, you’d be dead. All the other spells I know at close-quarters are really damaging to the internal organs!”

He nodded. “I know. Yet the combat spells you used just now were mostly good for medium and long range. I saw that, and it was why I thought I’d move the fight to the range you’re weak at.”

Hermione stopped in surprise. His actions were not as reckless as it had seemed at first glance. He’d seen the weakness in her tactics and he found a way to position himself there. He’d be a frightening battlefield commander.
“That was still a rash move.”

“I gained an impasse from it, didn’t I?” His eyes were half-lidded.

She huffed and turned to the professor who was pulling the barrier down. Merrythought was excited. Hermione was just tired.

“We’re tied, Professor. Because apparently, Tom is a sore loser and would rather gamble everything in one last, impulsive shot than surrender. If it was an actual battle, I’d have killed him already with some truly deadly spells.”

The other students were staring at the amount of destruction, the smell of burnt flesh in the air and the dripping wet Hermione and Tom with varying expressions of shock. Some were turning pale or rather green.

“I’m beginning to see why you wish for containment. That was highly unorthodox, dear. Effective, I’ve no doubt, but highly unorthodox. With all your silent casting, I’m not sure I followed everything that happened, though. I think we should go over it together in my pensieve. But why all the water? And what is that smell?”

Hermione choose not to answer where the vague odour of public swimming pool came from. She had to do something with all the excess chlorine from the bleach. Isoflurane had needed more fluoride atoms than chlorine.

She cast Ventus instead to blow it away with a strong gust, as the classroom door was currently conveniently open (someone probably opened it when she started steaming the room).

“Hermione’s favourite class is transfigurations, Professor.” Tom answered the question from his seat instead. “It is apparently one of her best fields too. Once one realises that, it was not hard to figure out herPreferred moves. The ice to affect the terrain, the steam to affect visibility…”

“Nice analysis, Tom. That lunge of yours was also very well-executed. In a fight, any move is valid if it helps you win.” Merrythought agreed.

“And now, I have to take his stubborn self to the infirmary.” Hermione finished.

“Is it the burn on Tom’s arm?” The older witch asked.

She sighed. “No, I can fix that easily with some time and effort. It’s just that I’ve transfigured some of the vapour into anaesthetic gas, Professor. The concentration isn’t what you’d call high, but Tom’s been inhaling that for a while. He’ll be fine. He just needs to sleep it off rather than futilely trying to focus on the class.”

The silver-haired witch stared at Hermione for a few moments without finding the words for it. ‘Surprised’ didn’t seem to be enough to begin to cover it.

“I think we need to have a conversation about using that in practice situations.” Merrythought said.

Hermione held back from sighing yet again. “Yes, Professor. Now, can I just…?”

“Certainly. You’ve both earned it. A fight on that level isn’t something I often see, that’s another ten points to both Ravenclaw and Slytherin.”

“Thank you, Professor Merrythought. Tom and I will be taking our leave now.”
The first thing Hermione did as she pulled another chair to sit in front of Tom was to heal the cuts and he did her the same courtesy. *Episkey* worked for the shallow cuts unless there was some sort of acid or infection involved because you’d just be sealing the damned thing in. Right now, she had exactly *one* wound of that description. Hermione knew a spell that would fight the foreign agents in her blood, with the slight downside of not being able to close the wound immediately.

The burns were salved, but it does take a little more finesse to heal than a simple cut, and Hermione thought she’d rather do it somewhere else than the class where everyone was staring at them like a zoo exhibit. Some rudimentary drying charms also helped their soaked clothes, though it left the fabric feeling a bit rough and with a faint impression of static (household charms weren’t her strength either). Tom surprisingly did a better job drying her hair and leaving it in soft curls.

One of these days she would remember to ask him to teach her that particular spell.

“I think I’m still quite capable. I don’t need to go to the infirmary,” Tom commented as he stood up following her.

Hermione was magnanimous enough not to comment that he was speaking carefully, a fraction of a second slower than his usual speed. She understood his reluctance, though—she was still feeling the rush from the fight, reflexes lightning-quick and magic fizzling in her blood. She could feel his gaze on the back of her neck and she knew he hadn’t lost his sharp focus either or his intense awareness of her presence.

“Look, if the class was just going to go over each of everyone’s individual duels, it’s going to be boring for us. Are you saying you don’t want to get out of class early?” Hermione asked with a hand on her hip.

He very much didn’t argue with her on that front.

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Tom might be able to seem completely unfazed as they walked out of the class, but in their walk to the infirmary (on a route of Tom’s choosing), she noticed that he’d stumbled into her a few times. Other people might consider it an accident. Heck, if she was walking with anyone else, it probably was an accident. Yet Tom was too well-coordinated, she knew this now. A few stumbles were a few too many.

“Are you alright?” She asked.

“Are you afraid you’ve somehow transfigured some poison instead of anaesthetic?” He asked back.

“No!” She saw the slightest twitch of his lips again and rolled her eyes. “Of course not. I know what I’m doing. You’re just…”

“I’m fine,” he said, evenly. There was none of the insistence of someone who was annoyed with the question, or the carelessness of someone who was only randomly answering.

When she tried to surreptitiously watch him, he was eyeing her in turn.

“What?” Hermione asked, a little unnerved.

“Perhaps I should ask you that question,” he said, “as you’re the one watching me.”

Alright. It was true, but it was hard to explain. He turned to a spiral staircase that seemed to have been servants’ stairs and climbed up. She followed suit behind him, taking note of his gait. The
stairs ended up in a landing, in a small alcove of its own with a door that she guessed would open to some hallway. It even had a small wooden table. The place had the dimensions of a linen closet. Tom had stopped at the landing, seemingly waiting for her.

“I didn’t know this was here—”

He turned around and kissed her hard, one hand at the back and the other possessively holding the curve of her backside against him. She was still high on adrenaline and he’d just heated her blood once more. His kisses were a much more delicious burn and she found herself leaning into his touches as he pushed her back against the table. He gave playful nips to her neck that made everything pleasantly fuzzy and she bucked against the hardness in his trousers. Hermione clutched his shoulder in a way that would leave nail marks without clothes but he certainly wasn’t complaining. Her hand slid down to his forearm.

It was his surprised hiss that had her retreating, brown eyes wide.

“Your arm! Dammit, Tom, let me do something to—”

What she got was a quick kiss. “It’s fine. I’m sure you’ll fix it in no time.”

“Well, let me—”

Another kiss. “I just need to—” *Kiss.* “Tom!”

Hermione was flustered, but she was rather determined. Tom seemed to be quite aware of her stubbornness and let her fuss where she had coiled her flame whip around. He even made it easier by discarding his robes and blazer.

“You were *glorious.* I was right on top of you, your spell was burning a hole through my sleeves and you didn’t release your attention for even a second. You simply kept burning, would probably keep burning if I hadn’t broken your focus.” His voice was a low murmur that sent shivers down her spine. It probably didn’t help that his mouth was two inches from her neck. How he was making it hard for her to think might be why her reply was rather ornery.

“Well, I was trying to force you to just *bloody give up already.* If a burn was going to do that, I was all for it.”

He chuckled. “So bloodthirsty.”

Hermione huffed, but colour rose to her cheeks as she didn’t miss the admiration in his tone.

“It’s called winning a fight and staying alive.” She said.

“But you *know* you’re not going to die from the fight. You never did use any of your more damaging spell, didn’t you?”

“Neither did you,” she noted. She absently started to open the buttons of his shirt when she found that the healing spell wasn’t really as effective with the barrier of the shirt. Tom pulled his tie loose and dropped it to the side, untucking his shirt from his trousers.

“And yet you fight viciously all the same, in a fight that you still know and understand to be non-lethal. If that’s not bloodthirsty, I’d like to know what is.” His voice was deceptively casual.

She looked up at him with narrowed eyes. Some of his hair had fallen in front of his forehead and he looked more disreputable than usual with the mess. She didn’t see a problem with it; she felt like
messing it up even more, a token protest against the world to show that the perfect prefect never existed.

“You just bring out my competitive side, alright? Because I know you’d be giving your all. Why should I just lay down and let you win when I can beat you?” She muttered.

“You didn’t.” He pointed out.

“Because you don’t like losing and would rather be suicidal?” She asked in a saccharine tone.

“There are around ten spells I could recall now that I could’ve used. A few would give you phantom pains, such as one to simulate appendicitis, another gangrene, and since they’re by definition phantom, they’re undetectable to most. The other is that I should’ve just blasted you with Glacia—considering all your wet clothes, you’d be mostly frozen into an icicle. You just have the devil’s luck.” Hermione stated. She simply hadn’t been able to react fast enough when he chose to blitz her than run out of time succumb to the anaesthetic.

Tom eased his shirt off as she cast several spells on the arm. The burn really wasn’t anything serious (by her standards). The skin was frighteningly red, and there were even striated lines where it was gone and you could see the flesh (muscle) underneath. She guessed this to be where the flame whip had abraded the skin completely. At least there were no white spots where the tissue had outright died. There was only the momentary tensing of his jaw when she touched it.

“Well, well, aren’t you a sore loser too?” She could hear the amusement in his voice.

Hermione sniffed with disdain but knew she couldn’t deny it.

“Oh, fine. I don’t lose with better grace than you do either.” She grumped.

Hermione did several twirls that she knew by rote for a spell to ensure that the deeper layer of skin had enough blood flow before a quick Episkey easily fixed the surface ones and regrew skin. It was still pink and a bit sensitive, but the skin of his arm was whole once more.

“You didn’t lose,” he pointed out yet again.

A small smile played on her face. “Yeah. I didn’t lose either, did I?”

“Time to close the gash on your left arm.” He said.

She remembered that it was the one with the dirty wound. She pulled her outer layers off with a grumble when something snagged, before rolling her shirt sleeves up to check it. The swelling had receded, yes, but she probably needed to check one more time before she’d feel it was safe enough to close it.

“It’s taking its sweet time. What the hell did you use?”

“Pythonis Ictus.”

Hermione tried to parse the Latin. “Python something… wait, is the last one bite? Did you just give me a python bite? Where’s the antivenin??”

“Pythons are non-venomous, Hermione.”

She blushed at his knowing look. “Right. I knew that, what with their killing by strangling and crushing their prey.”
Apparently, she’d panicked too quickly to think over it properly. *Damn, that was embarrassing.* He
didn’t seem to be intent to pick her on her slip, for some reason.

“On a more technical note, it isn’t a bite. It’s closer to a slash with a fang. Otherwise you’ll have
recognised the cause of the wound from the pattern of the bite in the first place.”

She had to admit that it was ingenious—it didn’t look like an obvious animal bite at a glance. But
the wound being technically caused by a phantom tooth mean that the swelling had been…*oh,* old-
school infection that came from all animal bites. *Right.* That means dealing with it was pretty
simple. Another jab, turn and tap at the wound as she cast the usual spell against minor infections
and Tom had closed it with *Episkey* before she finished casting hers.

“All the wounds are dealt with, then?”

“*Well,* you still have *isoflurane* in your bloodstream but mmmpph—”

This time, the kiss wasn’t exactly a surprise as she belatedly realised that the glimmer in his dark
blue eyes were somewhat familiar. She just couldn’t stop explaining even as he sunk his hand to
the curls at the back of her head. It was only when his mouth slanted over hers that her higher brain
finally switched off with a contented sigh and told her to enjoy herself. When she ran her hand
down his sides, she’d only then realised with unexpected joy that she’d pulled his shirt off earlier.
Now, she had all this skin to explore.

Why yes, she thought to herself *maybe I’ll do exactly that.*

His hand was under her shirt, following her ribcage up to her breast. She’d thought he’d stop there,
but he trailed to the back following her bra instead and made short work of the clasp when he
reached it. There was something about having the warmth of his hand over her naked breast that
raised her heartbeats and she reflexively grind herself against him. Their breaths came out harsher
in that moment.

Wait, when did she hook one leg over his waist? Since when did they curl around each other?

“You were stunning when you’re trying to destroy me.” He murmured to her shoulder.

Hermione had to chuckle at that. Her fingers were appreciating the muscles of his back with a
leisurely speed that made one wonder whether she was trying to memorise each dip or contour.

“Shouldn’t you be more worried?” She asked between kisses.

“*Why?* It was merely play.” His dark eyes met hers—she could almost see the laughter, the *glee* he
was holding back there. It struck her that the more of her abilities he saw, the more fascinated he
became, even when she turned out to be what Ron had only half-jokingly called ‘a one witch
demolition team’.

Harry was the one with all the magical firepower, of course, and the best fighter in more than a
generation. Unlike Harry, Hermione might not be an incarnation of some god of war on the field,
but out of his friends and colleagues, she was the one who could keep up with him in terms of the
scale of destruction—she didn’t need that much pure magic when she had *science* as her force
multiplier.

Tom had just opened all the buttons of her shirt. She should be more concerned about this as she’d
discarded her shirt to follow her robe and blazer.

She just wasn’t.
“Other people would be—” she gasped. Both of his hands were on her breasts. “—more worried about having a witch that—” he did this movement with his hips that made her lose her line of thought, 

“—a witch that can sling scary spells at them in a heartbeat—ooh, do that again.” Her voice was a breathless entreaty at the end.

‘That’ was her with legs around his waist, his mouth over her throat and their lower bodies tightly entwined that every slide generated wonderful friction. Their kisses might as well have been drugged honey, as she felt time to move in thick, lazy drops around them following the rising rhythm of their movements. Her own kisses tasted of sweet desperation as the heat inside her build up and she was running out of breath. That was when she realised that their whole fight had probably been building up to this.

“Only cowards and idiots, Hermione,” he whispered, “run from a witch of your power.”

She should stop being enchanted with the way he said her name, as if she was a secret pleasure for him to keep. His humour was because she was hidden in plain sight and no one seems to see.

“We should fight again sometime,” she said softly between tasting the sweat trickling down his jaw.

His answering grin would have sent most people to run far, far away from him.

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Chapter End Notes

End Notes:

Sex-Ed mini note: a sexual encounter does not always mean coitus.

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List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

Isoflurane: (Medicine, Chemistry), Chemical formula: C3H2ClF5O. One of its uses is as a general anaesthetic, inhaled. One of the reasons of the spread of its usage was because it wasn’t flammable. It has five fluorine atoms for every single chlorine atom in the molecule.

This is why Hermione ends up with excess unused chlorine from the bleach. She just dumps those into nitrogen trichloride, a common by-product of chemical reactions, including the one in swimming pools. It’s a major part of that bleached swimming pool smell. Nitrogen is what more than half of the air around us consists of.

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Additional Notes:

Glacia*: (Latin) verb, “freeze”. ‘Glacia’ is the present imperative, second person singular form of the verb.
*Vapora* (Latin) verb, “evaporate”. ‘Vapora’ is the present imperative, second person singular form of the verb.

*The eagle-eyed aficionado of all forms of HP canon would realise that there is a Freezing Spell used in the video games though it’s not part of book canon. This would be *Glacius*. The reason why I didn’t use that is because it’s a) clearly not book canon and b) not even correct Latin verb unlike Rowling’s other spells. Rowling might invent a lot of things including spells (*Wingardium Leviosa* comes to mind), but she’s actually pretty good with her Latin at other places when it comes to single-word spells. *Accio* is ‘I summon’, *Confringo* is ‘I destroy’ and *Protego* is ‘I protect’. For those who like technical details, they’re both verbs in the form of present indicative, first person singular. Even *Anapneo* is from Greek for ‘I breathe in’. So, I thought I might as well make new spells properly instead of making shit up. Rowling has the excuse of being the canon writer—I have no such recourse.

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21 Evenings at the Room

Chapter Summary

Hermione drops in at the infirmary with Tom. They meet up again later. Melchior Nott and Abraxas Malfoy wanders up to the Room of Requirement. The four of them have tea. Proofs. Some people just need to sleep it off.

Chapter Notes

So, guys, apparently, I'm on a ship and I don't even realise it? Okay.

To rewind a bit, it began with my sister coming across mention of Tomione day on the 29th of March on tumblr. I didn't know what that had to do with me until it was pointed out that there is a Tom and Hermione relationship (sort-of/maybe/kinda/if you tilt your head while looking) in SA. I really have enough on my plate to not pick up anything new (tests. Bloody upcoming tests), but she said that even a bonus update would work. I said, I'll only update if she can come up with some random new graphic for the tumblr. I underestimated the speed and skill in which she edits graphics.

Considering that I really wasn't planning on updating this weekend, this truly is your bonus update, folks! Courtesy of my sister and...the tumblr event that still somewhat confuses me. Enjoy.

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21 Evenings at the Room

Maggie Edelstein didn’t know what her evening would bring, but it wasn’t this.

Hermione and that Riddle boy entered the infirmary still with their clothes worn, cut and singed. It was only their apparent ease of movements that stopped her from running. No, neither of them was wounded. The Ravenclaw was fussing over her hair, which she insisted must have looked like a lion’s mane regardless while the Slytherin wizard assured her that it was fine—he was right too, in this case. Her curls might be wilder than usual, but their richness actually reminded her of Vera Lynn. There was an earthier feel to her today than her usual prim appearance, and it made her more inviting.

Tom Riddle looked fit to be hanging about the docks himself than to be a prefect; he had the appearance of one who’d just walked out of a barfight and the confident stride of someone who’d won. All that he lacked was a cigarette hanging at the corner of his lips to perfect the image. Both students had the brightness of eyes and vitality of skin that came from recent physical exertion.

“Goodness, what happened to you?” Maggie had dropped whatever it was she had been holding and was by their side in no time.
Hermione huffed. “We happened to each other.”

It took her a moment to process the answer. Even then, her disbelief was still clear.

“You?”

“It’s the Defence class.” The brunette witch said, as if that made everything obvious. “We fought, we healed each other’s wounds and I made a second pass in case I missed anything. I just need you to look him over and pronounce him fit as a fiddle again before any of his admirers screamed that I’ve killed him.”

She heard a derisive snort—a snort! —from Riddle and her eyebrows, which had been rising through Hermione’s story, rose even higher. Oh, she never bought into his apparent perfection, no matter how many girls gushed about him as they pass her infirmary. Yet she’d never seen him act with anything less than perfect decorum even when she was trying to discourage him from keeping Hermione’s company. She’d wondered then if Riddle himself had forgotten his real personality in his effort to embody the ideal student.

Apparently not, as somewhere deep down, he still kept a sarcastic edge.

“If anyone thought you could kill me with just that, then they truly shouldn’t have been in Advanced Defence in the first place,” was his cutting remark.

Maggie was amused of the fact that he actually voiced the opinion than that he held it in the first place.

“You’d be surprised how much you could support your Defence grade based on the written exam results alone. I checked the weighting of each component. It’s entirely possible.” Hermione answered.

“I doubt most people could reach more than eighty percent on the written component.” He casually dismissed the intelligence of his year mates.

_Harsh_, Maggie thought with slight surprise. Add in his rough appearance like some survivor of a schoolyard scrum, he’d fit better as the mocking delinquent right now than his usual air of perfection.

Surprisingly, Hermione didn’t seem to be fazed by his sharpness at all.

The brunette was thoughtful. “Perhaps there was some pressure to grade to the curve? I mean, you have seen what the Hogwarts Board of Governors look like, haven’t you?”

“Half-filled with mollycoddling parents, half with sycophants and another half with clueless Ministry lackeys?” Riddle asked back.

Now _that_ was a sentiment that Maggie could get behind, and she didn’t hide her snorts of laughter. She couldn’t believe she just exchanged a look of understanding with Riddle, of all people. The student with a scarly perfect façade.

“That’s three halves,” Hermione replied.

“I didn’t say there weren’t overlaps.”

“Look, I know what you can do, Hermione. So, what tests have you run?” Maggie asked, cutting into their back-and-forth.
“Standard? I mean, no open wound or sores anymore, no burns whether thermal, electrical, chemical, etc remains—”

“Burns? You have burns?” Maggie yelped.

“I need to up my calcium intake, but I think you already know that. Otherwise we don’t need to replenish any loss of blood. He’s not concussed and neither am I…what else am I forgetting? Oh! No inflammation and other signs of infection. We’re already clear on that front.” Hermione didn’t walk her through her explanation—she ran through it.

“What spells have you been using, exactly?” The nurse asked with a vague sense of dread.

“Can you just check him one last time so I can tell people that you’ve given your seal of approval?” Hermione finished, her eyes wide and innocent. Maggie, of course, knew better.

“You could have just done it yourself and say that it’s infirmary approved. You know that I don’t mind if you do that since I trust your skills for the basics,” the nurse said. “Now, what else that you haven’t told me?”

The Ravenclaw student was waffling; Tom was the first to react as he reached for Hermione’s hand. The brunette didn’t even seem to realise that she grasped him back easily. Maggie blinked. Since when did they—

“See? It’s fine. We can just go back to our dorms and rest.” Tom said. Maggie had only realised then that even throughout the entire three-way conversation, his attention had never left Hermione for long. Even now he’d placed her arm over his once more.

“But…”

“You know the quality of your own work, don’t you?” He asked Hermione, overriding her self-doubt.

She bit her lip. “Well, yes.”

“Then I see no reason why you should fret unnecessarily. Good afternoon, Madam Edelstein. Our sincere apologies for interrupting your afternoon.” He nodded to her and of course Maggie nodded back. Hermione’s goodbye followed soon after, and then the two of them left in the same speed they had entered it. Maggie found that she had more questions in her head than answers.

“Advanced Defence Against the Dark Arts, huh?” She mused to herself as she checked at the clock.

Ah, no wonder. It was already ten minutes past the time when the last class would let up. Hermione and Riddle probably went straight to the infirmary after class.

“-”

“But…my essays!” Hermione wailed.

This was the middle of the week and Hermione hadn’t started on any of her new homework. It was blasphemy, that was what it is. They had both separated to change and freshen up before meeting again in the Room of Requirements, at first to do their respective homework while tossing ideas to each other until Tom brought up his newest idea of having a meeting this evening.

Tom Riddle seemed utterly unconcerned about her emergency as he lounged in the green wing-
back chair provided by the Room. Hermione’s was grey (the unofficial colour of the Unspeakables, not that anyone would know).

“It won’t take that much time for you to finish them.” He replied. “There aren’t even that many yet, Hermione.”

Well, he was hard to deny. Alright, so she knew she wouldn’t take long to finish her Arithmancy one, and she’d certainly have fun preparing for Transfigurations. But she hadn’t taken Advanced Care of Magical Creatures the last time she was at Hogwarts, and she certainly needed to read the suggested reading too.

“So?”

She stalled. “We can’t do this tomorrow? Or in two days?”

“Well, what with the future of the wizarding world at stake, I thought you’d prefer if we act faster than slower?” He asked.

The rest of Hogwarts would take him seriously when he said that, agreeing with the wisdom in the statement. Hermione found it hard to do so, especially since she could now detect that hint of mocking in his tone. It wasn’t always there, but it was there often enough for her to begin to recognise it.

“If you say that you want to save the world, I’m going back to my common room right now,” she warned. He had one of his not-quite-a-smile on.

“Well, we do need to coordinate on the campaign, and it was your idea.”

“And I just came up with it on the way to Advanced Arithmancy today, so pardon me if I didn’t think I’d have a meeting about it within several hours.” She grumbled.

He sighed. “Apparently, Slytherin has the field for quidditch practice in two days, and people became inconveniently unavailable.” Contrary to most wizarding males she knew regardless of the era, Tom was singularly unimpressed by quidditch, even if he still took the scheduling conflicts the popular sport caused without a comment.

“What about tomorrow?” She asked.

“You have Astronomy at night and that usually means shifting your sleeping schedule forward. Unless you would rather not attend…?”

“No. You’re right, I’m not skipping Astronomy.” Her Head of House taught it. If she was about to miss it, she thought she’d better have a damned good reason.

She rubbed her forehead with resignation.

“You’re frustrated,” he observed.

She let out a vexed bark of laughter. Between adapting to the unexpected aspects of the wizarding world in 1942, getting into the groove of classes and wrapping her head around the constantly-evolving puzzle that is Tom Riddle, she hadn’t even had time to start on charting history.

“Whatever gave you the idea?” Her question was entirely cynical.

“At the very least, I can promise you a very good opportunity to vent before the meeting begins.”
“Really?” She was sceptical but open to possible positive news.

“How well-practised are you in indoor fighting?” He asked.

“How well-practised are you in indoor fighting?” He asked.

“Urban combat? I’m very well trained at it.” She didn’t miss the gleam of interest in his eyes.

Hermione’s smile flashed her canines and was a little too similar to Othello’s for anyone’s peace of mind.

“Now, how much destruction can I do?”

One blond-haired and one dark-haired Slytherin fifth-years were walking down one of the higher corridor of Hogwarts, looking for all the world as if the personification of day and night decided to stop and chat at that moment instead of journeying on their cosmic paths. The more unusual state for Abraxas and Melchior wasn’t that they were wandering around when no classes were held, during the evening, but that neither was in the company of any female. On the other hand, Melchior had always been more circumspect about that than Abraxas that it wouldn’t be strange to find him alone than with someone.

“Do you know why we’re summoned?” Abraxas asked Melchior.

The Nott heir huffed. “Do you even think before opening your mouth to speak?”

“I know there’s a meeting tonight with the boring seventh-years, but that’s not what I meant. That meeting is not in the next hour and we’re called earlier and to the Room. Something’s rotten, Melchior.” Abraxas brooded.

Malfoy would have made for a fine Hamlet if only he were not too handsome, his hair so very shiny. It was difficult to take him seriously when his fine features advertised to all and sundry that he’d never had a hard day in his life.

“Well, yes, otherwise we’d be in our common room lollygagging or you would be in your dorm room wanking. Would you stop stating the bloody obvious?” Nott snapped.

“I knew it. We have to save him. I don’t know how, but that witch must have sunk her nails into him.” The blond decided.

“Abraxas,” Melchior said, slowly. “This is Tom we’re talking about. Tom.”

Tom, who considered all the witches even vaguely interested in him as dust under his shoe.

“For every man out there, there’s a Helen of Troy that can turn his head and make him lose his mind. There’s this one woman for which he’ll launch a thousand ships. The Morgana to his Merlin,” the blond insisted.

“You’re mixing your stories.” He muttered.

“You saw her, didn’t you? Not bad looking at all. A bit on the bookish side, yes, and Merlin knows the teachers haven’t stopped asking her questions and or to demonstrate things. Yes, we know she has a brain and we wish she would stop flaunting it because it’s becoming tiring. But when she moves, Melchior, it’s like she dances with magic. You saw her at Defence, right? Can you imagine her…flexibility, her stamina?”
Nott was rubbing his face with his hand. Well, he can imagine her alright, he was a red-blooded young wizard. They’re always looking, anywhere, and there’s really no harm by it and just pure enjoyment of Nature’s bounty. He was always up to appreciating Mother Nature. It didn’t mean he wanted to be caught looking at a witch that Tom bloody Riddle took the effort to lure to his side.

He has self-preservation instincts.

“I think you should stop looking, mate.” He advised. Abraxas’ forehead creased.

“Well, I can’t. I mean, we have to observe the enemy to figure out their weaknesses, right? How am I going to do that if I stop looking?”

Melchior stared at Abraxas blankly for three seconds before his face crumpled with his mental frustration. His left hand was starting to yank his dark hair.

“Morgana’s Tits, Abraxas! For the love of Slytherin—”

“You see, we have to find a way to remove her influence from Tom.”

“We have no idea whether she actually has any influence on Tom.” Melchior said.

Tom, after all, has the habit of collecting people. He’d know. He was part of that blasted collection, just more self-aware than most to realise it. Tom had also displayed the sentimental range of a teaspoon. If someone was useless, they were useless, and they’d never rise beyond pawns in his perspective—and this was Nott being generous.

“There is no way a witch that attractive becomes that close to a wizard and not influence him. Why did he suddenly get the idea for that article for Emma to write? Why did we have to get it published in the Prophet?”

Because Tom asked for it? Nott noted sarcastically.

“I think she wants to be famous and that’s why she’s sticking close to him. We just have to find a way to show him the truth about her.” Abraxas concluded.

Melchior was hitting his forehead with the heel of his hand. Repeatedly. Maybe he could pass out from this? No, he was never that lucky.

“Tom’s not that blind, Abraxas. He’ll know if she’s just using him—”

The Malfoy heir was on a roll because he was inspired. His blue eyes were bright. “I think we should create a trap for her. I know! I’ll display interest and I’ll demonstrate that at present, I have more wealth to give her and I can pretend that I’ll make her Mrs. Malfoy.”

Melchior half-wished he could kill himself and stop listening to Abraxas’ drivel. Why couldn’t Brock Bulstrode have been a year older? Melchior could’ve hung out with him instead of Abraxas. Or Mordred Montmorency a year younger? Or for himself to be born anytime that ‘doesn’t make me end up in fifth year, right now, and Merlin-forbid, listening to Abraxas fail to plot his way out of a paper bag?’

Entrapping someone with Hermione Curie’s intellect and world-weariness was simply beyond the abilities of Abraxas. And he was speaking as a friend here.

The dark-haired wizard took a deep breath. “Abraxas, look, I’m not a witch. Yet if I was one and I have to choose between keeping Tom’s company or yours, guess which one I’ll pick?”
His friend smiled. “Ah, but that’s because you’re not a witch, Melchior! As you know, I have many admirers of the female persuasion. This is already a fact. It’s just a matter of finding what type of woman Miss Curie is.”

“One that is not stupid,” he muttered dryly.

“Yes, but does it mean that she’d find it more endearing if I ask for her assistance in class, or would she be more impressed if I can dazzle her with my intellect?” Abraxas asked.

Melchior made a strangled noise from the back of his throat.

“Are you serious?”

“Those two moves are a classic strategy for a reason, you know.”

He was laughing with the jagged wheeze of one who knew he’d be in frustrated tears if he didn’t. Half of his hair was sticking up from all the yanking.

“It’s probably easier to begin in Advanced Potions. We do share that class, after all. Melchior? Melchior, are you alright? You sound like you’re choking on something.”

“I only wish I was,” he replied with resigned depression. “Look, do you prefer oak, willow, beech or something else? Pine is easy to get, but rather gauche.”

Abraxas looked at him askance. “You’re asking me about woods? No, I don’t need a new wand—”

“It’s not for a wand,” Melchior cut in, his tone brusque. “What’s your height? Wait, it doesn’t matter. I’m sure they stock several sizes and one would certainly fit. Fortunately, you’re not heavy-set either to ever need a custom one.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your coffin. Someone should start planning for your funeral because it’s clear you’re not going to.”

There were two wing-back chairs whose back faced the door. A voice spoke up from behind one.

“Ah, come in Abraxas, Melchior. We were just talking about you.”

Tom’s random expressions of omniscience were one of his more unnerving habits, Nott thought as he stepped into the Room behind Abraxas. The Room right now looked to be a nice English sitting room, complete with a roaring fireplace and lined with endless bookshelves. Tom stood up from one of the wing-back chair. From the other one, the witch that Abraxas couldn’t shut up about stood up as well. He noticed how light she was on her feet and the grace that the blond had mentioned before he stopped himself from staring too much.

Oh bother, Melchior thought as he braced himself.

Abraxas was looking too much at ease and had greeted Miss Curie by kissing the back of her hand. He’d have maybe a grain’s worth of confidence in his friend’s scheme instead of absolutely none if he hadn’t seen Curie exchanged an amused glance with Tom for a second. The rest of the greetings given were less odd.

He saw the tea service already laid out at the table. Meanwhile, the two wing-back chairs turned
completely around, following their masters’ position. Melchior hadn’t seen Tom or Hermione say any spell, and a quick glance on their hands showed them to be empty of wands. A quick-draw from a forearm holster was still possible instead of completely wandless magic, but it still spoke of finesse.

*Right*, he thought. *If that’s not a display of power, I’ll eat my hat.*

Tom summoned a chair for Abraxas while Curie did the same for Melchior. Nott didn’t miss the details that where Tom and Curie’s chairs were wing-back ones, his and Abraxas’ were more modest armchairs. They sat down again.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of the meeting later on with Oswin and Emma,” Tom began.

“Yes, we are aware of that,” Melchior replied.

Hermione Curie played the hostess and offered them refreshment and cakes—naturally after she served Tom. Melchior admitted to preferring his with lemon while Abraxas took his with milk. Her manners were quite fine; even his mother would approve. He let out a relieved sigh he didn’t know he’d been holding in. *At least she couldn’t have been a muggleborn.*

“I did wonder why we were invited before them.” Nott added again.

He was hoping that if he took the initiative in the conversation, Abraxas wouldn’t have the opportunity to say something foolish.

“Well, Oswin, Emma and the rest would certainly handle the Ministry side as well as other matters related to bureaucracy. They do, however, prefer to play things safely.” Tom confirmed.

Melchior felt a slight frown forming on his forehead. “What is the plan, anyway?”

No coups would be on the agenda today, he was sure. Anything espousing views that were strictly, violently pureblood would no longer be palatable with Hermione Curie’s inclusion into their coterie. Her familiarity with muggle weapons spoke at best of a halfblood background. Even if the grace with which she distributed cakes was something to behold.

“And what are we talking about?” Abraxas asked. “If it’s more policy details, I’d rather decline—not out of disrespect to you, Tom, but because I don’t think I know that much to say to them, anyway.”

Nott observed their seating arrangements again. Why were there only the two of them?

“You’re not here to talk about policy with us, are you? At least not *just* policy,” he shrewdly noted.

“Why, we bring the fight to Grindelwald, of course.” Curie said.

Her answer startled the two of them. Melchior didn’t feel any need to check on Tom’s reaction because he couldn’t believe that Tom hadn’t expected her involvement when he invited her.

“How? We’re not going to be the first people looking for him,” Abraxas said.

“The first thing we need to establish before entering any conflict is the moral high ground. We need some proper *casus belli,*” Curie said. “What’s the one thing that almost everyone in the wizarding world can agree on, no matter what they think on tradition, innovation and everything in between? The Statute of Secrecy.”
“Grindelwald flaunts his untouchability there, but it’s not a surprise. Who can take him, indeed? I hear his muggles built a fortress for him. Not that we have any idea which one is his, and even if we’ve located it, where he is. He might have more than one for all we know.” Nott said.

“We declare him outlaw, not only by British standards but also by international standard. We get other countries to declare him outlaw, as he had broken an international norm,” Curie spoke again. Embers burned in the depths of her brown eyes and Melchior understood how she could be compelling.

A glance at Tom only showed him the Slytherin prefect’s inscrutable expression, half his face hidden behind his teacup.

“Well, outlawing Grindelwald is a good place to start, and the Policy Swots are going to be happy to be able to raise some sort of hue and cry against him,” Abraxas said. “Yet it still doesn’t explain why we have to start this meeting before their arrival.”

“Do you expect the Ministry to suddenly start sending Aurors after Grindelwald even after they publicly condemn him?” Curie asked.

“Not at all,” Abraxas dryly replied.

“Once he’s clearly everyone’s enemy, the next step is to locate him.” She said.

Abraxas sniffed. “If it was that easy, someone else would have found him earlier.”

“Yet who exactly has been looking for him before? Some Aurors were assigned to do so. Have they looked in Europe of only in Britain? If they tried searching for his base in Europe, were they able to speak the local language or were they just blundering about the countryside expecting to somehow trip over it? Did they coordinate with the local magical law enforcement?” Curie relentlessly pursued her argument even as she refilled Tom’s cup the moment it emptied and made it perfectly to his preference. The contrast in her character was almost endearing.

Melchior himself was chuckling at her last question.

The Malfoy heir nodded slowly at her words. “It does bear checking, doesn’t it?”

“Also, what use is international denunciation if it does not give us international assistance?”

The dark-haired wizard shook his head. “Most of the other countries would complain that they already have enough on their plates to deal with, what with Grindelwald’s muggle catspaw making a mess of things on that side…”

“There are enclaves, expatriates in Britain right now with an intense wish to bloody Grindelwald’s nose. What about the Free French Wizards, the younger of which we can find at Hogwarts? What about the Polish Contingent? The Norwegian Exiles? The German Exiles?” She took a breath.

“If we can contact them, there’s a good chance that they’ll gladly work with us. Their advantage is clearly better familiarity with their respective countries. If they were to go out looking, it would certainly be faster than if a foreigner were to do so—not to mention that they already have contacts there too. These groups are also just what I can recall at the top of my head, yet I’m sure there are still others.”

“So, we have a plan for locating him,” Nott said slowly between sips of his tea.
The witch was right. He couldn’t believe that the opportunity had been lying under their feet all this time and no one had taken it. Melchior had to give credit where it was due and admit that she had a keen mind.

“Considering the Ministry’s bureaucracy, I have a feeling that we might even be able to move faster than them if we were the one to reach out to the wizarding communities from other countries.” Tom commented.

His voice startled Melchior slightly, as he’d realised that Tom had been content on settling back and merely watching for a while.

“You haven’t addressed his muggle catspaw,” Nott said. “As much as I loved to have to only consider his wizarding forces, Grindelwald did, as you put it, break the Statute of Secrecy. He gained his personal muggle forces out of it too.”

The brunette witch answered that, her curls glinting with hints of copper and gold under the light of the fire. “That’s why we need to find out the location of his base. Odds are, it’s actually a muggle base. With Minister Spencer-Moon’s high degree of coordination with the Prime Minister, they would gladly destroy it once we’ve stripped the place of its notice-me-not charm and other magical defences.”

“We’ll be joining the muggle war!” Abraxas exclaimed in surprise.

“We won’t be joining the muggle war.” Curie cut in with discomfiting brashness. “We will be enforcing the Statute of Secrecy of not interfering in the muggle war. Grindelwald is interfering in the muggle war, abetting his preferred faction—we’re removing any advantages he may have given and let them sort it out among themselves.”

“That’s a little…hair-splitting, don’t you think?” Melchior carefully asked.

“Yes, that inch of difference is all we need.” Tom answered. “One to bring the law right behind us.”

The brunette witch sniffed. “Unlike Grindelwald, we have no intention of working with muggles to defeat him. Once he’s separated from his allies, catspaw and whatnot, we’ll simply just fight him. It would be a wizarding war once more.”

“And everyone will be behind us at this point because Grindelwald had stepped on too many toes, destroyed too many homes and made too many enemies.” Tom concluded.

Abraxas’ expression was one of unease. “Still…muggles. We have to get involved with.”

Melchior snorted. “Come on, Abraxas. Would you rather get the British muggles to fight the other muggles, or do you want to lift your robes, wade into the mess and fight them yourself? Why would you want to let the muggles sit back and fight their foes for them? Personally, I choose the first. Let them sort it out between themselves once we stop Grindelwald’s meddling.”

“It’s an elegant solution.” The Nott heir admitted.

He knew he was on to something when Tom gave him a slight nod, crediting his conclusion.

“We can always withdraw once the advantages are removed and declare that we have fulfilled our duty. And then we’ll have ourselves the cleaner, strictly wizarding war that we’d been looking for.” Curie finished. The emotions flickering in her eyes changed far too rapidly for him to read.

“Alright, so we assist in locating him.” Abraxas said as he nodded. “I can see that. But I still don’t
feel it’s our field, you know?”

The blond glanced in Tom’s direction, several unsaid sentences raised there and clearly bypassing the witch. Neither Tom nor Curie reacted to it.

“We’ve covered the first and second steps. What comes after that is the final step.” Tom said. “Which is exactly what Hermione has said at the beginning.”

Melchior gasped in disbelief as it dawned on him, the sound catching Abraxas’ attention. The brunette witch was nodding.

“We bring the fight to Grindelwald. That’s the final step, of course,” the witch said.

Nott tried to watch Tom carefully, to see if he had been missing any clues. But no, the other wizard was completely calm, as if Curie was merely announcing that dinner had been served.

“Grindelwald. You want us to fight bloody Gellert Grindelwald.” Abraxas was the one who managed to find his voice first.

“Well, he’s just one wizard.” She said.

Melchior didn’t expect Curie to say that at all and he could only stare at her, her expression completely relaxed and open. Abraxas was the one who found his tongue first.

“B-but he’s a powerhouse. Have you even heard about what he did in that Polish town, whatever it was named? Three wizards encountering difficulties holding him off and having to hunker down behind cover and another four desperately distracting him? There’s several teams sent there and they…” he trailed away.

“He also came with his own team—teams, probably,” Curie noted. “He did not fight them alone either and we’d be foolish to do so. Playing fair has no place on the battlefield.”

“You plan on scouting the field ahead of time, aren’t you?” Tom asked.

“And manipulate it in our favour and construct several ambush locations if possible. Add traps. If you’re fighting fair, then you’re not really trying.” The witch spoke of fighting dirty with far more ease than he expected from someone who wasn’t from Slytherin.

Neither Melchior nor Abraxas said anything, the size, the insanity of Tom’s plan weighing over them. If it was anyone else, they’d have laughed outright at the idea. It was only because Tom clearly agreed with it that they were taking it seriously—there were very few things he could not do if he put his mind to it. A smile was slowly dawning over Tom’s visage, and the sight of it made Melchior shiver instead of putting him at ease.

“Ah, I see. They don’t believe they can, do they?” He turned to the witch at his side.

“No, I don’t think so,” Curie replied just as casually.

“Oh, we’ll do it, of course. Right, Melchior?” Abraxas said. The other Slytherin wanted to slap himself as much as he wanted to slap the blond. Don’t drag me into this when you sound like you were doubting Tom! Dig your grave alone, dammit!

“I’ll work on the outline of the plan—unless you already have one?” Melchior asked, hoping that he came off as more self-assured than the Abraxas. His gut feeling warned him that something was up.
“It’s certainly still far too early to make a plan. Why, we don’t even know where he is yet, how would we know where the field of battle will be? I’m so thrilled that you’ve volunteered already, but it’s really not necessary at the present,” Tom replied, his eyes were unreadable as he paused for a moment, tapping his chin in thought.

“Yet I think your lack of faith is about something more…fundamental. You don’t believe that you can do it at all.”

That damnable smile of his was ever-so-slightly off. Even though it seemed amiable, was perfectly pleasant, some older instinct inside Nott recognised a threat when he saw it. It was as worrying as a snake in the grass.

“Even worse, it stems from the fact that you don’t believe I can do it either.” Tom spoke with ease, and his eyes were darker than the ninth circle of hell and promised just as much suffering.

The tension in the room rose, something churned the air and prickled uncomfortably at his skin. Curie was delicately nibbling one of the pink petit-fours at the end of a fork, as languid and content as a cat.

“This won’t do at all.” He drawled. “Abraxas?”

“Yes, Tom?”

“Do you think you can defeat Hermione in a fight?”

“I, uh, I wouldn’t want to hurt her…”

Tom chuckled and even Curie smiled. She looked like a nice, sweet witch you won’t mind introducing to your mother (if your mother didn’t have any hang-ups about halfbloods, that is).

“That’s funny, but that wasn’t the question, Abraxas. Do you think, you can defeat her in a fight?” Tom asked.

The blond was sitting ramrod straight in his chair. “I, uh.”

“Ah, I know that look. You gave several Gryffindors that look before, Abraxas, usually right before you wiped the floor with them in Defence Against the Dark Arts. You believe you can defeat Hermione.” Abraxas paled, but Tom continued with the same amused smile, completely unoffended. It was raising all sorts of alarms in Melchior’s head. “But this is excellent!”

“It is?”

Melchior inwardly groaned. *Merlin, just shut your sodding trap—*

“We’re in the perfect place to test that. You, Abraxas can fight her in this very room, right now. Do your best, though don’t be an idiot and use spells that would get you expelled, will you? It would be very inconvenient to have to replace you.” Tom mildly reminded him. Then, to Nott’s horror, Tom turned to him. “Help your friend out, will you, Melchior? Let’s improve his odds a little.”

Nott spluttered. “But it wouldn’t be fair—”

Tom wasn’t listening to his polite objection as he had already turned away.

“Hermione,”

“Yes, Tom?”
“Do you mind fighting them both at the same time, in this room?”

She smiled. “Of course not. I’d love to.”

“Please don’t break them. It really is hard to find excellent company these days.” Tom added.

Hermione Curie laughed. “If you were looking for excellent company, Tom, you wouldn’t even start with them. But it’s alright. I’ll spare your house mates from anything permanent.”

As sweet as her tone was, she did not hold back on her sarcasm. Why had he only noticed that Curie had a very sharp edge to her laughter just now?

Melchior cleared his throat slowly. *I have a bad feeling about this.*

Tom cast *Protego Maxima*. The dome covered his chair, Curie’s and the tea table between them. He continued drinking his tea.

Abraxas was standing awkwardly next a jittery Melchior as Tom pointed out their starting point, and that whoever reached their spot first had the right to begin.

“As you can see, there are three X-marks on the floor. You can attack only after you’ve stood at one of the marks. You may begin.”

Abraxas was still processing that when Curie had already sprinted to her X-mark on the floor and Melchior’s instinct got him running even before he realised why he had to run—oh, his spot! He had to get to the accursed place first before he can start casting. Abraxas caught up last, of course, though with his long legs, he had a fighting chance.

Melchior remembered what Curie and Tom’s fight had been like. She went for large effects. Now, what could he do about it?

“Oleumenti!”

What? Oil spread on the floor, covering his and Abraxas’ spot. *Oh, that is just so not fair*. No two ways about it, he had to skid past his spot and start casting. There was no way he can stand still there and he wouldn’t even try. Why is there no hex cast in his direction yet? He skidded into the spot just in time to get sprayed with water. He started sending curses that didn’t hit her due to her shield charm and his questionable balance due to the slick floor. Abraxas had just gotten to his spot and started casting.

Curie spread a group of small fireballs towards their floor and he leapt away while still sending hexes in her direction. He could hear Abraxas yelp, but he really didn’t have time to mind anyone’s skin but his own—he was busy avoiding the spreading fire.

He only allowed himself to look back once he’d positioned himself well behind a couch. Abraxas was down and frozen to the floor—it wasn’t even a figure of speech or anything as he was literally covered in ice. *Malfoy’s out for the count, then*. The curses and hexes started flying between them, but Curie was already sprinting again, making it hard to target her. He found it curious that every five or six spells, she’d have *Aguamenti* cast.

So far, he’d only had minor cuts and a stinging slap. He was sure the last sandblasting hex he sent abraded her left arm, but she didn’t slow down. The witch sent another oil spill towards him and he moved because he was not looking forward to being set on fire. In between the curses, she
added more spills around the room and he avoided them and—

Why did he smell bleach, of all things?

She was throwing bookshelves at him and he raised shields against that. And he was not surprised that she’d sent fireballs to follow up, with Oleumneti interspersed because, why not burn him up while there’s all these kindling? He’d never raised shields so quickly in his life—that was when he realised he’d cast Protego completely silent for a while now, with half the wand movements, out of sheer dread.

_Huh. Nice to know I improved in something._

Half the floor was ice and the other half was oil. Why in the name of Merlin’s underpants she wasn’t slipping was a mystery and the bane of his existence and—

Wait, why is his movement sluggish? Why does he seem to…oh no, _she’s too close_—

It was embarrassing to know that she disarmed him with a well-timed Expelliarmus than some other, more dangerous hex.

“Good show, Melchior.” She congratulated him and returned his wand to him.

He stared oddly at her from the floor as he couldn’t even stand up, accepting her hand to shake without much thought. She was holding a bottle in hand and she was summoning water in. Why was she summoning water in? Tom approached and knelt in front of him and…checking his eyes?

“I think he inhaled too much, Hermione.” Tom commented.

“Well, he kept running around, it’s a bit inevitable that he metabolised even more because of that,” she said. Was that guilt in her voice? “I might have upped the concentration after I saw your endurance.”

“Hermione, I trained to get that endurance.”

“Oh.” A very becoming blush spread over her cheeks.

_She was embarrassed? Why was she embarrassed?_ Melchior found it strange.

Tom was looking entirely too amused. Not far from them, he’d apparently unfroze Abraxas and lead him by the hand to Melchior. Curie had summoned their two chairs, now mostly wet, and transfigured it into two beds that are fortunately dry.

The witch held both of Nott’s hands in hers and carefully pulled him up to one bed. She dried his clothes systematically, cleaning any mess that was too egregious and even patched him up. It was a nice sensation, being taken care of. She had warm and gentle touch. Her hands were soft too.

“You’re feeling drowsy right now and it’s alright. It’s normal. Just lie down and sleep it off. You can leave for your dorms any time you wake up.” She said kindly.

“But the meeting…”

“Well, Abraxas did say that he might as well not join since he didn’t feel like he’ll contribute anything. He’s certainly going to skip it. Are you saying you’ve been looking forward to it?”

“Well,” he mused about it carefully through his oddly lethargic mind. What did he know of her? He knew that for all her brilliance, she wasn’t like Tom. He’d seen her actually having fun with her
friends. “Not really. But I won’t be as useless as Abraxas there and can still…contribute…things. Yes, things. Besides, I’ll always come if Tom asks me. You know how it is, right?”

Curie nodded. She actually looked sympathetic as she patted his arm. “It’s alright, you can skip the meeting, then. There would always be more later. You just get some rest for now.”

He hadn’t expected her to help him out of his shoes and truly tuck him in. Emma was right. Curie was not a bad nurse. Even her smile was truly warm, not the perfect copy that Tom has that can fool most people (Melchior included himself on that list. The only reason he could see through it now is only because Tom had shown him his other side often enough for the sense of dread to stick).

As he laid down and stared at the increasingly blurry ceiling, he could still hear Tom’s voice. It was one he had when he was politely refraining from laughing.

“As much as I would love to gloat about the difference in level that they’re still not getting, it’s a trifle pathetic when they’re not even conscious for it…”

“Tom, that’s not nice. You really scared them.” Curie sounded genuinely concerned.

“They’re always scared, Hermione. It’s their natural state of being and it’s why I’ve stopped noticing it…”

“But I don’t think it…”

Their voice began to drift away somewhat, growing indistinct.

Melchior Nott would like to disagree, because while he definitely felt threatened when he fought her, he didn’t fear her personally. Yet the pillow was so soft and downy, the covers so fluffy, and it was hard keeping his eyes open. Soon, sleep claimed him.

‘-“
Chapter Summary

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood. Gathering support, preparations for a campaign. Post-meeting. Abraxas and Melchior walks back to the Slytherin dorms.

Chapter Notes

So, it turns out that my sister mistook the date of the tumblr event to be on March when it was actually on May. I am definitely distracted half the time for anything that isn't problem sets that of course I vaguely thought it all checks out, nod and say yes when she passed me the link. I'll just upload another bonus chapter on May when she participates again. It's not as if anyone's complaining about having double bonus chapters instead of one, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

22 Councils in Times of War

Oswin had arranged the meeting in an unused classroom. Hermione and Tom still have some half an hour or so to go before the scheduled time and that was why they were chatting.

Tom had informed her that Oswin and Emma, the two seventh-year Slytherin prefects, were the lynchpin of the ministry-oriented Hogwarts seniors. The Orpingtons were known career bureaucrats while Emma had an older brother and parents in the ministry. Oswin and Emma’s study group was, among others in the know, known informally as the Policy Swots. Only excessively pedantic people and stickler for details like her knew them as the Wizarding Society for Better Governance.

A flash of insight hit Hermione then.

“The aspiring bureaucrats wouldn’t have felt it wise or safe to throw their lot with you before now, would they?” She asked.

She was sitting in the grey wing-back chair next to his once more. At the far side of the wrecked room, Abraxas and Melchior were sleeping. The two Slytherins were soundly ignored.

“Why wouldn’t they throw their lot with me?” Tom said.

“If you had gone on with your original plan with the Knights of Walpurgis, taking power with force of dark arts and violence—oh, don’t look at me like that, Tom. You know that I know. It’s in that bleak future that I have knowledge of, among others.”

She shook her head. “These junior ministry types of Hogwarts students wouldn’t have joined you.”

He was glancing at her sideways, under his long lashes that made it harder to read his expression.
Not that he even needed to do that in the first place, she thought morosely, because he’s already hard enough to read most of the time. Tom hadn’t returned the teacup and saucer he was holding back to the table, and as she watched him with an annoyed sense of wariness.

His slight smile was sudden and it surprised her. “No, they wouldn’t have.”

“Another difference to mark down,” Hermione said with a nod. “I wonder what the chart would look like now.”

“The chart?”

“The flow of history? Charting time with highly advanced arithmancy? That particular interest of mine that I, perhaps ironically, gained from what will be my future profession. Your group of… extremists had left a significant weight in that history that you can see the ripples extending everywhere, affecting much even once they were destroyed. It’s quite an inconvenience in the future.” She said.

Hermione spoke with the casual confidence of the woman who had seen them destroyed and didn’t consider them to be something to fear. What she did consider them to be was a pain in the backside and a constant source of her annoyance. She (and everyone else) had to keep cleaning up their messes when a new Death Eater site was found or another cell was detected by Harry and Ron.

Then she remembered who she was talking to and belatedly remember that maybe she needed to be more deferential about the threat they presented? A little less dismissive? The Death Eaters was the vessel of Tom’s grand ambition. She bit her lip and raised her head. Instead of bristling, his gaze seemed almost fond. Honestly, it was rather unsettling.

“Um, Tom?”

“Yes, Hermione?”

“You’re not… mad? No, too loaded. Find another word, “…upset? I mean, it is your…”

What, future? That might not even be the right word for it now, is it? So far, it would seem that Everett’s interpretation of quantum mechanics was the one that holds.

“Not at all.” It was the ease with which he said this that convinced her. “It’s just nice to see that you would never quite change your destructive capabilities. I merely wish I could be present for all the times you demonstrated your devastation.”

...what.

Hermione’s eyebrows were twitching. That was weird and she still couldn’t wrap her head around it. He was smiling at the thought of his own destruction? No, that couldn’t be it, right? No. He was very much the survivor, she understood that the moment she read that he’d grown up in an orphanage and created for himself a markedly different persona in Hogwarts. But then, what is he thinking about?

Hermione decided to stop trying to think like Tom Riddle because her migraine was going to come up with a vengeance.

“I think I can easily see what one of the forks from that future happened to be.” Tom said, peacefully unaware of the confusion whirling in her head.
“Really?”

“Were you at Hogwarts at all? Perhaps it’s a future where you’ve never left Norway, or where you only returned to England after your school years were over and thus never necessitated a meeting between us.” He said.

Hermione couldn’t hide her sharp gasp. Since he’d heard it anyway, she decided to take her time to find the words to her answer. One that wasn’t ‘of course we didn’t meet. I was in the future, fighting against your underlings already.”

“No, I’m positive I wasn’t in Hogwarts with you, Tom.” She said dryly.

The Ravenclaw was sure she would’ve noticed it if Tom Riddle’s inner circle during his Hogwarts years had a witch on it, just because it seemed to be so male-heavy in general—she was a woman, she noticed these things automatically. His dark blue eyes were meticulously observing her yet again, though for what purpose this time, she had no idea. Previously, whenever he was watching, he was just being his unnerving and calculating self. Now that she could feel the trickle of warmth that came from a feminine awareness and power in another way she might have captured his attention; she still couldn’t decide whether it improved the experience.

Hermione still ended up unsettled, though for very different reasons (and different enjoyability).

“You’d still be noticeable outside Hogwarts,” He commented. She wasn’t sure what the context of that comment was supposed to be.

“If you say so,” the brunette absently replied.

Wouldn’t Dumbledore have remembered another Hermione that was also the best witch in her year? The similarities between them would’ve been too uncanny that he’d see it instantly. Unless he was lying and hiding the fact, which was entering the area of outlandish conspiracy theory that Hermione decided not to consider it seriously without substantial evidence.

“It’s clear that the failure’s future isn’t mine at all, then.” Tom said.

She didn’t understand that sentence at all. Hermione pulled herself out of her thoughts and met his gaze.

“Failure? What do you mean by failure?”

“Well, he is a failure if he did not even notice the sheer potential of a witch like you, isn’t he?” Tom casually asked. “That was rather short-sighted of him.”

Hermione’s mouth opened soundlessly for a second before she closed it again. Tom was picking one of the macarons with what she thought was an overly critical eye.

Did he realise that he’d just considered himself and Voldemort as different people right now?

Of course, compared to Hermione’s experience in her life before she was thrown here, Voldemort was probably still an abstract idea to Tom. Perhaps to be Voldemort was merely one shape out of many that easily formed and dissolved in the ever-shifting smoke that were his future possibilities and ideas. Yet to her, he’d crossed the Rubicon. She can’t help but remember the last lines of Robert Frost’s poem:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Hermione had arrived with Tom at the appointed classroom.

The conversations quieted down as they entered, before picking up again when it was clear that they weren’t going to interfere. A tall, serious-looking wizard and a witch with spectacles and hair secured in a bun greeted them. Her severity did not detract from her fine features.

“Tom, Hermione, welcome. Thank you for dropping by. We’re very pleased that you could make it,” The wizard said. Hermione could see the slight relief in his eyes. Oswin Orpington, wasn’t it? Seventh-year Slytherin prefect, she thought, trying to make sure she recalled his name. The prefect badge and his tie made her guess very likely.

“You’re in luck, the meeting hasn’t truly started yet.” The witch added.

That meant the witch was certainly Emma Eccleston, his prefect partner. The exchange of greetings and politesse was something that she’d done often enough when she was working in the Ministry that she didn’t even have to think about it. When that was over, her attention drifted to the Hogwarts students that were present.

The easiest way to describe her first impressions was that, they weren’t what she expected at all.

Oh, she certainly didn’t expect hooded cloaks, meetings at midnight and the entire cloak-and-dagger works that would have come with the Death Eaters or possibly even their predecessor, the Knights of Walpurgis. They’d be more normal. Yet seeing the smattering of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff ties along with at least one Gryffindor, with everyone easily talking to one another and moving between the different people made it all more real to her.

Not everyone had gathered yet when they arrived at the designated classroom. Yet from the way Emma consulted a list she was holding, did a quick check, and seemed to signal to Oswin to continue, she surmised that almost everyone invited were already present.

Oswin was the one who gave an unofficial version of an opening speech.

“Ladies and gentlemen. We’ve come together often enough for various talks that I’m sure it comes as no surprise to you that we’re gathered here again this evening. The Ministry Massacre by Grindelwald wasn’t the first or even the fourth among the series of attacks he’d perpetrated on British soil. We all know it’s not going to be his last either, and it’s just going to get worse from here onwards, isn’t it?”

His spirit faltered at the end; it was hard to avoid the spectre the attacks cast on them all. Emma smoothly picked up after him.

“The Ministry response has been tepid so far and not coherent enough, and we’re not the only ones growing impatient. Even ministry employees wish for a change. A few days ago, we’ve managed to set up a meeting with Tom Riddle’s people…”

Hermione could see the gazes flickering her way, attentions and curiosities momentarily diverted in their direction. It was odd to realise that at this point, even with her still-developing reputation as a new transfer student at Hogwarts, the students and staff might have begun to consider her under the umbrella of Tom Riddle’s people.

She, a muggleborn student, was now considered part of Tom Riddle’s inner circle.
Hermione found it strangely humorous, and she didn’t hide the small smile that grew on her face from the thought. She didn’t remove it even when Tom gave her a curious glance from the side.

The idea of being able to put on a united front against Grindelwald with the international wizarding community was predictably, a hit with many people.

“He’s making a mockery of the Statute of Secrecy and we won’t stand for this!”

“Yes!”

“Thinks of himself beyond the law, did he? Well, he’s not.”

“We’ll show him what for!”

Similar opinions were expressed with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Everyone liked the idea of standing fully on the side of right in the eyes of the law and to see that their enemies are clearly in the wrong. Hermione could see sparks lighting up in the eyes of many, of how more of them moved with the surety that only a purpose could give after that. Even the realisation that it could already be handled by the current Ministry instead of them didn’t decrease their spirit much.

“That still leaves us with nothing much to do, though.”

A tall Ravenclaw calmly stated between Hermione’s explanation. He was a guy whose strawberry-blond hair was grown carelessly long (she can’t see his ears). It was surprising to see that he had a prefect badge.

“We’ll pass the idea up of course, and I’m sure we’ll see the results in the Prophet soon enough, Missy. But what can we actually do?”

He leaned back slightly, as if he was too lazy to stand up straight. His tone was very reasonable. From the way Hermione could see Tom staring sideways at him for one whole second when he was conversing with a different group warned her that the Slytherin had noticed the Ravenclaw cutting into her explanation and was not entirely pleased.

She spoke up quickly before Tom decided to come over and probably make a pest of himself.

“You have a good point, Mr…?”

“Bones. Daedalus Bones. Seventh-year.” He did not mention his House because he could see that she was clearly not a fool and thus would’ve figured it out.

Hermione nodded. “Well, I was about to proceed to the next step after that. Once we’ve gotten international agreement on outlawing Grindelwald, we find his hideout. If we can find his hideout, we can find him.”

“We?”

“The Ministry clearly would not be able to spare too many Aurors to find Grindelwald,” Hermione was answering him, but she made sure to turn around and meet the eyes of the other people in her audience. “But I’m sure our friends from other countries would be glad to help. There are French wizards and witches who are forced to leave their land as the forces of Grindelwald’s muggle allies entered France. There are Norwegian exiles in London. Hogwarts has its own Polish contingent.”
The realisation that they don’t have to fight Grindelwald alone was visible in the crowd’s reduced tension.

“I’m sure if all of us were to cooperate and coordinate to find him, we’ll soon find where his headquarters are. He would leave many traces that enough people searching will be able to find—for example, that many soldiers cannot just stop eating. He will thus still have links to civilisations somehow. If he sent for his food by magical means like, say, the floo, it would be even more traceable. Even more so for the size of his food purchases since the wizarding world do not routinely hosts groups of people as sizeable as the force he leads.”

Daedalus listened to her carefully before he spoke.

“Once we get the law on our side, we could track down all the unplottable cartographers in Europe. Ask for orders to cover an area that is larger than a certain size. If the Aurors can get an estimate of Grindelwald’s forces, then we’d also know the minimum size it could be and eliminate anything smaller from the list. It’s not a bad place to start searching even if there might be some places omitted because they’re trying to cover for their customers.” He added.

“We need to get the law on our side? On what matter?” She asked, curious.

“Formal statements of how he’s now an outlaw and all that. Wanted for several crimes in several countries. It would be easier to get people to cooperate.”

The Ravenclaw wizard offered more of his own ideas as Hermione added her own. Between their back-and-forth, locating Grindelwald now seemed completely manageable. She could see people nodding along in understanding as they followed the arguments. She could see others speaking up and adding their own suggestion and she saw the verbatim-quills diligently writing every word spoken. Hermione could even drift into the background a little and watch everyone else come up with suggestions and ideas as she’d managed to get the discussion going.

Locating Grindelwald’s hideout was not something that scared most people out of their wits like fighting Grindelwald. If even the core of Tom’s supporters whom she assumed were more hardened than most still found him intimidating, she didn’t want to know what most wizards and witches thought of Grindelwald.

Probably like some sort of Titan, hurling lightning towards mortals from atop Olympus.

Of course, sooner or later, someone would remember the fact that Grindelwald had muggle soldiers. That was when she had to carefully draw back the conversation to how Grindelwald only had it in the first place because he broke the Statute of Secrecy. She needed them to keep it in mind.

This is why, she explained, that they have to prepare for when of the teams finally managed to find Grindelwald’s location and shared the information with everyone else. Then, they’ll forward it to the Ministry, and then the Ministry would have to prepare an Auror team that can strip the location of defensive wards, notice-me-not charm and anything even remotely useful from it.

“But the muggles…”

“Then, we’ll inform the muggles of the location.” She answered.

There was an uproar. Several people tried to talk at once, though not, she noticed, Daedalus Bones. He was watching the byplay. He cut in at a natural point among the overlapping conversations.

“Look, Grindelwald would have muggles, yes? We’re just letting the muggles on our side to hit the ones on his. That’s what the Statute of Secrecy was about in the first place, innit? For us to leave
the muggles to fight their own war? So, of course we’ll have to inform them of the location.” Daedalus was staring down a belligerent Slytherin.

“We’ll just have to isolate Grindelwald’s wizards beforehand so they can’t interfere with the muggles.” Hermione added.

“Why do we need to even involve muggles in the first place? Can’t we just handle it on our own? That’s what obliviators are for.” The Slytherin wizard even sounded annoyingly petulant.

“Do you want to face muggles like those that attacked the Ministry?” Daedalus fired back. “Oh, wait, are you volunteering to be among the first to face them? Is that it? To set things right once and for all in the name of the wizarding world?”

The Ravenclaw’s grin was a tad too wide. As the other wizard was not looking forward to getting anything close to a field assignment, he backed down with a pale face.

Daedalus was quick on the uptake, she had to give him that, and he had a lot less qualms of shooting people’s inane ideas down than Hermione did. The conversation moved faster thanks to his interferences, even if some people were grumbling about him. This was also the point where she’d realised how useful the Daily Prophet article about her was. When someone doubted that they needed to bring in muggles just to face other muggles, she turned to him.

“Have you seen the wounds caused by muggle weapons?”

The answer was no, obviously. Then, she started going on about what happens if you get shot in the gut (doesn’t that just sound so awful?) until he paled enough to shut up. She asked him whether he wanted to hear about what internal burn injuries look like when one is too close to an explosive in an enclosed space. The sixth-year wizard declined. At no point during the whole process did ask her how she knew, no one accused her of making things up. They accepted her knowledge, took it into account and moved on.

Apparently, she was now a trusted expert on the effects of muggle weapons. That particular Prophet article that Tom engineered was actually useful.

So far, she was satisfied how she’d managed to herd everyone into accepting the necessity of informing the muggles and cooperating with them to take down Grindelwald’s muggle forces. She was also glad with how Emma and Oswin saw what she and Tom was going for and brought similar arguments to bear on the rest of the seventh-years within a moment.

Wow, I could get used to this. She almost forgot how it felt to have a highly skilled team backing you up.

As for personally fighting Grindelwald down, that scared the wits out of practically everyone there. As a consequence, neither Tom nor Hermione was going to breathe a word of that plan. Not that they’ve even coordinated on this, it was just one of those bloody obvious things you don’t do—a good chunk of the wizarding world is too used to peace, even more so than the muggle world, and thus it is to no one’s benefit to panic the sheep. The general theme of the meeting ended up being about enforcing the Statute of Secrecy against Grindelwald and how the British wizarding community and related exiles from Europe can do that.

Yet for her, there was no doubt that the plan to crush Grindelwald would exist. The skeleton of one was already being laid in Hermione’s mind, and she was sure Tom was doing much the same thing in his idle moments.
Finding ways to weaken, to strike, to kill Grindelwald.

She was beginning to have a better understanding of Tom Riddle’s character. Considering Tom’s ambition for power and glory (one way or another), she had no doubt that if Dumbledore didn’t move quickly enough, he’d lead the efforts to take Grindelwald down himself if he had to. She’d began to suspect that he moved even faster than in her future’s history with her presence on his side increasing the firepower he could bring to bear. It was a flattering thought to know that she had noticeably began to alter the course of events.

Hermione herself had a conscience when it came to letting an active dark lord spread destruction around him. Add her experience (memories) in fighting them that she remembered (and more skills that came without any memories), she can never justify to standing aside and letting him be to herself. Sooner or later, she was going to start making plans to take him down too.

They’d marked the same faction as enemy.

It was certainly a lot more expedient for the two of them to pool their plans and effort into one. Their respective positions on the Dark Arts notwithstanding, they were surprisingly convenient allies.

Everyone else had gone out to their respective Houses or up to whatever mischief they wanted to go to next. Though considering that most of the students that Oswin and Emma gathered are the more dependable, law-abiding types, probably not. Daedalus Bones, on the other hand, struck her as one who wouldn’t be sneaking out because it was too bothersome to do.

“Allright. We can still manage one last patrol for the night, people, even if we can’t make it two like the usual. These are the remaining routes that aren’t covered by the Abbots and the other prefects not present here.”

Oswin unrolled a scroll that Emma had handed to him and laid it on the table so everyone could see. He had even enlarged it so it was easily readable to people not immediately next to him. “Emma has taken note of the routes taken by the other prefects. So, these are the remaining uncovered routes.”

“All right, I didn’t mind we ditched patrol today?” A Ravenclaw witch asked in amazement.

Since Eugenie was the fifth-year prefect, Hermione guessed she was sixth or seventh. She vaguely remembered being introduced earlier to one Julia Goldstein.

“We did not ‘ditch’ patrol. We merely deferred it.” Emma’s reply was cool.

Oswin clarified with a sigh. “We certainly coordinated the timing of today’s meeting and how it would affect our patrol with the heads. We’re not going to get a dispensation otherwise.”

“Each of us shall pick a partner and pick a route, and we’ll have discharged our responsibilities as prefects for the night.” Emma said.

Tom had picked the higher and farther routes. Technically, he should be doing his rounds with another prefect instead of accompanying her part ways, but none of the prefects in the room even bothered to register their objection. The Slytherin prefects had always lined up behind Tom, with even Oswin all too glad to relinquish control and responsibility to him.

The Ravenclaw prefects present were the laidback Daedalus Bones and the bookworm sixth-year
Julia Goldstein, who would really rather be reading or discussing about interesting things than make a fuss over something she considers such trivial details. The friendly and easy-going Ethel Macmillan of Hufflepuff thought that it wouldn’t hurt anyone.

“It’s also very good of you, Tom, to escort Hermione back. And Hermione, I’m sure you’ll arrive safely at the Ravenclaw Tower with Tom’s assistance.” Ethel said.

Hermione pressed her lips together to stop a disbelieving laughter from escaping. The two Ravenclaw prefects present managed to meet each other’s gaze at Ethel’s comment.

Daedalus laughed and Julia snorted, but neither took the trouble of clarifying what they saw to Ethel.

There was one Gryffindor prefect present (one of the only two Gryffindors there), the fifth-year Rajesh Setalvad. He struck Hermione as someone who was entirely fired up to save the world, and as such, couldn’t really give enough attention to care about something as small as patrol partners. She had the oddest feeling that he was one of the few people there who’d gladly support any plans to take down Grindelwald.

“So,” Hermione started after they left Oswin and Emma to close up the room. They had walked together and she found their steps lead back to the Room of Requirement.

“So,” Tom replied, just as vague.

“We’re both going to take Grindelwald down, right? Regardless of whether anyone else is ready or not?”

“Of course,” he confirmed it as casually as he would that the sun rises in the east.

“Good. I was just making sure.”

He hummed in agreement. It was on one of the stairs up that didn’t have any portraits on the walls when Tom spoke up again.

“This weekend happens to be Hogsmeade weekend.”

“Oh, it is?” Hermione asked. She didn’t exactly keep track.

“Yes. There’s a restaurant there, ‘The Hare and the Fowl’ that makes the perfect baked gammon—crisp on the outside and perfectly tender and juicy on the inside. The casseroles are also rather good with a nice balance of herbs. They have fruit terrines as dessert during the summer and their Shrewsbury biscuits uses oranges the last time I checked.”

She perked up at the idea of good food. “Those dishes sound delicious.”

“Indeed. What do you say if we were to dine there this weekend?”

If she was still more awkward, Hermione would have simply come to a sudden stop. Now, she could continue walking even as she turned to Tom in surprise.

Is this a date? No, there were no two ways about this. It is a date. Her brain had just overloaded itself at the thought and she blanked out.

Tom Riddle had just asked her out on a date. Does not compute.

“We could also drop in at Honeydukes before that. Do you know that they make seasonal candies
and confections as well? They’re not displayed at the most obvious spots, but they’re there if you know where to look for. Candied fruits are among their summer specialties.”

“I think I’d like to check that out.” Hermione murmured.

“They also accept requests for boxes of chocolate with custom selection, so you’ll never find any piece that you dislike in your purchase. They do have an actual chocolatier in their employ, in case you were wondering, and she was trained in Belgium.”

He displayed excellent knowledge for someone she was sure wasn’t a candy or chocolate fan. It was surprising.

“They have an actual chocolatier? I find it hard to believe for a store in a wizarding village!”

“Yes. Interesting, isn’t it? But then perhaps it’s precisely because they’re in a wizarding village that their regular patrons do not need to worry about physical distance.” He mused.

“True,” she agreed. “Whether from London or Newcastle, it would take the same amount of time via floo.”

They walked in silence that was not uncomfortable for a few more moments.

“On the other hand, we have to consider that Honeydukes may wish to keep up their tradition of quality. After all, they have a Royal Charter.” Tom added.

“Really? Which monarch gave it to them? What year?” She was excited to know this tidbit of Hogsmeade history she’d never heard before. She was always interested in any interlinkages between the muggle and the magical world.

“Elizabeth the First.” That answer was oddly brief.

“Ah, Good ole’ Queen Bess. I can believe that she knows the value of good chocolate.”

She was lost in thought and gasped as the next realisation hit her. “Wait, if they had a Royal Charter, that meant she’d tasted their chocolate! Does it mean that Queen Elizabeth’s travelling court ever reached Hogsmeade?”

Queen Elizabeth I occasionally had a travelling court, as she made a habit of going out and meeting her people and nobles. If she could always stay longer than planned in a particular noble’s estate, draining his coffers and thus muting whatever rebellious plans he seemed to be up to according to the rumours, well, Hermione was sure the queen considered it a useful feature.

Hermione remembered very well that the Statute of Secrecy only came into being during the time of William and Mary. The Tudor era was still a different time, the wizarding world as optimistic and lost in grand dreams as the non-magical world—Queen Elizabeth had John Dee in her courts, for one, and he was a rather famous wizard.

“You know she never managed to get that far north, regardless of her plans.” Tom said. “Honeydukes was smart enough to open a London branch during that time. It was nothing but a storefront.”

“No kitchen?”

“In the 16th century? They wouldn’t need to do that. The floo powder was already widely available and cheap.”
“Oh.” Hermione had only remembered fragments from *Hogwarts: A History* right then.

There had been invitations from Hogwarts well-preserved to the present day in a hidden, magical part of the Tower of London. In one of the corridors nearest to the Ravenclaw Tower, the queen’s delighted reply was framed and mounted for posterity on the wall. She remembered staring at it in wonder during her original third-year in Hogwarts.

*Weren’t there even some extensive renovations done in Hogwarts in consideration of the visit? Too bad the queen didn’t manage to arrive.*

“Of course. You’re right.”

They fell quiet once more. His gaze flickered sideways to her twice and that was when it hit her that she hadn’t said anything to his question. This was probably the closest she’d ever seen to him being nervous.

“A dinner at Hogsmeade sounds like a great idea, Tom.” She finally said.

“Then that’s settled.”

He did not sigh and neither did he start grinning from ear to ear—he simply continued walking. Tom was not someone whose emotions overflow or were easy to read. Yet in that moment, Hermione thought she could feel his contentment.

“*So,*” Melchior started, “were you about to impress her with your duelling skills?”

“You’re not helping.” Abraxas muttered.

They were more or less fine, other than the bruises. The dark-haired wizard surmised that even when taking into account whatever purpling area was created when Abraxas fell down, his ego was probably hurt even worse than any physical harm that he’d suffered. They had woken up rather late in the Room of Requirements, still in the mess it was in from the fight. Melchior had been rather impressed with the degree of destruction they’d managed.

“It’s clear that neither of us are at an advantage in fighting Miss Curie,” Melchior spoke up again.

“Maybe in a formal duel—”

“No.” He cut in. “She will defeat you within five minutes. There is no ‘maybe’ about it. I’ll even bet for your entire allowance this month.”

Abraxas was quiet for some time and he gave his friend time to think. It wasn’t that the blond wizard was unintelligent, it’s just that he could be too stubborn for his own good. Once he’d formed his thought or opinion, he preferred to hold on to them. It usually took a major blow to shake him out of that rut, and fortunately for them, they’d just been delivered one.

“She’s very skilled, isn’t she?” Abraxas finally asked.

“Did it ever occurred to you to wonder why Tom had to tackle her to get an *impasse*? You did notice that, right? Tom *didn’t* win against her. Why the bloody hell would we have won?”

He clammed up again after accidentally venting. Melchior couldn’t be impatient—he had to do this slowly and give his friend room to think. Otherwise, Abraxas might even wall himself off from
anything that anyone could say.

“Well, it was a fight, right? Not a duel,” Abraxas asked.

“Yes?”

“It’s still a valid move. It’s like what Professor Merrythought said, anything that can help you survive and win is a good move. If I was Tom, I’d have done the same thing.” The blond said. His eyebrows rose. Did Abraxas actually notice something critical that he’d missed?

“Do you know why he chose that tactic?” Nott asked, his curiosity was now piqued.

“It’s a nice way to get a girl under you,” his friend replied.

Melchior groaned and buried his face in his hands, cursing Fate, Norns, gods, whoever. Caspar Zabini has always been such an opportunist that he was an annoying noncommittal fence-sitter on almost any issue you can pick (and that takes skill and the forked tongue of a politician to pull off without looking like a brainless idiot), but Melchior thought that maybe he wouldn’t be such a pain to talk to compared to Abraxas. He was seriously reconsidering his choice of company right now.

“I take it back. I take it all back.”

“Don’t say you won’t do it.” The blond perceptively commented.

He shook any inconvenient images away right now. He needed to get his friend to focus. “That’s— that’s absolutely not the point. Look, we’ve established that she fights to a tie with Tom, and she can take both of us down when we were fighting her together.”

“Well, we won’t be taken off guard next time.”

Melchior threw both of his hands in the air. “It goes both ways! She’d be more prepared to fight against our styles next time too. Look, can we at least agree that she’s not a shallow social-climbing witch? She has skills of her own. It makes complete sense if Tom wanted to pull her in.”

He was thankful that Abraxas has enough sense to nod at that. “You’re right. Tom must have seen something in her.”

I’ve been trying to tell you that a few hours ago! Nott thought but did not say.

“Alright. We can certainly be civil to Curie, Right?”

“I think Tom would’ve wanted us to get to know her,” Abraxas concluded. “What with that article we had to push in the Daily Prophet, she’s going to be in an important position in the future, isn’t she? Tom wouldn’t do that for just about anyone.”

He was speechless. Sometimes Abraxas would be unbelievably dense and then something like this happens. He’s an idiot savant. I have no other word for it.

“I…yes, I think so too.” He stumbled.

“Good. So, we’d be asking for her help in classes to get to know her, then. See? I told you it’s a classic strategy.”

I’m going to sit next to Zabini at breakfast. Let’s see whether I’d end up wishing I can kill him less than I would have if I sat next to Abraxas tomorrow.
List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Elizabeth the First's Travelling Court:** (History, Tudor History) Known in the era as *the Queen's Progress*. Queen Elizabeth I (b. Sep 1533 – d. Mar 1603) has a habit of closing up the palace in summer (because London stinks without air conditioning) and then travelling to various parts of the country. Ordinary people are happy to be given the chance to meet their ruler while ambitious nobles vie to host her with the hopes of increasing their visibility to the queen and network with the nobles of the queen's court. As I've mentioned in-story, it is also a feature of the travelling court to be able to drain the coffers of the nobles hosting them if the queen so chooses.

People (well, *nobles*) renovating their grand homes in the hopes the queen would visit, or people renovating in advance of a visit, is common. So, it's nothing weird if Hogwarts was once renovated in expectation of her visit.

**John Dee:** (History) Advisor to Queen Elizabeth I and actual historical figure (1527 – 1608/1609). Mathematician, astronomer and a scholar of the occult and magic. Wikipedia points out that he's also an astrologer, and that devoted much of his life to the study of alchemy, divination and Hermetic philosophy (I kid you not). This was a time when scholars see both physics and metaphysics as true, only governing different spheres of reality. There really is a good reason why he usually ended up as a wizard in many fictional works.

**William III** (co-reigned with his wife, Mary II as William and Mary, b. Nov 1650 – d. Mar 1702): (History, Stuart History) Between the rule of him & his wife and the rule of Elizabeth I are four monarchs from the Stuart dynasty (Elizabeth was the last of the Tudors) as well as the Lord Protectors Cromwell between Charles I and Charles II. I'm just putting this here for those curious about the timing and not that aware of British history.

If you think that him voluntarily co-ruling with his wife is weird when most queens are just *queen consorts* instead of *queen regnant*, it has to be kept in mind that he was the *nephew* of the previous reigning king, while his wife was the *daughter* of that same king. Not to mention that he was born in the Dutch Republic and grew up there as well instead of anywhere around the British Isles, thus giving him even more distance from England (and handicap in the ensuing catfight for the throne). That he married a direct issue of the previous king (James II of England) and reigned with her strengthened his claim.

Additional Notes:

**Daedalus Bones** (OC):

Seventh-year Ravenclaw prefect. Some form of his existence is foretold in canon,
because someone has to end up being the father of Susan Bones. The name Amelia is a variant of Amalia, which is a Latinised version of the Germanic name Amala, a short form for names beginning with Amal, meaning “work”. So, for Amelia Bones’ older brother, I thought I’d take Daedalus from the Greek Daidallos (Δαιδάλος), which was derived from daidallo (δαιδάλλω) which meant “to work cunningly”. That's why he's in Ravenclaw here when Amelia is in Hufflepuff.

Amelia Bones has always said that he was ‘the lazy one in the family’, even when he is highly intelligent. He never did deny the accusations. “Well, Ravenclaw only asked me to like pursuing knowledge. It didn't ask me to work like a dog for it, so you know, what? I'm in.”

‘-
23 La Société

Chapter Summary

*Breakfast at the Ravenclaw table. One of the Free French Mages visits. Passing through ADADA. Lunch.*

Chapter Notes

Almost went nutty enough to try roasting some rice to make genmaicha (one of three of my favourite studying drinks). Luckily, I found a local version of it in the nearest store. On a more relevant note, this is a quieter chapter. Since chapters 24 and 25 are two parts of a whole, I can at least guarantee that I’ll post them within a week of each other. Whether I’ll post chapter 24 next week or in a fortnight depends on how impatient/bored/in need of distraction I am from my problem sets.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

23 La Société

Tom’s near-superhuman organisation talents (or his ability to collect underlings that can pull it off) meant that they’ve already started tackling the troubles that trailed the steps of Tuesday’s tragedy. She didn’t know what to do with the rising animosity towards muggles (and possibly muggleborn) yet, but they now had a plan for Grindelwald and his unsavoury habits of using muggles as part of his attack force and meat shield. The last meeting had gained them the support of people enthusiastic enough to pick the cause as their own and start pushing pieces of the plan in place. She could leave that be for now and let it progress on its own pace.

This was why she was able to eat through her breakfast in peace right now, as students have only half-filled the Great Hall. Hermione had always been an early riser, and it was beneficial in giving her a peaceul time to get through more than half of her breakfast. She mulled over what she can do next.

Hermione was certainly thinking of making some sort of command room where they’d place this huge map of Europe. Then, every liaison to a team can update the search process on the map, as in, which areas they’ve checked, what the methods of checking are, etc. It would give everyone a clear idea which areas have been checked. It would also give everyone the incentive to pass on information if it meant they’d be able to get an overview of everyone else’s work.

So yes, some sort of headquarters and information hub for Grindelwald’s search? Hermione had a plan for that.

Sometime later, the lazier of her dormmates dragged herself down with eyes that were still half asleep. Some wizards might think that Lakshmi had bedroom eyes, and to Hermione, they were right. The dark-haired witch indeed had eyes that were regretting their presence at the long house table instead of the bedroom.
“Morning, Hermione.” She muttered, fighting off a yawn.

“Morning, Lakshmi,” Hermione greeted back.

The owls delivering morning posts and packages from home had started to fly in. One dropped between Hermione and her friend, politely waiting for someone to take its burden away. Delicately-painted nails took the newspaper and tipped the brown owl with some bacon—the only reason Lakshmi even had meat on a small plate in the first place. She read the news and made a long theatrical sigh of disappointment when nothing she found interesting came up.

Then, she passed on her subscription of the *Daily Prophet* to Hermione. They were refining the arrangement just now—Hermione was going to get priority reading the newspaper after Lakshmi herself, and in return, she was going to have to keep the other witch appraised of whatever it was the she and Tom were up to.

“What Tom and I are up to?” Hermione asked with a puzzled look. Lakshmi rolled her eyes.

“Did you miss the part where I said that he spins his web through the entire Slytherin House? He’s *always* up to something. Now that he’s nabbed you for his coterie, you’d be neck deep in whatever he’s in as well.”

“I thought you thought I was with Tom for clothing optional activities?”

The dark-haired witch sent her a look under half-lidded eyes. The uninitiated might have thought it sultry. Hermione knew it was one of serious consideration.

“I might have, but I think you’re too boring for that—”

“I’m *not* too boring—”

“—though I have to commend you on your current ability to say that with a straight face. Besides, there is no way for a wizard like Riddle to stop going after power for any reason, much less a pretty witch—no offence on your prettiness at all, Hermione.”

She raised her eyebrows at that. “Wow, that’s harsh.”

“No, that’s realistic. So, you, my dear, will be right in the middle of whatever plot he’s going to set off and definitely working on it. And if you’re right there, the least you can do is save your dormmate a front row seat.” For all the languid ease that she said this, Hermione knew that she was serious.

“Alright, I’ll keep you up to date.”

“Excellent! Now, here’s your paper. I don’t care if you do the crossword puzzle. Just be aware that Alvis Boot is going to hate you for it. He’s always looking for the crossword.”

“Hmmm, fine.”

And that was how Hermione ended up scanning this morning’s news and found nothing of particular interest (for now), and then passing it back to Lakshmi. It was her right to pick up who would be next in line to get the paper, after all, traded for some unspecified favour for currency. (the favour-trading system was alive and well in Ravenclaw as well).

What surprised Hermione was the figure striding from the Gryffindor table in her direction. And was that Eugenie, trying to keep up with the wizard?
“Good morning, Eugenie,” Hermione greeted.

“Good morning, Hermione,” here, the blonde paused to take a deep breath, her face a little red. The Gryffindor wizard with her stood straight in a gallant way that drew attention to his wide shoulders—it was the sort of posture that Hermione had come to recognise as one moulded by pureblood etiquette tutors from a young age. His head was topped with light-toned curls and it would have given him an angelic appearance if not for his impish smile.

“Hermione Curie, this is a friend of mine, Evariste de Breteuil. Evariste, this is my good friend Hermione Curie.” She turned to Hermione. “Like the rest of the French émigrés, we’ve known each other from Beauxbatons.”

“Charmed, Mademoiselle.” He took the hand she offered and kissed the back of it. Eugenie only made a put-upon sigh and gazed heavenward.

“Well, err, it’s good to know you,” Hermione said.

Lakshmi was completely diverted at this new spectacle, as she gladly made space between herself and Hermione so that Eugenie can sit. “So, you’ve finally returned to us from the lair of the lions.”

“There was a row I have no interest in partaking.” She murmured.

Lakshmi seemed torn between finding out what the row at the Gryffindor tables was like and who the players are, and staying here to hear what could get a lion such as Evariste de Breteuil to cosy up to the raven’s nest. In the end, sheer inertia won with her and she stayed.

“Montmorency is an egotistical retard,” Evariste complained.

He casually asked for a space to sit from the fourth year sitting next to Hermione. The poor witch blushed and stammered, but she did made way. Hermione wondered why he was complaining to her out of all people. She wasn’t a Slytherin.

“You have an issue with Mordred? Aren’t you better off complaining to his house mates?”

He looked confused for a moment before he laughed, free and unrestrained.

“No! Not the Slytherin Montmorency, heir to the cadet branch. Goodness, no. I was talking of one of ours—Maximilien de Montmorency, heir to the primary branch of the Montmorencys. Maximilien is another émigré from the motherland and did attend your meeting yesterday; the one with plans of action against Grindelwald. Yet Max did not even inform any of us about it! Nor does ‘e even have the excuse of finding it difficult to send a message to us—Melusine, we’re all Gryffindors!”

Alright, Hermione thought as he talked, I can check the details on the family connections later. Not to mention that this other Montmorency sounded like a prick. She knew she’d forgotten how much genealogy she’d had to read whenever she was dealing with the old families. She barely had any memories on that front, just the sense of knowing that it was simply something to put on a to-do list. (Ignore the memory holes, she told herself, quickly plastering over any feelings of frustration).

“Since Maximilien ‘as not the good grace to inform us of things pertinent to our interest, I am taking the matters into my own hands.”

“Good for you,” Hermione answered, as she was lacking other things to say.

She was more concerned with eating her toasts at this point. Was that croissant? Ah, one of the
French Ravenclaws, perhaps Eugenie or Verrault, must have talked to the house elves to have increased the variety of breakfast food. Hermione took one with relish as well as the nearest pot of butter.

“Especially when one of the masterminds are someone as charming as you are, Mademoiselle Curie. To create plans to set against Grindelwald! This is the best news I’ve ‘eard in ages!”

His enthusiasm was surprising to her, because her general impression from most wizards and witches were that they’d rather not face Grindelwald at all. Then again, she hadn’t seen much of the so-called Free French Mages other than Eugenie—compared to the British wizards and witches that have only recently been attacked by Grindelwald, it was only natural that they’d have an axe to grind against a full occupation of their country.

“I’m glad that you think so. I just thought that we cannot let this terrible impasse drag on endlessly.” And any further attacks by Grindelwald will probably continue to raise anti-muggle and even anti-muggleborn sentiments. These were things she’d rather stop.

“Exactly my feeling too, but we ‘ave scarcely seen any initiative from the British Ministry on that front.”

“Oh, the changes are going to happen.” Hermione assured him. “It would just take a while.”

“Is it alright if I were to join in on your Society’s meetings? You would not mind terribly if I were to continue calling on you to discuss this, do you?” He asked. He looked incredibly earnest and Hermione had to snap herself out of staring for too long into his blue eyes. Evariste was one of those males Hermione found incredibly distracting. Lucky for her, frequently being around Tom meant she’d had plenty of practise of inuring herself to such charm, so she managed to pull her thoughts back in order very quickly.

“I don’t mind at all and I’m always open for discussion. To be honest, I’ve been trying to find an official liaison to the French Mages. I’m sure there are more dangerous and important events taking place in France than Britain, and it would be nice if we can get news about them quickly too.”

“Then consider me your liaison, Mademoiselle ‘ermione,”

“Please, just Hermione,” she insisted, simply because Mademoiselle Hermione sounded too long.

“Then you must call me Evariste,” he said, with that charming lopsided grin of his.

Hermione couldn’t help grinning back. “Of course, Evariste. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a class to attend.”

“What class do you have next on your schedule?” He asked.

Her hand went to one of her pockets. She did a quick glance to the mini-schedule she’d made to be pocket-sized.

“Technically, I have to choose between Advanced Arithmancy and Advanced Defence Against the Dark Arts, but I think I’ll take the latter this week.”

“Your choice is my good fortune! I am also taking that class. Let us leave there together.”

“Sure.”
Hermione secured the straps of her bag and stood up. It was only when she saw Evariste waiting for her with an extended hand that she remembered the etiquette of this era. She gave an inward sigh. Right, arm-in-arm it is. She took it without a second thought and the two made their way out of the Great Hall.

She had no idea what could have made Lakshmi giggle so excitedly. She would’ve guessed that Eugenie brought her some news of some Gryffindors’ misfortune, or something close to that. Evariste seemed to either be naturally chatty, or was in a talkative mood, as he’d spoke up again when they entered the hallway.

“By the way, ‘ermione, your performance yesterday was excellent!”

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s not often one gets the good luck to see such an intense fight. Most people would rather not risk it and prefer to duel. Of course, it takes two fighters of equal level to achieve that effect. I’m still not sure I recognise all the spells used, and the both of you silently casting it most of the time does not ‘elp at all.”

It was hard not to smile at the memory. “Oh, yes, Tom is very good. The more I think of it, the more I don’t regret it at all, even with all the wounds we ended up sustaining, because you don’t improve if you don’t get challenged.”

He paused for a moment. “You ‘ave serious wounds?”

Hermione shrugged. “It was nothing either of us can’t heal, so I consider it still acceptable.”

She had the vague inkling that *Pythonis Ictus* was a questionable spell to use, but who was going to know, anyway? There was only the faintest line left from yesterday’s slash, undifferentiable from the remains of other cutting spells since she’d cleaned it properly. They did inflict damage on each other than was more than what most people could heal, but Tom did keep to his word and she to hers—as long as it was within their capabilities to fix, any spell was fair game. That was their rules.

“I was surprised at your fight,” Evariste said.

“Why?”

“I did not expect Riddle to be so… aggressive. Riddle was always someone who would not get carried away in inter-House fights and arguments, even when ‘is friends are involved. I’d always thought of him to be an uninteresting, dispassionate man, somebody that is British to a fault.”

She laughed.

Hermione didn’t care if Evariste turned his slightly baffled expression to her, but *dispassionate* was the last thing she’d used to describe Tom. He simply hid his intensity so well most of the time that no one noticed. Well, she supposed he was still stereotypically British that way.

“I think you should look again and more carefully. Our…Society, that you’ve mentioned before? Well, it was his brainchild, for one. I have plans and ideas, yes, the same as him, but he was the one who brought the people together.”

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When they reached the DADA class, Hermione found it only natural to part ways with Evariste and
go looking for Tom—just in case he chose to attend ADADA in this time slot instead of the Advanced Arithmancy they both also have on their schedule. It wasn’t as if she was going to start duelling or fighting anyone else with her current head being as weird as it is. She found him easily, complete with the empty seat next to his and her lips curved in an unconscious smile. It was nice of him to save her a seat next to his—whatever his faults were, Tom Riddle was solicitous. Melchior Nott and Abraxas Malfoy sat in the row behind him, though why Abraxas paled as he saw her arrive, she had no idea.

“Good morning, Hermione.”

“Good morning, Tom.”

He greeted her first, and then his two minions followed. Now that she thought of it, Melchior seemed to be intently observing her too. Hermione frowned.

“Do I have something on my face?”

Melchior yelped. “No! Not at all, I was just…um, nothing. I thought I saw something and it turned out to be nothing.”

She sighed. Whatever his issue was, he wasn’t going to outright tell her right now and she didn’t have the time to cajole him.

“Whatever you say, Melchior.”

Professor Merrythought hadn’t arrived yet, but the rest of the students had started to trickle in. She’d seen several wizards and witches glancing at her and Hermione was reminded yet again of her fight with Tom yesterday. Of course, that reminded her of what happened afterwards, and she soon had to bury her face in her hands and act like she was trying to massage away a slight headache when it was more like she didn’t want her blush to be visible for all to see.

She was going to give him a second chance, right? It shouldn’t be too odd if it turned out that there ended up being something between them. They were both very intelligent people with a love of knowledge who didn’t always manage to find peers among people their age. He was good-looking, courteous beyond his initial lapses into psychopathy and she had hormones.

And she was not going to think about it right now. No. Class. You have to get through class, Hermione.

“I don’t think I’m familiar with the wizard who escorted you in, Hermione,” Tom commented.

Hermione raised her head. If he found her relieved smile odd, he didn’t say anything; she was rather thankful for his interruption, because now she had a distraction she can set her mind to.

“Ah, Evariste de Breteuil. He’s one of the Beauxbatons transfers, and as a consequence, a member of the loose association of Free French Mages. It would seem that one of their member was present yesterday, but he did not inform the rest of them about the meeting in the first place and they were annoyed at not being present for any sort of planning against Grindelwald.”

“I think I recognised the one present yesterday. The French de Montmorency, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s him. The other Gryffindor, Rajesh Setalvad, was more approachable than he is, and apparently even Montmorency’s own House mates think he can be a pain.”

“He did not tell them yet because he was still unsure. He was still testing the waters.” Tom said.
She eyed him oddly. “And you know this how?”

“Because the Montmorencys are an old family and they did not survive that long in France without being prudent. He was uncertain of what the talks would be, and even now he doubts. If he thinks our way has a potential, he would’ve told his companions this.”

“How on earth did you know him better than his friends?” Hermione was both impressed and annoyed. Tom’s other Slytherins had started to trickle in, and she soon found herself nodding in reply to their greetings, no matter how odd she still found it.

“I studied him as I would any major heir. Besides, who’s to say that his friends aren’t trying to invite sympathy by feigning dissent and some sort of falling out?” Tom’s voice was deceptively light. She knew he had a good point, though, even if she didn’t find it as easy to assume the worst of the people around her as he seemed to.

Hermione thought over it. “I think the ensuing argument from Montmorency not telling the rest of the French wizards and witches was real. Eugenie walked away from the Gryffindor table back to the Ravenclaw one because she was annoyed by them rowing.”

“I think you should ask Eugenie to relay you that conversation.”

“Oh, I will. At lunch, probably.” Hermione replied. “I almost forgot—Evariste asked me whether he can drop in at the Society’s meeting. I told him to go ahead and drop in. We are trying to reach the widest audience that has connections to continental Europe, aren’t we?”

“We are. We simply did not have that many contacts among the Gryffindors to be able to reach many of them in such a short time. Maximilien de Montmorency, as you may have surmised, heard of it from his Slytherin cousin.”

“By the way, what are we naming the Society?”

Tom didn’t have time to answer as the Professor had arrived and everyone began to prepare for class. Hermione resigned herself to being pulled aside some ten minutes at lunch time to share her memory of her last fight with the professor and break down her actions—it was still later, of course, but she just had the misfortune to have already remembered it now. Fortunately, it was more practise duels first. She guessed that Professor Merrythought would put the theoretical part of the class after this.

“Speaking of duels in class, I’m sure you can duel Abraxas and Melchior,” Tom said to her.

“Mmm, why would you say that?”

“Because you took down Abraxas within five seconds. I’m sure he wouldn’t be able to threaten you and trip your actual combat reflexes.”

Hermione let out a surprised laughter at that before she immediately covered her mouth with her hands, embarrassed. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one restraining her laughter, because she thought she’d heard Melchior snort before he turned it into a series of coughs. She turned around.

“I’m so sorry, Abraxas,” she started.

The Malfoy heir gave her sheepish smile, but he seemed to be in a far better humour than she’d thought he would be.

“It’s alright, Hermione. Tom was right, I need to improve more.”
“Melchior as well. He never was much of a threat to you, was he? The only reason he lasted noticeably longer than Abraxas was because you didn’t decide to take him down first.” Tom said.

Tom didn’t hide the pitiless edge from his usually nice smile. Hermione hid her snort of laughter. She really shouldn’t feel so amused that he was politely tearing into his men.

She could hear a resigned sigh from behind her. “Yes, Tom. I was absolutely no threat to her at all.”

“Capital. The two of you can explain that to Professor Merrythought when the class is paired off to duel so Hermione has partners other than me.” He turned to her.

“On that note, Hermione, I think a quarter of the class casts with the speed of molasses and around another quarter are far too easy to intimidate. They would also not trip your sense of danger.” Tom said.

“Ah, thank you.” Hermione said, more out of reflex than anything else. Did he just flat out dismiss half the class within hearing distance of a few other students?

“They’re not the speed of molasses, Tom,” Melchior’s even and much-tried tone could be heard. “Not all of us can silently cast most of our spells and or even abbreviate the wand movements.”

“Well, obviously, you all should.” Tom stated without care.

“Of course. We’re just not there yet,” Abraxas said optimistically.

“You’re overestimating the speed of our progress, Abraxas,” Melchior dryly noted.

“On the plus side, that means Hermione gets more target practice in.” Tom added, before looking in her direction. “I’m sure you don’t mind a little target practice, do you?”

“They’re not that bad…” Melchior started, though he faltered when Tom sent a sceptical look his way.

“I’m sure they’d be good duellists,” Hermione answered as nicely as she could.

Tom shook his head. “They’re not much better than stationary targets, I tell you.”

“Even you still have to move even when you duel someone like Ackers.” Melchior said again, disagreeing with what he saw as misrepresentation of their class.

“Yes, well,” Tom mused, “perhaps it’s more akin to facing scarecrows placed on rails, then—mobile dummies. In any case, it’s still not a problem for Hermione to duel them.”

Nott made the defeated sound of someone who knew people would just miss his point.

Hermione had to duck her head after that. She really shouldn’t have found it amusing that Tom was measuring the students of their class based on the degree of (in)competence, forgetting to be polite about other people’s skill level. And all this just because he was more intent on getting her a list of people she can duel and fulfil the class’ requirements. In a way, it was oddly endearing.

She froze. Did I just think Tom Marvolo Riddle as endearing?!

Hermione sighed and rubbed her forehead. That’s it. She can officially say that she’d gone native in the time period.
“Are you going to take Herbology after this or Ancient Runes?” Tom asked as the class ended.

Hermione wasn’t surprised that he’d somehow memorised her schedule, considering that they shared seven classes out of her nine. Compared to hers, Tom’s schedule only doubled over in five spots.

“Advanced Ancient Runes, I think.” Hermione randomly chose.

“Why not Advanced Herbology? Not that I’m not pleased to have intelligent company for Ancient Runes.” He said.

She thought over it for a while before answering. “Well, Professor Spore was rather satisfied with my grasp of the foundations of biology and herbology, so I think my Advanced Herbology is going to look closer to independent research from this point on.”

“Less burden on your class schedule, then,” he noted.

“Exactly! Of course, I’d have to occasionally allocate time to present my project to the whole class and help improve their understanding of the vascular structure of dicots and monocots, and maybe go over some rudimentary phylogeny of some fruit trees once Professor Spore touches grafting later—it’s fascinating how much flexibility Hogwarts professors have in writing and adjusting their own curriculum! I’d probably use the Rosaceae family as an example for that, but…alright, that’s neither here nor there and I’m rambling. Again.”

She gave Tom an unamused look that clearly said he should’ve stopped her earlier.

Tom had one of his smirks now. “I find your projects rather interesting, actually.”

“Yes, but I think neither Abraxas or Melchior wanted to hear about it.” She said.

“Um, no, it’s absolutely fine. You can talk about your classes” Nott affirmed. She had the feeling that he was trying to get her to not stare at him.

“And I didn’t get anything much, but it’s alright too,” Abraxas assured her. “Sometimes listening to Tom gave me a similar sensation.”

Hermione had to admire Abraxas’ resilience, really. He certainly wasn’t intimidated or annoyed—he seemed to just have accepted her intense and difficult academic interest as it is and rolled with it. She couldn’t help her smile when Tom gazed heavenward and sigh in resignation before giving her a look that clearly said ‘do you see what I have to work with?’

“Aww, you’re both so very nice, has anyone ever told you that?” She said with a large grin, enjoying the sheer weirdness the whole scene was giving her. If her life was going to be absurd, she might as well enjoy the show. These were men who, in a different world, would have become the core Death Eaters, were now trying to win her favour, or at the very least avoid her disfavour.

Abraxas puffed up happily and accepted her compliment easily. Melchior was staring at her as if she was nuts while frankly confirming that no, no one ever told him he was nice. She found him to be entertainingly truthful. Was this how Luna felt when she managed to confound people? No wonder she kept doing it, then. It was fun.

She took Tom’s arm without thinking when he offered it. Abraxas and Melchior took their leave as they would be taking a different class from the two of them. The other two Slytherins whose names
she hasn’t remembered had left earlier. Hermione and Tom were on their way out when Evariste
cought up with them. He seemed surprised to see the two of them. She took the opportunity to
introduce them.

“Ah, Tom, this is Evariste de Breteuil, a Gryffindor and one of the Free French Mages. Evariste,
this is Tom Riddle of the Society.”

“It’s good to know you, de Breteuil.”

“And I’ve been curious to know you, Riddle. You don’t mind if my peers and I attend the
meetings, do you?”

“We’ll be glad for your company. I have always thought that the more news we have from the
continent, the better position we’ll be in. It is never to our advantage to be blind to Grindelwald’s
movements.” Tom’s reply was even and measured.

They still seemed to be the right words because she could see the spark lighting up in Evariste’s
eyes.

“My cousins are out there, fighting back, along with others of the family. They do not ‘ave to go to
school. At least one of them is already married! They could be men while I’m treated like a child
and coddled. I would’ve easily joined them if my family would accept it for I dislike feeling so
useless.”

“I can’t imagine they’d allow the heir to risk his life and limb before the continuation of the
primary branch is assured. You are aware that more than one wizarding families have died off in
the middle of a war, aren’t you?” The cold truth in his assessment forced the Gryffindor down from
his fervour. Evariste was still discontent.

“Well, yes, but it’s not as if I would go out looking for danger and death myself. I am not suicidal.”

“They might change their tune if you’re willing to let them match you right now—I’m sure they’d
be ecstatic to hear that you’re ready to settle down. Once there is a child on the way, preferably
two, and I’m sure they’ll let you fight in the field.” Tom pointed out astutely.

Hermione was still trying to wrap her head around the politics of noble marriage (because that’s
what the purebloods are) when the French wizard coloured.

“I suppose you are right. It does not mean that I wish to stand still and do nothing.”

“Of that, you need not worry with us. Welcome to the Society, de Breteuil.”

Hermione could almost see the point where everything clicked together in Evariste’s mind, and he
decided that it was the best idea he could have to throw his lot with them. It was in the assurance
Tom could easily project and give, and she knew exactly why. As practitioners of magic grew
increasingly powerful and skilled, the more that sheer weight of their magic in the fabric of reality
would compel people to pay attention, to listen, to follow. Magic changes the wielder in a way that
transcends physical age, at times even speeding the brain’s maturation. Power feeds charisma at a
most basic level—and Tom had an overabundance of both.

At least she knew that they’d have French contacts now. She wondered just how large the de
Breteuil’s extended family was, and how many of them were over at France right now.

Hmm, it would seem she had missed some chit-chat between Tom and Evariste while she was
ruminating. No matter, it probably wasn’t that important.
“Are you going to Transfigurations right now?” Evariste asked.

Tom’s smile was perfectly polite. “I’m afraid not. We’re both taking Advanced Ancient Runes, you see.”

Eugenie caught up with her at lunch. It seemed that Hermione was not the only one who had quickly made their way to the hall from class.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” the blonde said, sending her looks of displeasure.

“I didn’t tell you what?” Hermione’s brows furrowed.

“The Society! I had to hear about it from de Montmorency and he can’t say anything without that particular tone that seems to say how he always knows more than anyone else. It’s grating to hear more than ten minutes.” Eugenie pouted as she folded her arms in front of her chest. She looked like a disappointed fairy.

Hermione had to hold herself back from just hugging the blonde outright because she was so cute. She was sure Eugenie wouldn’t appreciate that right now.

“I didn’t even know about the Society until I was in the meeting. It had been some chats with Tom and the Ministry kids, then we were bouncing ideas off one another on the way to Arithmancy, and suddenly he pulls off a meeting in the evening! I didn’t see that coming at all.” The brunette insisted.

Eugenie perked up at that.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. If I’d known that we were planning that, I might have talked about it to you and Lakshmi, and even Lucretia if I met her, wondering what he was up to. Anyway, I didn’t even know what you do with the French Gryffindors.”

She sighed. “It all started as a way to vent their frustration after they saw that Grindelwald dared to stage a big attack on British soil—the nerve of him! Of course, after that, de Montmorency started pulling others to consider possible actions that can be done instead of just railing against the dark wizard. He was always the pragmatic one.”

“Well, at least now I know that, and now you know what Tom had been planning, are we alright?”

“Hmm. Would you mind if I come too?”

“I don’t mind at all. I have to ask, though, are there still many Delacours in France right now?”

That subdued Eugenie’s enthusiasm a little. “Yes. It’s not always easy or practical to immediately uproot an entire family and move it across the Channel, you know?”

“Oh, I understand. I’m just asking because, well,” Hermione faltered a little. Could she say this? Who was she to ask this of them? Her hands fiddled with her skirt as she considered it. “I wouldn’t want them to face more dangers than they already have to, and I’m sure their lives are difficult enough as it is. But is it possible for us to hear news from them? It doesn’t have to be much, you know, but perhaps we could make sense of it when we combine it with other information sources.”
Oddly enough, the blonde seemed to be in a better mood when she heard that.

“You’d want information too? We can do that!”

“Well, no need to hurry right now. There’s still the next meeting, and I’m sure that some people have a better idea about what we actually need to know than I do. Heck, maybe you should have that talk with Evariste in the first place, as his cousins seems to be fighting in the continent?”

Surprisingly, Eugenie snorted. “Evariste? He’s left out cold here in England, what does he know?”

She didn’t know what was behind her friend’s annoyance, so she stayed neutral. Maybe Evariste’s exuberance was grating after a while to a shy witch like Eugenie.

“Well, in that case, maybe we can convince him that he didn’t have to be out there and fighting to help. He could help them by helping to coordinate information.”

Hermione huffed at her friend’s look of uncertainty.

“Honestly, we’re magiciennes, Eugenie. Distance doesn’t exactly mean much to us. So Evariste’s family is forcing him to go to Hogwarts because he’s the heir of the main family? It doesn’t mean he can’t go to Hogsmeade during the weekends, get a room at the Boar’s Head, or whatever the inn there is called, and tell his cousins to floo up to his room. See? He’s still in Britain. His family would have nothing to complain about. Then, they can chat and exchange information.”

“You’re not suggesting that he floo his cousins in to Hogwarts?” Eugenie asked curiously.

She shook her head. “No, that’s not a good idea.”

“Really? But Hogwarts has wards that will secure us.”

Hermione stared at Eugenie and wondered when the last time she had been so optimistic was, so trusting in the invulnerability of Hogwarts as well as the infallibility of the senior wizards and witches. It had been a while. Even she, Harry and Ron ended up going on their horcrux hunt on their own, didn’t they?

“Well first, we don’t know how secure they are over there. Someone might eavesdrop him. At least Hogsmeade is still some distance away from Hogwarts. Two, I’d rather not have him invite someone and thus unknowingly bypass Hogwarts’ wards. It’s not the issue of his cousins at all, rather, what if someone with ill intent waited until he calls his cousin over and then follows right after? I’m not sure if the wards would reject those people and Hogwarts could be attacked from the inside that way.”

Her friend paled. Hermione sighed when she remembered that not everyone had gone through war and consider security precautions as a matter of fact.

“How do you even think about such dreadful things?” Eugenie whispered. Hermione rubbed her arm to comfort her, before deciding to just pull the blonde by the shoulder so she was hugging her sideways.

“If I think about them, then I can stop them. If I don’t think about them, someone on the other side will. To try to outthink them is a safety measure, Eugenie.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re the one that gets to come up with these things instead of me.” Her reply was a little mulish, and Hermione couldn’t help but laugh.
“Oh, you’re not going to get drafted for it, don’t worry. I’m used to it.”

Lakshmi came upon them not long afterwards, and she looked askance at the easy mood between them. Her amber eyes narrowed as she seated herself next to Hermione.

“I missed something big, didn’t I? Eugenie, just this morning you were complaining about Hermione forgetting you! What happened?”

“I was overreacting. It turned out that Hermione didn’t even know about the Society meeting until she was in it. It was all Tom Riddle’s plan happening too quickly.”

Lakshmi almost cackled at that as she turned her victorious look to Hermione. “Ha! What did I tell you? He’s always up to something. Now come on, spill. I don’t think I’ve heard the details about that yet.”

“I saw you chat with Daedalus this morning!” Hermione complained.

“Well, yes, but I didn’t get all the details, you see. Then, there are things I’m sure only you could tell me, Hermione.”

Hermione prepared to take her lunch as she resigned herself to recounting the meeting again. Maybe she should invite Lakshmi over to the Society meetings as well? Merlin knows she was getting tired of repeating the same thing over after she went over it with Evariste.

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Chapter End Notes

Additional Notes:

**Evariste Emmanuel de Breteuil (OC):** Fifth-year Gryffindor, French transfer from Beauxbatons. The classes that he shares with Hermione are Advanced Charms and ADADA. The particle in his name indicated that his family is one of the older pureblood ones, which is the closest thing to nobility that they have. This makes him a prominent member of the French wizarding society. ‘Evariste’ itself means ‘beautiful form’. Rather impetuous.

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Chapter Summary

Hermione somehow gets involved in more meetings with more people on lunch (Gryffindors and Slytherins respectively). An unexpected encounter before Ancient Runes class with a housemate and a Hufflepuff. Word games with Tom. Drafting wards in Advanced Ancient Runes. Honoria Gildenstern makes observations.

(Summary applies to both chapters titled ‘The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men’)

Chapter Notes

The academic test was long, meh, but a pain in the backside. Had to guess the answers 25 problems because there's no bloody clock that I can see in the room and apparently I spent too much time on some of the earlier quant problems (like hell they'd let me open my phone just to check the time). Apparently, it's been a while since I did a multiple-choice, paper-based test that my usual instincts and subroutines for it are dulled.

On a brighter note, The number of kudos left had shot up recently. Even more noticeable in the favs and follows on FFNet. I have no idea what happened. It's probably my sister's work on tumblr rather than mine, but anyway, I thought I'd just share the pleasant surprise with you this week, as opposed to updating next week. Plus, I'll welcome the distraction after the pain-in-the-rear test.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

24 The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men I

Hermione had only finished her main course before Evariste enthusiastically brought the rest of the French Gryffindors over to her table.

"'ermione! Here, come and meet my friends!" Evariste.

Heads turned either in his direction or in hers. All that's lacking is two spotlights over our heads, Hermione thought dryly. Eugenie covered her face with her hands next to Hermione and let out a soft moan from the intensity of the attention.

The fact that she could see the Prewett twins looking on with grins on their faces and finger-foods at hand while they told their friends to turn towards the Ravenclaw table does not help. The tall wizard next to Evariste had an expression of distaste.

“You need to be louder, Evariste. I’m sure the Slytherin table haven’t heard you yet.” He was snide. It was not hard to recognise de Montmorency, as he and Evariste could not seem to stop sniping at each other.
“I am being friendly! And you would do well to greet the ladies at the table.” Evariste insisted. Then, he did exactly as he’d said.

“Good afternoon Eugenie. Greetings to you too, Mademoiselle Chakravarty—still as lovely as ever, I see.”

Eugenie chirped a quick reply. Lakshmi let out a low laugh that turned the heads of several wizards.

“Oh, you flatterer. Good afternoon, Evariste.”

Evariste then went on to greet Julia, a couple of Julia’s friends, and the other Ravenclaws around her with unbelievable thoroughness. How he had all the excess energy to do that, she had no idea—just watching him converse with several people at once made her feel drained and wish she could spend the rest of the day in bed with a good book and a cup of tea.

Maximilien de Montmorency raised an impeccable eyebrow at Evariste’s exuberance. He made do with a single sweeping glance at the Ravenclaw table and a laconic “Mesdemoiselles. Messieurs.”

That was it.

He frowned. “Maximilien.”

“I did as you say.” De Montmorency dismissed.

Evariste complained that de Montmorency was being too uptight. De Montmorency’s expression turned sour and started saying about how he was being a fool, and they were about to enter round two of their argument when another wizard had quickly come up between the two…

…with a Ravenclaw tie.

Hermione did a double-take.

Wait, he was a Ravenclaw? Oh, there was actually another French Ravenclaw, one that was neither the unsocial Verrault nor Eugenie. The Ravenclaw wizard had seen the gaggle of French Gryffindors coming from a distance and had left his own seat at the Ravenclaw table to intercept them. Verrault seemed to mostly hover in the background, ill at ease with too many people around him.

“Evariste, Maximilien, I respectfully ask both of you to keep your voice down as guests at my House table.” He was perfectly polite, but his tone was firm.

His task was not as easy as it seems, as Evariste had his excuses,

“But Auguste, I’m only greeting my Ravenclaw friends!” Evariste’s wide smile was brilliant, with perfect rows of pearl-white teeth and all. Hermione held back the urge to groan following Eugenie as she could hear the stammered agreement coming from more than one witch around them.

“It’s fine, Auguste.”

“Oh, yes. Your friends can stay.” Another of her housemate piped up. Some only let out wordless sighs.

Then, de Montmorency wouldn’t shut up about their previous argument. With that statement, he prompted Evariste to put up his spirited defence and thus start the whole thing all over again. She
spotted another Gryffindor wizard tagging along behind them who looked as if he was content with just drifting, though after a while, she realised that he was subtly goading Evariste or de Montmorency while dodging the Ravenclaw wizard’s reprimands. At least before Verrault tried to restrain his fire-starting tendencies.

“Oh, for goodness’ sakes…” Hermione muttered.

Eugenie let out a harrumph of annoyance, uncaring that the sound she made was the farthest thing from cute. Hermione found the disparity funnier and had to stifle a snort of laughter.

Two more Gryffindors had just trailed in after the main group—a wizard and a witch. She was almost concerned at the possible increase in ruckus.

The Gryffindor wizard noticed Hermione’s look of apprehension and grinned at her.

“Oh, don’t mind us. We’re just here to tag along and watch.”

“Really?” Hermione asked sceptically.

He nodded with mock solemnity, a long braid falling down his back. “Oh yes, really. Ever since Dippet pinned these things on us, we have to ‘be respectable’ and can’t go off joining the nearest fracas.”

He shook his lapel with an expression of regret. His partner snorted at him. That was when she noticed that both of them wore prefect pins.

“Since when did you let it stop you from jumping into fights?” The blonde witch asked sceptically. Her English was surprisingly accent free.

“As a prefect, I do need to separate the people fighting, you know?” He had a rather impressive expression of innocence.

That was when they noticed there was some sort of a break in the arguing people on the other side of the table.

“We should propose our next meeting at the Gryffindor common room.” Evariste was saying.

“Not all of us are actually Gryffindors. You can’t just decide to invite other house members to the Gryffindor common room and expect everyone to be able to make it there.” the Gryffindor witch disagreed. She turned to Hermione when she realised she hadn’t introduced herself, her straight blonde hair falling to her shoulders.

“I’m Ceres Victorinus, sixth-year, and I know you’re Hermione Curie.”

“Ah, how do you do,” she was slightly surprised at the witch’s frankness.

The long-haired wizard next to her nodded. “Oh, yes. We might not all be Gryffindors. It’s just that almost all the hotblooded ones from Beauxbatons end up in our House. So here we are, the troublemakers, at your service.”

“Pip!” She elbowed him.

The blonde sent Hermione a long-suffering glance. “Ignore him, he's not housebroken yet.”

“Hey, it’s true! Even you can raise hell with the best of them, no matter how charming you are, Mignonette.” He winked at Ceres. His female house mate was singularly unimpressed.
“You haven’t introduced yourself, you berk.” She cut in. He turned back to Hermione at the reminder.

“Ah, pardon me, I was carried away by your radiant presence. Philippe Bernadotte, at your service, Gryffindor sixth-year, not that it matters.”

His bow was rough at the edges, outrageously flamboyant instead of proper. Evariste was back to audibly disagreeing with de Montmorency, with their Ravenclaw compatriot and that other guy still tied up in the argument. Verrault’s suggestions or comments did not seem to make much difference either. The fact that he insisted everyone follow the rules did not help matters.

“She’s not going to eat that up, Pip. She’s not a fool,” the blonde witch muttered with a jaded sigh.

“Oh, come on, it’s a gentlemen’s responsibility to inform the ladies that they’re beautiful at least once a day. Have I told you that you look beautiful today, Mignonette?”

“I probably didn’t hear it. I think I’ve stopped listening to it after we were seven and it turns out you were only after the cake I was holding.” His friend pointed out, her merry smile growing at his protests and his insistence that she had always been beautiful and had only grown more beautiful with time.

Hermione was more surprised that he can say all that with a straight face. She couldn’t repress her grin at their eccentricity.

“And before Bernadotte gets us all off track yet again, I would like to assure you that we are certainly not all Gryffindors, if being a Gryffindor meant recklessness to go with a directionless rage,” said the handsome French Ravenclaw trying to arbitrate the argument.

He’d managed to get Evariste and de Montmorency to sit down some distance away from each other, with Verrault and the other Gryffindor sitting between them across the table from Hermione. The expressions of the Ravenclaws they’d edged out was either simple acceptance or long-suffering patience.

There were downsides to being a house of (mostly) bookworms. Ravenclaws were generally non-confrontational even if they did grumble or complain. They were certainly no match for the boisterous Gryffindors who had decided to sit there.

It seemed that the Ravenclaw wizard had been able to restore some semblance of order. He ignored some of his countrymen’s complaints on his assessment of Gryffindor. He bowed formally to Hermione instead, his dark hair neatly styled. There was a discipline to his bearing that gave her the image that he’d make a very effective judge as he presided over a bickering courtroom.

“Auguste Alexis Murat, at your service.”

She did her best to simulate a half-curtsy while sitting. (Thank you, Daphne).

“Hermione Curie. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Oh, we all know who you are, Mademoiselle,” he replied knowingly.

“Yes, while we are certainly not all Gryffindors, they are definitely where most of the noise comes from. Don’t mind them, Hermione,” Eugenie was being surprisingly outspoken. “There are Hufflepuff ones too, and they’re better at adapting to a life in Hogwarts.”

“But they’re not interested in fighting the fight at all, and what good is that for the future of
France?” Asked Evariste rhetorically.

“Yeah, absolutely boring, those lot,” Long-braid agreed, not minding Ceres’s snort at him.

“It does not mean jumping in with both feet, without a plan at hand,” de Montmorency reminded, fulfilling his unofficial role of resident killjoy.

“Oh please. We had a plan now. You can’t accuse us of recklessness for following it,” Evariste countered.

“An untried plan, undetermined in scope and manpower.”

And then they were off again, talking at a rapid pace about the Society’s plans (Evariste) or the downsides (de Montmorency). More than a smattering of fast-talks in French were thrown in for good measure that Hermione wasn’t sure she was able to follow all of them even with what French she knew. She still had no idea who the quiet wizard was, for one, though she didn’t think it would matter much.

It was, however, rather interesting to see Eugenie being obstinate for once and the others taking her stubbornness for granted and ceding to her point of stopping the damned argument until they’ve tried to run a plan—any plan. Perhaps it was the freedom given by her ability to occasionally use (and curse) in her mother tongue.

There were so many names to remember at once that they were slipping from her memory. Ceres was perhaps the exception as she was not difficult to remember, being the only Gryffindor witch among them.

“Does this happen every day?” Hermione asked her with a wry tone.

Ceres’ reply was deadpan. “Every damn day.”

“I’m impressed that you haven’t tried to kill any of them yet.”

The Gryffindor witch laughed at that. “What makes you think I haven’t tried?”

“Ah, but she always stops herself! That’s how we know that she loves all of us!” Her partner remarked from Ceres’ other side, winking at Hermione.

“And how would you know, Pip?” Ceres’ tone was oddly cheerful as she turned to Hermione in faux whisper. “The upside of being friends with Gryffindors is that many of them have short memories.”

“I still remembered when you pushed me into a pond on my eleventh birthday!” Philippe insisted.

“Yes, but what about all the other ones?” The blonde asked innocently.

“What others?”

“Exactly.”

Hermione laughed more than once at the easy way they ribbed at each other, even as the discussions (argument) between the more influential or outspoken of their group continued to rage across the table. It truly wasn’t a surprise that Hermione invited them all to the next meeting of the Society.

Yes, even Verrault. Despite his own suspicions about Tom, he was definitely outvoted by his peers
and he decided to come ‘to keep watch on Riddle’.

To Hermione’s credit, she didn’t roll her eyes at that and only nodded solemnly in understanding. She didn’t see a need to antagonise the budding inquisitor unnecessarily. When the barrage of questions became overwhelming, Hermione raised her hands to stall.

“Hold it! Please, if you really must know all the little details, de Montmorency was there yesterday—I’m sure he can take any questions you have and answer it. Also, I’m sure Evariste can enlighten you about our conversation this morning. Right, Evariste?”

She gave him a pointed look. To his credit, he nodded easily and confirmed it. “Why yes, we certainly had an interesting discussion.”

“Thank you. Now that that’s settled, can you please have this argument at your own House table and let us dine in peace?” The brunette was smiling, but the tone she said it in was not one that invited bargaining.

Eugenie took the opening Hermione created as she stood up instantly. She shared a glance with Murat, who comprehended her plan instantly.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me…” Eugenie began, as she walked behind Hermione to tap Philippe Bernadotte and Ceres Victorinus’ shoulder.

The pair of French Ravenclaws sent back their rowdier Gryffindor counterparts back not long after that (though Eugenie and Ceres parted ways affably). Then, Eugenie sat back down and invited Murat and Verrault to stay and dine with them. Murat accepted—Verrault declined.

Hermione found that at least Auguste Murat was not a bothersome company at lunch, because he was rather content to eat and let everyone enjoy their meals, only occasionally asking questions. Lakshmi found him entertaining as he seemed to be unfazed by her directness.

“Do you always use your handsome looks to be invited to the ladies’ table, Monsieur?” She asked.

“Considering that you invited me, Mademoiselle, I think you can answer that best.”

“So, you admit that you do,” she replied with relish.

“Actually, this is the first time someone told me I’m handsome to my face, so I wouldn’t really know.” He replied politely, with the barest edge of something else in his smile.

This is like the Dumbledore’s Army all over again, Hermione thought wryly, though she doubted the secrecy, the contract and the message galleons were necessary this time. Nobody doubted that they were at war and it seemed a good number of people hated to sit on their hands too. Well, the coordination the galleons could give would certainly be good for something. She just hadn’t found a use for it yet. She shrugged inwardly. Sooner or later, it would come together.

Hermione should not be surprised to spy Tom sitting with yet another group of different Slytherins at the last leg of lunch, when most were getting desserts. The people Tom was sitting with wasn’t ‘his’ crowd, which would be the wizards who were the Knights of Walpurgis. It wasn’t the Wizarding Society for Better Governance either, as she’d recognised the group of policy people headed by Oswin and Emma. It was…

Was he speaking German?
He was, she thought with surprise. She could recognise some words even if she couldn’t exactly speak much of the language. It was hard not to envy his skill.

When she had unknowingly drifted in their direction, though, one of them stood up, which soon caused the others to stand up as well, Tom included. The ones still sitting were the pair of witches among them, a blonde and a brunette. The first watched Hermione with a particular gravity while the second seemed more curious than anything.

The Ravenclaw was mildly interested to note that Melchior and Abraxas also present.

“Hermione, you would not mind joining us for a moment, would you?” Tom asked.

His wording implied that he didn’t think it too important, but she might still find something of interest.

“Well, if you don’t mind doing the introductions, Tom?”

“Not at all…”

Oh, what the hell. I’ve met with the French. Might as well spend some time with the Germans as well.

Nott had discreetly shifted to the side as he had before, making space for Hermione to sit at Tom’s left. Naturally, she took it.

“Now Hermione, this is Sigmund von Moritz. Moritz, this is Hermione Curie.”

That was how she was introduced to their apparent leader, someone whose figure was so heroic she wouldn’t be surprised to see him on stage as the protagonist of Wagner’s opera, stoically killing people as honour demands. The steel-eyed, wizard had a military precision to his gesture. He took her hand and shook it with a firm grasp—the fact that she was a witch did not make him yield the pressure the slightest, and her respect for him rose a little for it.

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The Germans, it turned out, were a much more formidable bunch than the French. Where the French names were a varied lot, the Germans all had names with particles.

(The rest of the names passed by too quickly for Hermione’s liking. Rainer von Regenstein. Gerhard von Grimmen. Rudolf von Riga zu Neustettin. Beatrix von Blankenstein. Wilhelmina von Alsing. She was just glad nobody expected her to remember all of it now.)

All the others had von in their names, and there was at least one with zu, though seeing her confusion the wizard gave a knowing smile and told her to not pay attention to it for now. They were wearing Hogwarts uniforms now, yes, but she could tell that the cut of their blazers was superior to most, matching the ones worn by the scions of the better old families (of course, curiously enough, Tom’s own uniform also matched theirs in terms of quality, though subtler in appearance). The fabric of their robes also used damask or velvet—the sort of thing that commoners and burghers can’t wear in the middle ages without being slapped down with sumptuary laws.

The fact that more than half of them complained about not being allowed to carry bladed weapons in Hogwarts was another clue.

They’re Junkers, she thought with an odd sort of realisation. Remnants of old readings and lessons
on WWII came together in her mind in a moment of insight, they’re all part of the landed gentry. The same officer class that gave rise to Otto von Bismarck.

She guessed their Slytherin ties were pure silk.

Thankfully for Hermione, the Germans did not really mind speaking in English. They did clarify that they were only occasionally speaking in German, as not all of those in current company could speak the language fluently either. Neither Melchior nor Abraxas denied that.

To be more precise about Tom’s current guests, the Germans were Prussians. Hermione did not immediately understand the distinction until they reached a particular point in their conversation.

“If he must have a puppet, could he not find a real German, at the very least?” One of them complained about Grindelwald.

“A real German? I thought he was German.” Hermione said, mildly baffled.

“Of course not. He’s Austrian.”

“But he’s leading Germany?” she hazarded a guess—how did he end up in that position if he was Austrian? Yet what she obtained was the blonde witch sitting near her to nod sagely in agreement.

“Precisely. That’s exactly the problem, isn’t it?”

“But he’d be just as much of a problem if he was leading Austria.” Hermione pointed out.

“No.” The blonde witch cut in. “He wouldn’t have the German military to swell his ego.”

“Since he’s basically impotent without it.” The brunette witch said this flippantly, ignoring the sudden coughs that some of her countrymen were afflicted with.

“Mina!” The other witch gave her a stern look.

Mina (Wilhelmina, Hermione presumed) was unruffled, calmly sipping her coffee.

“Relax, Beate. It’s nothing no one here hasn’t heard before.” Her curious gaze drifted to Hermione. “I read that you’re experienced in nursing men wounded from the war. Surely you’ve heard them curse in pain?”

Hermione saw no reason to lie. “Yes. Of course.”

“All the same, let’s keep this conversation civilised, shall we?” One of the wizards (not Sigmund) carefully stepped in.

“If I’m allowed to continue the previous topic,” Hermione spoke up, “then I’d have to note that even if Grindelwald found a German to be his catspaw, we’d still be in the same mess we’re currently in.”

One of the other wizards shrugged. “At least he wouldn’t be Austrian.”

And well, they also had words to say about the current dark lord himself, who they regarded as more Anglo than Saxon (she found out that Grindelwald was half-English, half-German). She did need to weather that initial reflexive, jingoistic pent-up complaints among others—she had no idea how Tom held his opinion back during that time with an expression of perfect amicability.

Wait, no, she did know. He rarely cared about anything else other than himself, doesn’t he?
“Then, there’s also the issue that Grindelwald had muggle forces with him in his last attack.” Hermione said.

“Yes. What about it?” The strident wizard to Sigmund’s left asked.

She paused. None of the Germans seemed to be the slightest bit concerned. The realisation had only dawned on her then.

“You’re not worried at all, are you? About the muggles?” She asked.

One of the quieter wizards huffed and spoke up. “Muggles, really? They can’t exactly find the wizarding world with both eyes and hands. What is there to worry about?”

“Well, there’s this recent worry that we need to protect ourselves against muggles since muggle weapons did the most damage in the Ministry Massacre.” Tom offered.

Sigmund shook his head, his expression intensely sceptical.

“Muggles? This is a joke. The only reason they’re dangerous is because Grindelwald uses them. They’re just one weapon among others. If Grindelwald is no longer a threat, then the muggles will return to being the blind and ignorant sheep they’ve always been. I see no reason why we should bother with them.”

His explanation was followed by a few nods from his friends, and she could see that they generally agree with him.

“You don’t think there’s a need to ‘root their spies out’ or ‘make sure the muggleborns won’t betray us for their roots’, then?” Hermione asked, quoting some of the conversations she’d overheard.

It was clear that the chuckles that spread among the Germans were a surprise to the Malfoy and Nott heirs, so much that Abraxas spoke up.

“But the muggleborns do have roots in the muggle world.”

“And what would they gain, Malfoy?” the wizard left of Sigmund asked (she’d marked him as von Moritz’s right hand at this point). “Do you think life in the muggle world is much better than in the wizarding world, particularly if you have magic? Some might be foolish that way, but we can root them out easily. The rest simply want to be wizards and witches.”

*Root them out easily, he says, Hermione dryly mused. Want to bet he holds the ‘search and destroy’ philosophy when it comes to what he considers treasonous behaviour?*

Of course, to his credit, he did think that most muggleborns are upstanding citizens of the wizarding world.

“Grindelwald’s muggles are a clear danger to us, though.” Melchior said.

“If he truly comes with a muggle army of his own instead of the limited group he had up to now, you know what I’d do? I’d get a muggle army of my own too.”

Melchior and Abraxas might be shocked, but she was also no less surprised while Tom was clearly interested with that statement. Von Moritz’s right-hand wizard believed that it was actually natural for Grindelwald to find any tool he can to aid him in his quest for power. Thus, why shouldn’t he use muggles if he considers them to give him an edge? Why shouldn’t a wizard use them if he can?
Surely, the victories gained showed the worth of the methods?

Not even Melchior or Abraxas can actually argue with that. It was Prussian efficiency at its finest.

Hermione, on the other hand, had some experience in negotiations (even if she couldn’t remember how much experience exactly that she had). She could read between the lines enough to realise what he meant. If Grindelwald almost successfully obliterated the British wizarding world with an army of Imperius’d muggles…he’d get his own. A younger, more idealistic Hermione would be outraged that another wizard could consider mind-controlling muggles so easily. The older, cannier her was less worried. Oh, she’d stop him if he ever tried that, sure, but right now, it was merely one scenario out of many. She didn’t believe things would really get that bad, and secondly, no one can really know how far desperation can push them until it happened—the wizard (Randolph? Reinald?) was merely more aware of his dark side than most. He wasn’t unique among many people.

Around this time, even non-magical UK were cultivating anthrax in labs and field-testing them. The argument for it was, if Germany was to cross the biological weapons line, they’d have the perfect weapon to retaliate. There was a long history for humanity to follow a scorched earth policy when they feel their survival was threatened.

The outspoken wizard from before (Rudolf? Randolph? Reinald? Rainer?) looked Hermione straight in the eye and didn’t mince his words. “I would also like to praise you for your excellent work on the wounds from muggle weapons, Fräulein.”

“Um, I’m not sure I did anything extraordinary.” She fidgeted with her knife.

He shook his head, undeterred. “On the contrary. My father happened to be visiting St. Mungo’s recently and spoke to his mediwitch. She told him if it hadn’t been for your efforts, the death toll can easily be half again as large.”

“Most wizards and witches underestimate the degree of internal bleeding it could inflict, don’t they, Rainer?” Sigmund mused aloud (oh, so it’s Rainer!) Rainer nodded.

“Indeed. I remembered the time my older brother accidentally caught a bullet to his throat! I was very young, so I was surprised by the amount of blood the human body actually contain while my mother rushed with a handkerchief in one hand and a wand in the other to stop the bleeding. I can’t help but compare the gushing fountain of blood to those of the pigs being cut for Christmas feast.”

The blonde witch (Beatrix?) heartily agreed. “My brother was shot once too. He was off hunting, he said. I remember the mediwitch picking fragments shattered bones out of his arm. I hear that if you’re a muggle, crushed bones like that is enough to get your limbs cut off.”

Another wizard shook his head. “How barbaric.”

“It is, isn’t it? It’s nothing we need to worry about at any rate. Look, he had enough to turn it into a keepsake for me.” She casually pulled out her necklace from inside her clothes. The pendant was a classic heart-shaped one that you can keep pictures in—what Hermione noticed was that it was bone white. The tiny etchings on its edge was rust-coloured; she suspected they were very, very small runes, coloured with blood.

“Please tell me he’s smart enough to use his bone and blood as a base for a protection amulet. ‘Flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood’ and all that.” Her brunette friend remarked.

“Of course. He’s neither squeamish nor a fool.” Beatrix proclaimed.
Hermione’s gaze sharpened with interest. She realised that the old German families who managed to leave for England were actually even more traditional than many of the English ones. The average student would not even notice, but she was too aware that the only branch of magic that can turn blood and bone into a protection charm was blood magic. She made a note to herself to chat with the blonde German some time in some place discreet enough to talk about it. Her talk with Tom made her painfully aware just how shallow her knowledge was on blood magic.

While Wilhelmina and one other wizard was observing Beatrix’s pendant with curiosity, the rest was mostly listening to the wizard (Reinald? No, Hermione, Rainer) that was still telling the story of how he helped stopped his brother from choking on his own blood. Tom seemed to find his description of how his hands slipped from all the blood coating it to be somewhat interesting.

This time, Hermione noticed the other people’s paling countenance near them. The Ravenclaw witch subtly moved the topic away before they freak out the less gore-oriented people on the dinner table (read: the more garden-variety Slytherins around them).

In the end, they did get down to business right after that; it was soon clear that the Slytherin Germans still have close contacts with their families in the continents. They didn’t even think twice about agreeing to the meetings of the Society, or even about of the risks that would entail if anyone they knew were to agree to help search for Grindelwald’s base. They had considered it and they had agreed that it was worth it, even the two witches present. In this, they, too, are efficient.

“Excellent. Then I’m sure we’ll have a profitable cooperation, Ladies, Gentlemen.” Tom said.

“Certainly. It’s nice working with you,” Sigmund von Moritz agreed, representing his faction.

It only took another minute or two before the entire talk was over. Hermione prepared to leave for Advanced Ancient Runes soon after (this is one of the times her class schedule did not consist of two conflicting classes at once, forcing her to choose between them).

It struck her just now how busy her meal times had been. When was the last time she could enjoy eating in peace, other than the first half of breakfast before people came? Why, it might be her get-out-of-the-infirmary picnic with Eugenie and Tom. Or even the time she ate dinner with him at the kitchen.

(He was taking up a significant amount of her time, wasn’t he?)

It was then that she’d begun to wonder if she’d ever have a normal lunch again.

Yet should she be surprised? She knew that Tom wouldn’t give up on his rise, whatever form it would take. The dark arts give you an astronomical increase in firepower in such a short time, turning yourself and your forces into a hammer that can flatten everyone else within five years or a decade—frankly, it was what she would call a hack in modern parlance. It was not a surprise that an ambitious youth with non-existent morals like the Tom Riddle in her own history had chosen to take that path.

Of course, she had also witnessed the downsides of it herself in her own time. You lose yourself in its darkness and scarcely what you used to be remains. If one were to take a different path to accumulate power, one that would not end up relying heavily on the dark arts, then other methods must be considered—methods that most certainly required more legwork.

Like politics.

Well, she mused with a sardonic amusement at her philosophical acceptance, I suppose I did sign
Hermione had come to a halt in front of the Advanced Ancient Runes class, her gaze meeting instantly with that of another Ravenclaw already inside. Tom certainly noticed but he did not lose a beat.

“I’ll place your bag in the desk next to mine, shall I?”

“Um.”

“I’m sure you both have a lot to talk about.”

She huffed. He didn’t have to sound so smug about it, just because he considered Verrault to be a lost cause. She slid the straps of her book bag from her shoulders and let him take it from her.

“Yes. I’ll meet you later then.” Hermione finally said.

It did not take a genius to realise that Jan Verrault would not feel pleased with Tom Riddle’s presence. Hermione walked into the classroom towards Verrault’s direction as Tom went the other way. She was vaguely surprised to see him in the company of several Hufflepuffs—some even tensed at her footsteps before they turned around and relaxed after seeing her. *Huh, that’s interesting.*

She took a seat next to his.

“So…um, hello?”

Verrault didn’t disappoint. “What is Riddle planning?”

“You were *there* in the Great Hall when Evariste on about The Society’s plans to help search for Grindelwald, right? When he and de Montmorency can’t seem to stop arguing with each other?”

“It’s too…”

“Ambitious?”

“No. Too selfless.”

Hermione laughed, catching curious looks from the nearby Hufflepuffs who were apparently doing some off-the-cuff studying. She’d just noticed that they were sitting in a circle, and she’d hazard a guess that one Hufflepuff was at the centre of it all. It struck her as very reasonable that the Hufflepuffs took this class in one big group when they knew at least one of them was very good at Ancient Runes—it improved the odds of survival for everyone.

*All for one and one for all, eh?*

She turned back to the Ravenclaw wizard who was eyeing her suspiciously.

“Verrault, I did say it’s an ambitious project, isn’t it? First, do you actually disagree with how I describe it?”

Leaning back against her chair, she kept her gaze on him unwavering, waiting without a word said. After a while, he nodded slowly.
“Yes, it is ambitious. In that sense, it is not uncharacteristic of him.”

“Good. Now, as for it being selfless…starting something that would raise his profile in the wizarding world and lay the groundwork for his post-Hogwarts career—that’s the farthest thing from selfless, isn’t it?”

“If you put it that way…”

“I do, because it is true.” Her answer was firm.

“But to go against Grindelwald…” he trailed away, still thinking.

“He’s menace to Europe, Verrault. I know this in ways that are too personal and that I won’t wish to my worst enemy.” Having her entire family and friends killed off? Yes, she wouldn’t wish that on anyone. Not that she was even sure it was Grindelwald, but eh, who even knew what happened to her?

“Now, why do you think Tom wouldn’t think the same way?”

“Why would he fight another dark lord?”

Hermione’s lips inadvertently quirked up at one corner. “‘Another’ dark lord, is it? Is that what you think he is becoming?”

He tensed up, but even then, it wasn’t fear she saw in his eyes but determination. He believed he was right and he was determined to stick to his position. In a way, she could understand him. She was like that once.

“What makes you think that?” She asked, her tone not changing.

“If you can’t see it, then it’s useless saying anything.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at the aura of doom and gloom he was channelling. “I’ve told you before, haven’t I? I know he has his darker side that most people don’t notice. What I’m trying to do is find out this; what’s your problem with him? And maybe even try to get Tom to ease off it if I agree with you. He did tell me that you once thought he killed someone.”

To her surprise, he looked away. Was that…? Was he embarrassed?

“Yet I wasn’t completely wrong.”

“How so? Last time I checked, ‘half-dead’ isn’t exactly an actual condition. You’re either alive or you’re not.” She said, sceptical.

“He is still sadistic.”

“I agree with you.” Hermione said. His startled look showed that he clearly hadn’t expected that answer. “He has threatened me more than once at the beginning of our acquaintance, and I believe that he’s an expert on pain. I’m quite aware of that flaw of his.”

“Yet you still remain friends with him?” Verrault asked, dubious.

“I said it was at the beginning, didn’t I? He hadn’t taken my full measure. He has no idea what it is that makes Hermione Curie who she is. He knows better than to threaten me now. As you can see, it’s possible to come to some sort of understanding with him.”
“It does not erase his past crimes.” The taller wizard insisted.

She held back from huffing. Barely. Yes, yes. He outright implied he has one horcrux already and I guessed that would be his father who snuffed it. I know that.

“And I’m interested in seeing his future change. To hound him for his past would not improve the future, would it?” She asked.

“You’d rather have him walk away without paying for his crimes?”

Hermione took a deep breath and reminded herself that Verrault wasn’t exactly wrong. He was simply as stubborn as a bloodhound on a scent, to the exclusion of almost everything else. He reminded her of more than a few Aurors she’d known, actually, though not in a good way.

“What you have against him right now is not even enough evidence to prove he’s guilty of even a single crime, isn’t it? At best, it would only amount to hearsay in any court.” She struck the most noticeable flaw of his that she could see. “To stalk someone endlessly without proof stems from the obsession to be right, not a reflection of the drive for justice.”

The other Ravenclaw grimaced but did not back away.

“He’s gotten to you, hasn’t he?”

She sighed.

“If you’re truly looking for justice, don’t follow what you ‘felt’ you know is a wrongdoing. Find the victim of the crime. Listen to his or her grief and follow that to find the evidence needed.” She shook her head. “I still can’t believe you’re sure of Tom’s guilt without defining the crime or finding the victim. You’re only going to get laughed out of the Auror test this way.”

Hermione bit her lip even as the two of them stared each other down. She felt that she was being unnecessarily cruel to him, especially since she said her last sentence particularly because she could see an inkling of his dreams outside Hogwarts and it was her best guess. Yet she could find no other way to force him to confront his most glaring flaws but to be harsh with the truth.

“What do you know of the Auror test? I hear you haven’t been in Britain for years.”

“I still know more than you do.”

For certain, she knew of Harry’s. She didn’t think the basic idea changed so much over decades, though she had to admit that the technicality of the procedure might have. And well, if she knew of one from a later period, it’s certainly bound to be more complicated than anything they could have now, right? Preparing against the future test would certainly over-prepare anyone from this period.

From the stiffness of his jaw, Hermione knew she hadn’t managed to reach him today, but it didn’t mean she could stop from trying. She softened her voice and gave genuine advice.

“Remember, evidence is king. Motive is queen. With only motive, you don’t have a case yet, just the possibility of one. Without either, you don’t have a case at all. You only have a conspiracy theory or an attempt at slander. If you want to go after Tom, make sure your case is airtight, because he’s damn well better than practically everyone in managing the technicalities. There’s no way you could gain an advantage against him there or somehow just expect him to slip up.”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t slip up on the details. Not unless he’s gone batshit insane.”
Her smile was wry, but he certainly didn’t understand her little in-joke.

“That’s your priorities: 1) Evidence, 2) Motive. Oh, it’s also important to always backup your files in at least two different places. Always have a safe house for your important witnesses. Arrange for a friend to check your house if you haven’t contacted them in more than a month—tell them how to access one of your backup files too, just in case. That way, if you’re ever killed in your investigations, it wouldn’t stop with you.”

He had been doubtful at first, before she could see that he was gradually listening to her. Incredulity shone from his face when he paid attention to her words. If he had but the slightest knowledge of investigations, it would soon be clear to him that she wasn’t leading him wrong. She did take his dedication seriously, and she did give him a serious advice in that regard in return.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want you to stop tilting at windmills against imaginary monsters.” She softly said. It was never pleasant to be Sancho Panza, even worse when the person you’re watching over actually had potential to be more.

“The monster isn’t imaginary.” He said.

“The crimes you think you see are unreal.” She replied. “And aren’t you actually making it worse? Some of your accusations are so ridiculous that even more reasonable suspicions in the future are going to slide away too easily—precisely because no one wants to be associated with ‘that crazy guy’”

He winced but didn’t let it stop him.

“You could help me.”

“I am helping you.” She was exasperated.

“You could come to me if Riddle did something unsavoury with the evidence.”

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. “If he did something unsavoury, I wouldn’t be standing in front of you; I’d be stopping him or die trying. It’s your investigation—it’s certainly your responsibility to collect the evidence.”

“Die trying?”

“If it’s worth doing, it’s worth dying for, don’t you think?” She challenged.

The two Ravenclaws had been too involved in their argument that they hadn’t paid much attention to the studying Hufflepuffs nearby. A few of them were outright watching, even if most were confused (she guessed that almost all the students were wondering who on earth was the person they’re talking about, since most people couldn’t imagine Tom in that position at all). This time, it was hard to ignore them as the circle rose up and broke open. They were rather synchronised with each other that it was almost like seeing the petals of a flower opening.

From the centre, it could be said that a fairy stepped out. The witch was so slender and ethereally beautiful that she could easily be one. Even her eyebrows were as dainty and perfectly-shaped as willow leaves, her complexion smooth and clear. It was her Hufflepuff tie and Hogwarts uniform that confirmed she was as human as everyone there.

“Enough Jan. She’s exactly as you’ve described.”
Her words piqued Hermione’s curiosity.

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Chapter End Notes

Don't worry about all the characters from the French and German contingent. If I don't expect Hermione to remember them all, I certainly wouldn't expect more from any readers.

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I might add some notes on Don Quixote for the context of 'tilting at windmills' and 'imaginary monsters' here if my brain doesn't feel like it's turned to mush. So no, none of that right now. Might update it later, though.

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Additional Notes:

*Around this time, even non-magical UK were cultivating anthrax in labs and field-testing them.* I would like to refer you to Gruinard Island, a small, nondescript Scottish island that was used for field tests of the anthrax bacterium in 1942. How do they decontaminate it decades afterwards? By spraying 280 tonnes of formaldehyde solution diluted in sea water over the entire 196 hectares of the island while also removing the topsoil with the worst contamination.

The only reason the government finally moved to do it in the first place was because of a group of activists trying to raise the island's profile in public (and raising hell in the process). Otherwise, who knows when the family of the original owners were able to buy it back (anthrax-free) from the government in the first place?

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Pendleton is going to get a rather long viewpoint segment in the next chapter, so putting in his mini-bio seems pertinent. Since the next chapter's end notes is going to get filled with Ancient Runes or linguistic details, I thought I’d just put it here:

**Patroclus Pendleton (OC):** He shares classes A. Potions, ADADA and A. Ancient Runes with Tom Riddle. He came from an old family that’s not part of the Sacred 28. His name is the Latinised form of the Greek Πατροκλος (Patroklos) which meant “glory of the father”. He is, on that note, an almost identical copy of his father. This is the name of a close friend of Achilles whose death brought him back to the Trojan War.

He’s one of the more intelligent members of Tom’s inner circle, though less stridently ambitious compared to Melchior or Abraxas. He prefers to go by his last name even among friends.

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“What did he say?” Hermione asked the Hufflepuff witch. She didn’t expect to see Verrault fidgeting again.

“Camellia—”

“Jiàn zhī shì hǎo fù, duó zhī shì jù hǔ.” Camellia answered.

Hermione gave Verrault an impressed look. “I didn’t know you know an East Asian language.”

“I still have an accent, as Camellia can tell you. It’s not that good.” He replied, only meeting her eyes for a moment.

“Are you going to translate that, or shall I?” Camellia asked Verrault without preamble, not even allowing him a moment’s respite. The eyes under those long eyelashes had no mercy.

“Looks like a lady, actually a tiger.” He rushed.

Camellia’s pink lips pursed in disappointment. Hermione was sure that there were two Hufflepuff wizards and one witch giving Verrault warning looks for vexing their esteemed lady of their house (that Camellia was an important Hufflepuff, Hermione suddenly had no doubt).

“Jan. I actually liked your translation. It preserves the rhythm somewhat and not just the meaning.”

He sighed in defeat and actually turned to Hermione. He actually lowered his voice slightly as he spoke.

“When seen, like a respectable lady. When robbed, like a dreaded tiger.”

Hermione smiled, amused and flattered at the same time. “Why, thank you, Verrault. I’ve never been complimented so well before by a new colleague.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.” He ground out, as stubborn as he was awkward and he was now frowning again. “It was an observation.”

The beautiful Hufflepuff turned towards Hermione, her expression was polite even if reserved as she extended her hand. There was no warmth in her voice.

“A very apt observation, it turns out. It is…interesting to finally meet you, Miss Hermione Curie.”
“Thank you for your compliment as well. I’m Hermione Curie, fifth-year transfer. I’m afraid I still don’t know everyone here, though.” She certainly couldn’t rattle off Camellia’s full name immediately.

Camellia’s lips quirked slightly into the mildest of smiles; her untouchable air thawed a little. Hermione was sure she heard at least one person behind her sigh.

“Camellia Lee, sixth-year Hufflepuff.”

Afterwards, it did not take long for Camellia to ask that they had settled their differences, hadn’t they? Because Professor Gildenstern can arrive any moment now and start the class, and she’d hate for them to miss parts of their lesson just because of an argument. Camellia had settled back into her seat behind Verrault, and without the other students pulling their chairs around her desk, Hermione could see that not all her textbooks used the Latin alphabet.

She was watching them both with eagle eyes, as if fully prepared to interfere again if they didn’t finish their discussion before class starts. If it wasn’t for her house tie, Hermione could’ve mistaken her for a Ravenclaw.

“Well, Verrault, your friend has a point.” Hermione said. “I do want to get ready for class too.”

“I have no argument with you.” He stated.

“Yes, but your needling at Tom without a shred of evidence is getting tiring.”

“I will get find the evidence. When I do, no one can stop me, not even you.”

Hermione shrugged as she stood up. “Really, when you do have actual proof, I’ll be the last person to stop you. But before that, please hold back mere suspicions.”

“Did you have a nice chat?”

As Hermione reached the desk he’d placed her bag on, Tom’s question was a dash too casual. She did consider his question seriously.

“Well, it certainly wasn’t too bad. Verrault could’ve been more stubborn.” Or more annoying, she didn’t say. “He even introduced me to Camellia Lee.”

“That’s,” Tom tapped his quill on the table once, his gaze straying to the hawk feather instead of her.

“Interesting.”

It was his tone that caught her attention. “Interesting?”

He pulled his scrolls and books out at such a leisurely rate that she had to clasp her hands together to hold back the urge to help pull things out faster. It was making her fingers itch.

“Don’t you know? Where Lucretia Black is Ravenclaw’s Princess, then Camellia Lee is undoubtedly Hufflepuff’s Lady. She is well-known not just for her beauty, but also for her work ethic and dedication to her house. She actually interacted with many of her housemates—helped them academically—that she was the strongest contender for Hufflepuff prefect in her year.”
Hermione frowned as she tried to recall the past conversation. Did Lee wear a prefect badge? No, the Hufflepuff didn’t. Her memory told her that.

“Yet she’s not a prefect, isn’t she? What happened?”

Tom’s smile was the perfect picture of kindness. “That, I’m afraid, would be gossip.”

She stared at him in disbelief. If Tom Riddle cared about something about hurting people’s feelings with rumours, she’d eat a first edition book. As his expression slid into a grin for a split second, Hermione knew she was right.

“Official notes from one of the meetings of Hogwarts’ Board of Governors state that she’s too ‘distant’ to be able to cooperate well with people from other house, not to mention that she is relatively unknown in the school. She did only transfer during the end of her second year. Some mention of ‘we should not be too focused on appearance in deciding this’ was also in the notes.”

Hermione’s answer was a low hiss. “That’s bull.”

“I don’t presume to know how they think.” His tone was mild.

“And yet you do, anyway.”

“You have such faith in me that you’ll inflate my ego beyond belief, Hermione.” He sounded flattered, and she would’ve believed it if she hadn’t seen the wicked glint in his eyes. As if it hasn’t already, she thought cynically.

“Tom.”

“Anyway, what did you talk with Verrault about?” He asked back.

“We talked of many things. Of men and monsters of the mind.” Hermione replied carelessly.

“And how not to cross a king?”

She shook her head. “Motive is queen—but evidence, king.”

It was his turn to lower his eyelids and fix his unamused gaze at her. She was undeterred. Step-by-step, a confident smile danced into existence on her lips.

“You helped him.”

She waved it away with her left hand. “Oh, please. I only gave him some pointers that he clearly needs. Even now, he’s only a pebble in your shoe. Don’t tell me you care?”

“It might be…inconvenient.”

“It wouldn’t be.” She answered with certainty. “After all, you’re not going to be that madman, are you?”

A question. A challenge.

Even if she wasn’t exactly wrong, it didn’t mean that Tom was used to another chessmaster working on the same board he was on.
“Are you really prepared to play the game, Hermione?”

“You have your insurance, I have mine. Besides, I’m neither a coward nor an idiot to be concerned with a little risk.” She rolled her eyes and pulled her chair flush next to his. “Come on, give me your truth. Are you even worried about him?”

Her left hand was laid lightly on his neck. His gaze flicked towards it for one second.

“If I said that you owe me a favour for the hassle you stirred up?”

“I’ll say that you’re trying to put me in debt for something you won’t even lose sleep over.” She pulled her hand away, scrunched her nose at him and shook her head in mild annoyance. Hermione shifted her chair back.

“Nice try, Tom. Try to bluff me like that again, and I’m liable to be a little pissed off. This one’s on me because I’m nice that way."

Hermione had started to pull her books and scrolls out that she missed the momentary surprise crossing his face.

“You’re joking.”

“No, I know you’re bluffing. I’m not one of your followers or your fawning masses to take you at face value. I can tell. Keep trying to convince me otherwise and maybe I’ll choose to get pissed off now.” She answered with barely a concern on her face, already half-distracted as she opened the textbook and skimmed it once to make sure she’d read ahead the correct chapter last night. She didn’t notice him stare at her for a long moment before he shook his head with a wider smile than before.

There was no way she was going to tell him that she just used a manual interrogation trick she learned from Harry right then. There was no need for him to know all her cards, was there? Of course not.

Her hand was right over his jugular as she asked him questions.

Oh, she knew she had to adjust her methods to his psychopathology. An average person’s heartbeat would increase when they lie and it would stay steady when they speak of something they knew to be the truth. But this wouldn’t be true in the case of a psychopath or a sociopath. They would have no guilt in lying to other people. But she knew she could still get a rise out of him—she wasn’t trying to detect him lying to her, she was trying to detect whether he was as emotional as he seemed.

His heartbeat was as even as a metronome.

He was simply trying to see if he can get one past her. As if! A wild wolf wasn’t going to change his habits immediately, she already knew that. At least this would teach him a lesson that she could see through him, and that she had no patience for his more irritating games.

Professor Honoria Gildenstern was walking into the class when mini paper bowls surreptitiously danced their way across her table. It was filled with small squares of peaches lightly splashed with cream with thin shavings of almond.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at Tom.

His regretful expression was too melodramatic that she couldn’t help her snort and her rapidly-
suppressed laughter. She didn’t care which Slytherin just had their snacks appropriated by Tom; she simply decided to use the available toothpick to pick the cubes and start snacking. They can mope and suffer for all she cared. He certainly owed her the bribe.

Hermione was not satisfied with her three-layered ward. It was obviously big. It took too much space. Some parts were clearly redundant and not in that good way that meant back-up systems, just bloat.

It was not elegant.

She could compare herself to most of her classmates contenting themselves with single-layer wards no matter how complex, but it wouldn’t be a fair comparison since she was sure that almost all of them were new at this. Even if she herself did not specialise in wards, she’d set up more than one before and helped tweaked the plan for others. She had a better understanding than anyone who’d never tried to applied their ancient runes knowledge to actually breaking or creating a ward.

Hermione, however, was not like Luna.

The Ravenclaw picked up dead languages the way other people picked up hobbies, and she’d done this since she was young. The blonde had several under her belt and was always casually reading up more. Her wards were unbelievably strong for their size—her signature style was density and compactness. It was her polyglot nature that allowed her to realise which words had stayed recognisable across cognates in several languages. Of course, cognate words are not exact copies of each other either. Their meanings differ slightly, thus carrying slightly different effects too. Luna merely considered all that as a challenge to her creativity.

That was why if Luna ever created a three-layered ward, with each layer having spellwork from different languages, she can actually skip some words in one or even two of the layers. She didn’t just skip some words—she pared a quarter of it. This is because she’d link those layers with symbols and words in the third layer that she knew can still mean the same thing. Instead of looking like an onion with its layers, her work was more like a crisscrossing web or densely woven basket.

(To be honest, Luna’s wards usually had at least five layers. But Hermione knew her own limits.)

On the downside, it made her work far less readable for people not versed in all the languages involved. On the upside, it forces people who wanted to break it to go through the much more exhausting brute force method because it was too hard to unravel it intelligently—most people would just fail to understand how it worked as a whole. Trying to understand it and find its weak points would be beyond almost everyone but an actual master warder.

Hermione supposed it was possible to make all three layers with spellwork based on the same language, but it would be too easy to read and break.

Luna’s wards were the pinnacle of design, as strong as they were beautiful. It was why it was frustrating when she couldn’t even recreate a simpler version of one.

Honoria Gildenstern stalked over to where Hermione’s face was in a complicated frown, peering over the Ravenclaw’s shoulder like an overly-curious hawk. Considering her aquiline nose and the colouring of her clothes, it was an appropriate imagery.

“You have a problem in sketching your outline?” She asked. Hermione sighed and passed her work
over. To her credit, the professor took it in a stride.

“Is this—isn’t this a little complex? Most would start with one layer or two.”

“Well, it’s natural for people who’d never raised or tried to break a single ward in their life. I have, so it’s natural if I have a bit of a feel already of the practical side to go further. Anyway, the problem isn’t in the layers. I’ve figured out a way to stabilise and synchronise them so they actually strengthen instead of weakening each other, as you can at these sections.”

Hermione pointed out the relevant parts on the foundation of each layer. That was the basic parts she’d understood quickly when Luna showed her. Less than half an hour of reading had refreshed her memory on what it required. She could hear Professor Gildenstern humming in agreement with what she did. Not that Hermione ever doubted that.

“My problem is that I haven’t been able to reduce the volume much.” The brunette said.

The professor’s eyebrows rose in curiosity as she began to read the details Hermione’s work.

“Mmm, this isn’t the Elder Futhark, is it?”

“Only the basic parts, the core as you can see. Yet I wanted to be more specific with the capabilities and the effects of the ward in general. Elder Futhark is good for essential work, but it’s hard to wrangle for fine details—probably because we don’t know all that much about how it’s used. I used the futhorc for the rest instead.”

The dark-haired witch read on and frowned.

“Wait, this doesn’t make sense. Unless… Hmm. The uniform orthography is actually an illusion. You didn’t choose just a single language to work in even if this is all Anglo-Saxon runes, did you?” She mused aloud.

“Of course not,” Hermione said. “As you can see, this layer—and I use the term layer loosely since they weave around each other so much—is Old Frisian. The one lower than that is Old English. This is why you see me piling all these phrasebooks, grammar books and dictionaries on the table. The problem is just that the layers isn’t sufficiently interwoven yet.”

Gildenstern laughed, sounding surprisingly youthful for once.

“I thought all these books meant that you simply couldn’t make up your mind on a language! Well, this is an interesting concept. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone try to apply it that way, though. Wherever did you get the idea?”

“A friend of mine could actually pull it off. I was trying to recreate what she could do.”

The professor nodded. “You get points for being honest. I’ll still give you more than enough credits if you choose to go forward with this, Curie. Constructing this from scratch by just using the vague memory of what your friend can successfully construct is not an easy thing to do either.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

“Your friend must be a talented wardcrafter. You’ll have to introduce me to her sometime.”

The brunette witch’s sharp laughter was closer to a sob that Honoria abruptly turned towards her.

“She’s…she’s not…” She took a deep breath and composed a sentence that would actually make
sense instead of babbles about futures she’d left behind and friends lost in wars she no longer even had any memories of. Hermione needed something that wouldn’t make her sound insane.

“As far as I know, she’s not among the living now.” She spoke softly.

Professor Gildenstern gave her a sombre nod of understanding, patted her arm, and moved on. In a way, she was thankful for the teacher’s discretion as she closed her eyes and tried to centre herself.

She wished she could say that she’d left Luna safe and happy in the future. It was a wish that she felt from the deepest recess of herself. Yet it was one that her gut feeling disagreed with. (She still wasn’t sure whether to hate or to thank her lost memories).

The best hope she could give herself was that Luna was going to live a long and happy life when she’s born in this timeline—Luna and everyone else she’d left behind.

Hermione was going to make that better future with her own hands if necessary.

Honoria Gildenstern had looped away from Hermione Curie in her casual stroll, just to give the poor young woman some space, and was rounding back in the same general direction because she wanted to check on Tom.

She was torn between gladness and exasperation when she saw Tom Riddle being crowded by other students in his seat. He was pointing out the weaknesses in his classmates’ designs, she knew that, as well as mark out the more egregious mistakes along with several less noticeable ones. It was significant feedback for most of them, even if he did not actually go through any one of them thoroughly enough to notice the subtle flaws—or whether the other students had actually chosen the correct design principle in the first place.

There was no doubt that he made her job easier. Always helpful, that one. Well, Camellia too, she mused, as her gaze travelled to the other group in class.

They were both her best students. Lee was at the centre of another group of students looking for help, but the Hufflepuffs usually already took too much of her time that students of other houses have to queue behind them. She also gets distracted into the details too easily—Tom did a better job in dispensing just enough advice to get people going before moving on to someone else, thus managing to help more of his classmates than she did.

On the other hand, if Tom was this free with his time, it meant that he’d considered his work more-or-less finished. That implied, in turn, that he’d done it quickly.

He could’ve done a much more impressive work if he’d spent the time on his own design. It wouldn’t have the level of insightful shortcuts that Hermione Curie’s design would have. Only Camellia Lee’s work was slightly more sophisticated than Curie’s—but considering the Hufflepuff witch had a mother who was a warding grandmaster, it was rather useless to compare Camellia to anyone else.

It was good for Tom and Camellia to get some competition. Especially Tom. Really, she was sure he was getting too complacent recently.

Hermione’s level of knowledge also caused Honoria to conclude that, similar to Camellia, Hermione must have trained with a master warder at one point or another. How the young witch’s OWL-equivalent scores from Norway were exceedingly exceptional across all subjects began to make sense now. She had probably been raised among masters all her life. Then, being the young
genius that she would have been even then, she soaked a wide variety of knowledge from them like a sponge.

*That girl is going to hit the wizarding world like a storm once she graduates,* the professor thought, with not a little schadenfreude as she imagined seeing some plodding Ministry officials having to face the full blast of one Hermione Curie.

Yet it also made Curie’s sudden silences and occasional shock (as Phyllida had relayed in the teacher’s lounge) made sense with that context. The witch was here alone now, wasn’t she? Just how many people had she lost? Practically her entire world, she’d bet.

Honoria shook her head from thoughts about their most recent transfer and focused on the dark head that was at the centre of a circle. She could hear his patient voice occasionally rising above the quiet. *A prophet, waited on by his disciples,* she thought with an inward chuckle at her own joke.

Chairs had been dragged from nearby spots to his position, tables have been shifted and rearranged; she was a relatively hands-free teacher. She set tasks for them and she waited for them to turn them in. She didn’t care how the tables and chairs were going to get configured at the end of the day. Honoria approached him casually, making no effort to quieten her footsteps. She was mildly disappointed that only a few students even noticed her, with Tom included in that few, of course. The rest was too focused on their work.

*Galatea has a lot of bad habits to fix from these kids.*

“*Tom,*” she called out, “you *do* remember what I said to you the last time around, don’t you?”

“I’m sure I remembered you telling us that we should assist each other in class, Professor Gildenstern.” He sounded too innocent to be true, which was how she first figured out that he had a mischievous streak buried deep inside his perfect student appearance.

She didn’t mind; it was proof that he was as human as everyone else.

There were the surprised gasps of many who didn’t think their professor was so close already. The other students around him mostly yelped or rushed back to their seats. She chuckled because truly, Tom had the right of it. There was nothing wrong with helping each other in class. They were being a bit too paranoid.

“I also remembered asking to everyone to do their best.” Honoria said.

One of the few cannier students noticed that she wasn’t about to reprimand anyone and stayed around. Gildenstern picked up Tom’s design and started reading it.

“Well, I gave my best.” The Slytherin replied.

“Hmm, dual layered...ah, at least you’re still creative. I would hate if you were just following some basic outline. Also, interlinkages between the layers? Not bad,” he had undoubtedly read what Curie was working on and included the layering technique that she used as one of the basis of his own design. All in just over half an hour—at most, it took three-quarters of one. Tom’s comprehension speed was frankly uncanny, as was his capacity for insight. *Another damned genius,* she thought wryly.

“There’s the Elder Futhark, *of course.* Quite the textbook use of it at the core, and it *is* a classic for a good reason. Wait these are...Tom! These are *Medieval Runes.*"
“Why, yes, they are, Professor.”

She snorted at his nonchalance and gave him an unamused look. “That means you’re practically writing the ward in Latin, barring the use of some conceptual runes. It’s phonetic Latin alright, but it’s still Latin.”

Gildenstern reread his work again. Yes, it was still Latin. Well, orthographically, it was Medieval Runes, but linguistically speaking…

“Well, since this is an Ancient Runes class instead of one on Germanic-Language Spellwork, I thought it would be alright.” He calmly replied.

Honoria’s braid swung at the speed she turned her head.

“You are an unrelenting smart-aleck, Tom Riddle. You know that no one likes a smart-aleck, don’t you?” she commented, with some grudging acceptance. He was right, really—he was still using runes.

“As long as I can pass, I’ll be happy,” his reply was glib, and she had to stop herself from telling him to stop being a wiseass and settle for a warning look before reading his work again (because professors at Hogwarts had to keep up a certain level of dignity in class, damn him).

The amount of traps and alarms he had layered into his design was definitely beyond what was needed to pass. First, he had to figure out whether any of the traps were going to be at odds with each other, and the more traps used, the more complicated the possible interactions between them become. There was also the issue that the more traps added, the more complicated it would be to route and allocate the power for all of them. He was certainly more hostile in his design principle than Curie—some of the traps were unusual.

You won’t know them if you haven’t been reading the books trying to collect them.

Still, he could have made the traps more sophisticated. To add something that can capture intruders instead of outright expelling or hurting them is something that she considers still within his abilities. Perhaps he can even figure out how to render the captives unconscious (wait, no, that’s wishful thinking and is actually a difficult problem—human brains are such tricky things).

“You know that you could’ve turned in a better work than this, right?” Professor Gildenstern asked as she handed his design back.

“Really?”

“You could make the traps more complex. I know what you can do, Tom.”

“But you did say that students should do their best,” he pointed out.

“What does that have to do with…”

He laid his design on the table and tapped over all the alarms laid around the trap. Yes, she did wonder why there was unusually many of them. Most people would not have embedded it so physically and extensively around the perimeter.

“This. This is how I do my best,” he remarked.

“Your best is in setting alarms?” She asked, disbelieving.
“I set alarms in wards that will summon me wherever I was, regardless of the distance, when someone tries to breach them. Then, I can deal with the intruders. The wards were never supposed to be the last and only defence.”

Honoria reread what he set for the alarms again and saw what she’d thought as overly-powered summoning arrays. Now, she knew why he made them that way. She gave him a wry smile.

“Your best is not in creating wards, is that what you mean?”

His expression was slightly apologetic. “I’m afraid not, Professor. I’m always a little too assertive to be patient in constructing wards. But if I have to create a ward to defend a place that was important to me? This is what my best would look like.”

She understood. “A ward that would stall and create problems for the attacker, but the most important part is, it would summon you?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “On the other hand, if we can get Hermione to design the ward and allow me to add all the summoning array, I think we’ll have something on par with what’s sold on the entry-level for home wards right now. It wouldn’t be too shabby for an hour’s work.”

Honoria laughed. She had seen what Hermione Curie did. With time and effort, the witch could easily go beyond that.

What was more important was that she did not forget what she’d seen half an hour earlier.

Most of the students were still too deep in their work to look around their surroundings while she was still watching them. She did not miss the ease Tom and Curie had in passing their work to each other to advise and criticise. She saw the time when Tom Riddle peering over the Ravenclaw’s shoulder, casually shifting her extensive curls when he did that; Curie barely reacted to it and only handed her work over. What was more surprising to her was that Tom allowed Curie to do the same when she wanted to check on his work some time later, her cheek probably only an inch away from his. She hovered there for at least a minute.

Honoria had seen Tom since she was a new professor at Hogwarts and he was but a first-year. She’d known him since he started taking her class in his third year. He had scarcely been within an arm’s length of someone else.

This was…hmm, this was fascinating. She hadn’t had this much fun in a while.

She couldn’t wait to get back to the teacher’s lounge to chat with Phyllida—she had to repay her last bit of information about the remnants of poor Curie’s trauma and her detailed degree of knowledge on plants. Orpheus might also be interested, considering that he’d been hovering around his newest House member like a mother hen when she was still in the infirmary. Honoria could casually drop hints about it and see how he’d react, and then they’d get a third conspirator to share news with. On further considerations, the last time she heard, Curie took Adele’s class, didn’t she? Advanced Arithmancy. Wasn’t Tom also in that one? This is a definite potential partner that she hadn’t even checked. Phyllida would be so disappointed in her.

Albus would be an annoying spoilsport, what with his insistence that none of them could see Tom’s ‘evil’ and how he was obviously ‘up to no good’, so the Gryffindor head would definitely be kept out of the loop.

Horace? Horace would be the last one to know, possibly beyond even Albus, because no one wanted to hear him being a smug arse. There were no questions about it once he heard the news—
he will be a smug arse. It was just a fact of the world along with how the sky is blue and the sun is hot. Plus, the Slytherin head would probably plan Tom’s wedding by next week, considering how much he valued the talented fifth-year that was the paragon of his House. They could not allow the man to embarrass the young wizard’s attempt at courting the girl he was interested in, especially since this was literally the first person that Tom even found interesting.

Tom would thank her for it, she was sure of that.

(The short segment after this does not focus on either Hermione or Tom.)
(Really, you won’t miss anything in the main story if you jump straight to the end notes and move on. I just had too much time on my hands/is procrastinating that I ended up writing it. It merely covered one of the side characters).

Side Story – Minion Blues 1

Pendleton had arrived early to the Advanced Ancient Runes class for the sole purpose of choosing the best seat.

He’d done it for the Ancient Runes class before lunch, almost running into more than one people as he hurried out of ADADA class, and he finished lunch at as much increased pace as he could manage without outright gobbling his food without chewing. He’d figured out the perfect seat—the seating column at the centre of the class gave the best view, while the third row gave him the expansive view of the blackboard without having to tilt his head upwards unnecessarily.

He considered it vital since Professor Gildenstern often drew large scale diagrams that easily took the space of half the blackboard.

The first Hufflepuff entered the class some ten minutes after Pendleton. His shoulders slumped once he saw the Slytherin sitting calmly in the middle of the class.

“Dammit, Pendleton.”

“It’s not my fault you’re slow.”

“There’s no way I can get you to trade your seat, is there?”

“No. So, you better not try.”

Pendleton ignored the annoyed look the wizard sent him and opened what in other schools might be considered a lunch box, but in Hogwarts everyone would recognise as a snack box. Professor Gildenstern was among the more lenient of the professors when it came to it. As long as the students were subtle and the snack wasn’t noisy, she ignored them. It might come as a surprise to many people, but Slughorn was on the other end. Yet considering the sort of potion accidents that even Slytherin fifth-years could get up to (even those who should know better), Pendleton did not find it unexpected at all that his head of house didn’t want to add poisoning on top of that.

Small squares of peaches splashed with a little cream and the occasional flaked almonds. The last
time his family visited Greece, he had developed a taste for pomegranates, so there were small wedges of the fruit inside, the small beads of ripe fruitlets glittering like jewels. The last was actually something new the kitchen elves offered him. They said they’d made a large batch of pear soaked overnight in litchi honey, and why would he say no to that? He idly mused which student’s recipe or order that was.

His grades for the class was good, and he might even be the top of the class in any other, more average school. Alas, he was in Hogwarts; the most prestigious school in the isles, and he had the added bad luck of having live through times of war in the continent. Tom Riddle shot up in any class he entered, and Pendleton had made his peace with that. Then Camellia Lee’s parents moved in from wherever it was that they were stationed at in the continent and he was instantly doomed to be a distant third.

To be honest, he didn’t really care about it all that much. He just wanted to be able to reconstruct and strengthen the wards at his family’s home. Sure, he can always ask for the help of a master warder, but in any old family’s demesne, there are always places where it’s very unadvised to let a stranger enter.

For those parts, it would still come down to his own expertise in the end.

His books were on the table already, his quills all loaded with the shades of ink that he used, and he had scrolls of empty parchment ready.

The second Hufflepuff and third Hufflepuffs who entered the room was as dismayed as the first to see him sitting at his desk.

“It just had to be Pendleton,” the wizard said with a theatrical sigh. He seemed to be one of those wizards who was like Alphard—in his enthusiasm, he forgot to use indoor voice.

“I’m sure there’s something we can trade with him, right?” The witch asked her companion.

“No, not really. We tried in the Ancient Runes class last year, remember? That wasn’t because we were out of things to trade with.”

Pendleton eyed them oddly. Really, there were light conversations, and if you were trying to negotiate with another party, you do not let them see all the cards you were holding. Was it just because they were Hufflepuffs and thus less vigilant about it? Or was this actually on purpose to get him to lower his guard or make assumptions about them?

“You know that I’m not going anywhere, don’t you?” The Slytherin asked.

“We were hoping you would say that.” The witch deadpanned. The wizard looked as if he still hadn’t quite given up.

“Come on, Pendleton. It’s for Camellia.”

“You should try that on another Hufflepuff, not someone from a different house.” He remarked.

As beautiful as she was, he was not sacrificing the best seat for her. What use was beauty to him, anyway? It wasn’t even something he could snack on, unlike the perfect fruits he had right now. He picked a small piece of pomegranate and ate that. The juice burst in his mouth.

“Urgh.”

“Try getting here faster.”
“We did! The only way to get out of lunch faster was to barely have any!” The wizard said. He had the upper body solidity of one who was his house’s beater.

Pendleton shrugged. It wasn’t his business that they couldn’t eat like an Auror rushed to go on a long, boring, tailing mission. Which, to be less polite, was to eat like a pack of starving jackals.

“How did you even still have the time to get snacks?” The witch asked in disbelief. She was eyeing his open snack box with a discomfortingly covetous look. Pendleton shifted its position on his lap.

He didn’t tell them that he had it prepared since the morning. It wasn’t as if the box didn’t have some light preservation charms on them.

“Can I have some?” She asked. His answer was straightforward.

“No.”

The witch threw her hands up. What was her name again? Something Anderson. Lana? No, not Lana. Ah, it was Iona. “Oh, for Merlin’s sake. It’s just snacks, Pendleton.”

“Then I’m sure you can get some yourself.”

“We wouldn’t have made it here on time! I didn’t even get to have any dessert at lunch.” She complained.

Well, being you sounds like a miserable experience.

“My condolences,” was his dry reply. It didn’t stop him from picking one of the peach squares with a toothpick and eating it. It was perfectly sweet and juicy, the occasional cream and crunchy almond providing a smooth contrast. He’d even properly planned when he was going to eat which quarter of his snacks to make sure he had enough snack from the beginning of the class to the end.

“That is just not fair.” The wizard groused again.

“Plan better.”

The two of them glared at him, which slid off as easily as water off a duck’s back. He simply savoured another square of peach in front of them.

To her credit, Camellia Lee entered the class without even blinking when she saw where he was (Pendleton was distracted for a few seconds as her dazzling being entered his view—until he remembered why he always looked away from her. She was hell on his situational awareness). She simply moved on and took the seat right behind him. It was, he had surmised, the second-best seat in the class. Tom usually took the one on the second or first row—why he did that, Pendleton had no idea and was only too glad that he thought that way. At least he wouldn’t be asked to give up his seat for his liege.

Well, he wouldn’t say no, but he’d do it very slowly and with regrets.

To his surprise, Tom didn’t enter alone—there was a witch by his side. There was only one witch with that mass of curls; Hermione Curie. A second later, he berated himself for being surprised.

Did he miss how Tom almost went all out in a fight with her in Advanced Defence? Yes. But then, he thought she was just a talented duellist. Delagardie certainly was. Then again, he didn’t think
he’d seen Tom go that far even with Delagardie, no matter how hard Augusta pushed (to her frustration).

Maybe Tom only wanted to see how long it would last until Curie bored him. Yes, that was probably it.

“Psst. Pendleton!”

A glance to his left and the previous Hufflepuff beater turned out to have taken the seat there. *One of the Adewale brothers, wasn’t he?* He only raised an inquiring eyebrow at the other wizard.

“Trade my liquorice strings for some of your snacks?”

His forehead creased slightly. “Those taste like cough medicine to me.”

“Come on. Well, it’s not *just* liquorice. I’m pretty sure there’s cherry, pineapple and green apple liquorice among others.”

Pendleton glanced down at the box he’d placed on the table (for the moment). He’d already quartered it properly, and he’d always brought just enough for himself to eat…

“Please? Pretty please? I’ll even go easy on Slytherin in our next practice match?”

“That would just make the team underestimate you in a real match.” Pendleton pointed out.

“I’ll go all out during practice, then?”

He sighed. The things he’d do for his House. Captain Flint was going to owe him some drinks in the next Hogsmeade weekend. “Fine. Please don’t take too much of the peach.”

Adewale whooped. Pendleton winced a little at the Hufflepuff’s volume control as he resigned himself to the trade.

“That’s your favourite, then?” Adewale asked. Pendleton merely shrugged.

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Class would begin soon, and it was just the right time he was waiting for as no one was paying particular attention in his direction.

He’d just managed to quietly place the box on the table when Tom suddenly turned around on his seat to face him. His smile was not exactly reassuring to Pendleton, who’d seen it often enough right before Tom gave him and Ves more assignments to do.

“Thank you, Pendleton. I’ll take that.”

Without as much of a by-your-leave, Tom floated the mini paper bowls of peaches up. It was so fast that Tom’s wand was only a blur. Confounded as he was, Pendleton still had enough presence of mind to snatch the last bowl.

His peaceful plans of working on Runes while having some finger foods as distraction vanished like a mirage in the desert. The pitying looks from Adewale on the next table from his didn’t help. Pendleton was still staring at the single peach square he’d managed to secure.

“Here, have one of my peach squares.” The Hufflepuff had moved his dessert before he even finished his sentence.
“Thank you Adewale, but it’s not necessary.” Pendleton finally managed to say.

“Oh, it’s alright. Just consider this one’s on me. Man, you Slytherins overcomplicate everything.”

The two miniature paper bowls with peaches on the table were as lonely as they were poignant.

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Chapter End Notes

Teachers are not blind, alright? I find it weird that only Dumbledore is able to sense ‘the evil’ in Tom and everyone else is oblivious as he spreads maiming and mayhem in Hogwarts. It's more likely that Tom actually manages to be a good student and have a good relationship with them. The situation is similar to those serial killers who have a good relationship with their parents or neighbours. After all, the smart ones know that you don't shit where you eat—you don't hunt in your home territory.

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List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Cognate:** (Linguistics) Words that are *cognate* have the same linguistic derivation as another (e.g. English father, German Vater, Latin pater). This definition is sourced from Oxford English Dictionary, with minor adjustments.

**Elder Futhark:** (Linguistics, Orthography) also called *Older Futhark* or *Germanic Futhark*, it’s the oldest form of the runic alphabets. It’s a writing system used by Germanic Tribes, the precise geographical location of which I’m sure Wikipedia can show you. Inscriptions in Elder Futhark are found on artefacts from the 2nd to 8th century.

**Old English:** (Linguistics) a. k. a. *Anglo-Saxon*, the earliest historical form of English language. Spoken in England and eastern parts of Scotland in the early middle ages. Brought to Britain by Anglo-Saxon settlers probably around 5th century.

After the Norman Conquest of 1066 (by William the Great, a. k. a., William the Bastard), the language of the upper class became *Anglo-Norman*, and this meeting ended up with Anglo-Saxon receiving many new words and shifting in form. This is when it begins to change into *Middle English*.

**Old Frisian:** (Linguistics) a West Germanic language, spoken between 8th and 16th century in the area between the Rhine and the Weser on the European North Sea coast. The people who settled England from about 400 onwards came from the same region and spoke more or less the same language (different dialects at most), hence the close relationship between Old English and Old Frisian. (Courtesy of Wikipedia. I don’t know Western European Linguistics *that* much).

**Anglo-Saxon runes, futhorc:** (Linguistics, Orthography) Runes used by early Anglo-Saxons as the alphabet for their writing. The futhorc (as the runes are collectively known) are descended from Elder Futhark. Since they are first thought to be used in
Frisia before the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain, they have also been called Anglo-Frisian runes. Artefacts have been found scattered in England and the places that used to be Frisia, etched with these runes, written in Old English and Old Frisian respectively.

Not to be confused with Younger Futhark, which is also a descendant of Elder Futhark, but is in use in the Scandinavian region, first to write Old Norse, and as the language began to shift later, its descendants (until the script mutates again).

Additional Notes:

见之似好妇，夺之似惧虎 (Simplified)
見之似好婦，奪之似懼虎 (Traditional)

Actual a fragment of poem/turn of phrase from the Wúyuè Chūnqiū (“Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue”), an unofficial history from the era of the Eastern Han (206 BCE – 220 CE). The freestyle translation is my own (apologies if it’s not precise/kinda rough) because yes, I was trying to find one that at least has a similarly rhythm in English. The phrase means what you think it means, at least when it's used these days. Don't ask me about the subtle contexts in Classical Chinese.
Chapter Summary

The young have no pretence and wears no masks. They are honest even in violence. A talk with Professor Dexter. Plans and more plans for headquarters and the Search itself.

Chapter Notes

Edited chapter 1 a bit to add that this is part of the first arc: Adaptation. Currently out of town. Replies might be slow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

26 The Honesty of Children

Tom could not quite understand why she’d rather choose to take Advanced Astronomy after Ancient Runes instead of choosing to take Advanced Charms like he did, but he knew there was no way to change her mind when she was determined and merely asked whether she needed him to show the way to the class. She assured him that she’d be fine with the class’ syllabus at hand and a sympathetic locating charm. Personally, Hermione agreed that she’d probably find Charms class more interesting than Astronomy, but she had the feeling that she wasn’t going to know her other classmates much whenever her schedules coincide with Tom (and it coincided most of the time).

It wasn’t as if she enjoyed socialising—goodness, no.

She’d rather just read and perhaps finish her schoolwork if she wasn’t trying to chart the current flow of history altogether. Yet if there was one thing that helping to cover for Harry and Ron at the DMLE against a jealous official or another taught her, it was that she always needed to know the social field.

(Harry had this inconvenient habit of leaving building on fire, or falling down, or falling down and on fire. Post-op reports have always shown him being able to justify the destruction—he has the bad luck of always attracting the worst foes specifically out looking for him—but people still think that he did it on purpose. Admittedly, he also has a problem scaling back the power on the spells he used, but Hermione considered bringing corridors down when he was supposed to cover his team’s retreat was a totally valid action. Though when those corridors are underground corridors, its collapse would understandably not spare the building above them. So…hmm, wait, she’d forgotten her point already.)

Hermione wasn’t naturally charismatic, or sympathetic that she can instantly connect with most people just by chatting with them on the spot—she knew that very well.

She could be arcane when she talked, she wasn’t the most sensitive to social cues, and she’d only gotten used to biting back her reflex to correct people when they said thing that were obviously
wrong a few years into her stint as an Unspeakable. Ah, *diplomatic*, that was the word Daphne kept using. It had taken Hermione a lot of effort to be more *diplomatic*.

But she had also found out that diligent background research covers a multitude of sins. Hermione was very good at research.

If she could find out who the officials that were currently complaining against Harry, she could find out how they got promoted to their current posting and what their policies had been. That way, she could already start seeing the pattern whether their dislike was because they consider Harry as an obstruction to what they do (say, rolling back the Auror force), or because they dislike his popularity (read: usually people who were aiming to be the next Minister for Magic or other high-profile posts).

Once she had started to gain a better idea of their motivation, she could find out who their allies and supporters are, or more importantly, who were their enemies. There would always be people who disagreed with those officials, and Hermione could reach out for them. These rivals have, in turn, usually kept track of those people’s careers longer than Hermione had. If she could build enough rapport to cooperate with them, they usually don’t mind giving her pointers on how to hit back.

Bullseye.

So, in the interests of surveying the students around her and collecting data of who might be an annoyance and who weren’t, there would be times when she had to get out of the circle of Tom’s halo. (Tom definitely had a *halo*. Students were respectful of him and/or they admired him. Many of them deferred to his authority or charisma easily and they saw him as some larger-than-life figure. She was going to get the associated benefits as long as she was near him, but she wasn’t going to see the more honest version of those students).

Hence her current choice to attend Advanced Astronomy instead of Advanced Charms.

She knew where the class was, there was no question. Yet since she was also interested to see just how accurate the sympathetic locating charm was, she tried it out on her syllabus too. She wanted to see whether the directions given would end up being the Astronomy Tower or Professor Dexter’s office. This casual stroll took her to a longer route she didn’t usually take, though she suspected it was one more often used by her Head of House. Well, she had the time, she can certainly walk around a bit.

That was when she saw the kids around the corner. She suspected that they were first or second years just from how short they were.

“Oh, look what we have here.” The childish voice had a high mocking tone. Hermione knew that tone because she heard it often enough before she came to Hogwarts the first time around. She drew back to be able to observe them unnoticed.

“Give it back!”

A girl was trying to take back a scroll from her classmate, who threw it to another witch behind her with a whoop of success. Her second tormentor unrolled it and waved it around.

“Look at this, ink blobs everywhere!”

“Ewww,” the other girls provided a chorus of disapprovals and disgust.

“Such ugly handwriting.” The first tormenter called out. The second one was now dodging the
girl’s furious attempt to get her scroll back.

“What a mess!”

“Yes. You’d think that she never knew how to write.” The first one said again.

“Maybe she doesn’t,” another piped up.

“Yes, because she lives with muggles, we all know what muggles are like.”

“Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shutup!” The girl was shouting now, but it wasn’t hard to see that she was tearing up. She shoved the girl who was holding the scroll up in frustration and that other girl fell on her bum, staring up in disbelief.

“So violent!”

“Yeah!”

“Exactly like all those muggles!”

“We’re going to tell the teachers on you!”

Hermione chose that moment to step out of the corner. “Really? And who are you going to report to? Because I think I can make the time to escort everyone there and wait as you tell the professors all your stories. In case there are…holes and missing parts in your stories, I can fill and correct them easily.”

She smiled, but her firm and steady voice carried the implicit threat of authority and the first-years froze (she was sure they were first-years now—that awkwardness with quills was telling).

“Hand me the scroll,” she ordered, and the witch holding it did so with guilt transparent on her face. She rolled it up with ease and made sure she stared everyone down. Not many could meet her gaze for long. Most of their ties were from Ravenclaw, with one from Gryffindor (that was tormenter number two).

“Tell me your names and the class you’re going to right now.”

One of them were apparently quick on the uptake. “But you’re not a prefect!”

“Two of my good friends are prefects, and do you really want me to get either of them here, right now? Especially one of our House’s prefects?” Hermione asked, waiting for realisation to sink in, “or are you just going to tell me your names and where you’re going to now?”

They clammed up quickly after that and did as they were told, even if it was reluctantly or sullenly, in the case of the ring leaders. Hermione memorised all six names with ease, along with a quick description of each (strong emotions were such a good memory booster).

“Now, do I have to escort you all to make sure you reach your potions and transfiguration class, or can I trust you to do that on your own?”

They quickly affirmed that they can absolutely be left to go alone.

“Good. Now, all of you can go off—except for Miss Hattie Perks here, who clearly needs some assistance for her handwriting. Now, go on, you do have to get to class, don’t you?”

They all hurried away, not questioning their luck of being able to escape her quickly. Hattie Perks,
however, looked mulish. She was a round-cheeked girl whose hair was kept in two braids, and her efforts to frown and look serious only gave her a pronounced pout. If Hermione wasn’t trying to calm her down right now, she would be tempted to laugh. Instead, she knelt down to be able to see eye-to-eye with the first-year. Her eyes were green and so close to Harry’s shade that she couldn’t help but miss him in that moment.

“Is this your scroll?” Hermione asked.

“You know it is.”

“No, I don’t really know, actually. I just knew that they took it from you. It could have been your friend’s scroll for all I know.”

Hattie gave her a look that clearly said ‘are you stupid?’ that kids seem to be so good at.

“Well?”

The little witch huffed. “It’s mine. They wouldn’t be saying all those things if it wasn’t, would they? It doesn’t matter that Dillingham has worse handwriting than I do, because she doesn’t have muggle parents and she doesn’t have large ink blots in her hands. Or Greengrass, but he comes from a pureblood family so nobody cares.”

Hattie started with complaining before she ended up ranting and yelling and her voice had started hitching at the end in a way that Hermione knew meant you’re holding back tears. She tugged the first-year into her arms. The little witch resisted at first, only standing there stiffly. As Hermione gently stroked her hair and made cooing sounds, she started to sob. She sat down and continued stroking the first-year’s back as the young witch cried her misery and anger out.

“It’s alright. I know how it feels.” Hermione said. “I used to practice writing with quills until late at night because I don’t want to look bad in class.”

The little witch looked up slowly, her nose had gone runny. “You do?”

“My parents don’t believe in writing with quills when we’ve already invented pens.”

“I know! Why do they have to be so…so…stupid!” She huffed with righteous indignation.

“Tradition,” Hermione said with a sigh, “is the perfect excuse for anything you don’t want to change. Now, the other thing you want to learn is cleaning spells. They’re really very handy. Here, give me your hands.”

With a quick twirl or three and a tap of her wand, Hattie’s hands became clean again.

“Purgo.”

“If you can do that after class or after doing your homework, no one can complain about your hands anymore. Here, try it after me. It’s not that hard, actually.”

Hattie was sceptical. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Come on, I’ll teach you.” Her reply was firm, leaving no room for doubt.

Hermione spent the next few minutes doing exactly that. She sat on the floor of a Hogwarts corridor with a first-year on her lap and teaching her the most basic of the cleaning spells. At the very least, it distracted Hattie enough from crying.
“There, it’s not so hard, is it?”

The younger witch shook her head. Hermione smiled as she moved to stand up and helped Hattie up as well.

“Now remember, you can always practice your handwriting outside class. And if you’re only drafting your homework instead of writing the final version, who would care if you still use pens?”

“But…” the first-year bit her lip in doubt.

“Seal your scrolls when you’re done writing in them,” Hermione told her. “I know a convenient sealing spell too. No one can open it without first unsealing it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Want me to teach you that one too? And the unsealing charm that comes with it?”

“Yes please!”

Hermione chuckled at her enthusiasm. “Alright, now pay attention…"

It didn’t take her too long. Between Hattie’s drive and her natural quickness, they made quick work of the next two spells too. Hermione made her practice on the contested scroll several times. Her enthusiasm when she’d succeeded was certainly gratifying to see. It wasn’t too bad to be reminded that she enjoyed teaching too. She just hadn’t been too charismatic at it back in her first round of Hogwarts years (again, she was too pedantic, and she didn’t realise that not everyone had her drive and obsession with learning).

She wanted to attend her Astronomy class, but Hermione thought she’d be pretty disruptive to the class if she entered now, with Hattie Perks in tow. She was determined to see their Head of House, after all, because someone had to know about what was happening.

“What do you think about visiting the library right now?”

Hattie gasped when she realised that she was missing her class right now. “But I have to go to Potions!”

“And you’re already a quarter of hour late. It’s fine, we can get a letter explaining your absence from Professor Dexter later—because we will be meeting Professor Dexter after he finishes teaching his class. It’s just too awkward for you to go in now.”

She could see the younger witch wanted to complain at first, before she seemed to consider it carefully and then nodded. “I guess so.”

They stood up, straightened their robes and readjusted their bags. That was when Hermione realised something.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I haven’t exactly introduced myself before, have I? I’m Hermione Curie, fifth-year.”

Hattie gasped and even left her mouth hanging open until Hermione closed it in amusement.

“You’re—you’re her!” The first-year said in excitement.

“I’m who?”
“You’re Hogwarts’ own Nightingale! You’re the one helping to heal people from Grindelwald’s attacks at the Ministry, right? I didn’t read the paper, but the third-year boys and higher have been talking about it so of course we all know!” She said excitedly. Hermione found it hard to take it seriously, because she knew the *Daily Prophet* article had a slant. *Alright, I have to admit that Tom knew something about media campaigns.*

“Well, I know of the principle ways that muggle weapons can wound people, yes. I just thought that it’s better to make sure that the front-line healers and nurses at St. Mungo’s does too.”

Hattie was still staring at her in silence, eyes wide. Hermione gave in to the urge to poke her button nose.

The first-year sniffed at that, but didn’t stop the staring, even when she was poked for the second time. Her green eyes were as big as saucers. Hermione had to bite the insides of her cheeks and even hold her breath once to stop herself from laughing or just squishing the first-year in a hug. It was just…her hero worship was too cute.

“The ones saving people in St. Mungo’s are still the healers and nurses, you know? I can’t even do much because I’m still a Hogwarts student. Obviously, I study all the time. I can’t be there like they can. I’ve passed on what I know, anyway.” Hermione explained, though staring at the shining pair of eyes made her doubt how much had just gone through. Well, she had time enough to try to change that.

“So, what were your potion class about to cover today?”

“I thought we were skipping class?” Hattie asked in confusion.

“It doesn’t mean I’m going to make you miss your lesson. I want you to still be able to answer any questions Professor Slughorn asks once you’re back in his class.” The brunette answered.

Hattie let out a long, disappointed sigh.

“Or, we can still get you to your potions class and I’ll even make the excuses you need to Professor Slughorn. He likes me, so he’ll listen even before we get an official letter about it.” Hermione suggested with ease.

“No!” The girl yelped. “I mean, no, it’s fine. We can certainly study together in the library!”

Hermione didn’t hide her grin, though she did look away to make it less obvious. Her voice when she spoke up again was steady and dependable.

“Right then. So, where were we…ah, how far has Professor Slughorn taught you in Potions class? Also, I’d like to see your syllabus once we’re in the library. I’ll need to check all the material you’ve gone through.”

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“Professor Dexter, we have a problem.” Hermione said.

Orphne Dexter, mostly known to his friends and colleagues as Orpheus, froze when he heard the words.

He’d thought that his most recent transfer student had simply chosen to attend Filius’ class than his for this afternoon, which was within Hermione Curie’s rights as someone who was trying to blitz through almost two years’ worth of classes in one. The teachers had checked her records and she
seemed to be capable of it, so they gave her the permission to try. So far, he’d heard no complaints from the teachers whose classes she’d attended.

Seeing her walk into his class after it was done, with a first-year in tow and a serious look on her face brought him out of his relatively pleasant assumptions. Something was definitely up. Some of the other students were watching her curiously, but most had decided that they have better things to do, like trying to watch (spy) the Hufflepuffs practicing quidditch this afternoon.

“Please take a seat, Hermione, and you too, Miss…?”

Hermione turned to the girl beside her. “Perks, Professor. Hattie Perks.”

The two of them took their seats. He didn’t miss the way Hattie was holding Hermione’s hand, or how she was sticking very close to her. She wasn’t exactly clinging yet, but it was very close.

“On my way to your class this afternoon, I encountered an interesting scene…”

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“Excuse me—oh,” Tom Riddle paused next to the doorway, black hair falling in well-formed waves. “I thought everyone was done. I’ll wait outside.”

“No, it’s alright, Mr. Riddle. We were just finishing. You might as well take another seat.” Professor Dexter replied. It was actually the polite and nice thing to do, because ‘waiting outside’ in the context of the Astronomy Tower was to walk all the way down the several flights of stairs to the bottom of the tower. If there was one thing the students of Hogwarts didn’t lack, it was basic exercise.

Hermione had turned around at the sound of the hinges creaking open and was not surprised to see Tom there. She was sure that he knew she’d had another Astronomy class tonight, and thus wouldn’t be free for any meetings this evening. He might just have more news he had to share with her right now.

“Those girls needed to be given a warning. I’ll tell Albus about the one from his House.” Dexter said again before turning to the first-year. “But even with that, I don’t think I can give you any guarantees that they’ll absolutely stop, Hattie.”

Hattie Perks shook her head, her twin braids shaking with her, her face serious. “It’s fine, Professor. Hermione taught me the cleaning charm, so my hands would never be dirty with ink again. She taught me other spells too! I can take care of myself.”

Hermione could see that their Head of House was also struggling to contain the urge to beam at the little witch. The brunette looked away before their gazes met and they failed to control their laughter. Hattie would be displeased and it would be bad. She heard Professor Dexter speaking up again.

“Well, that’s good to know. But do tell me if they try anything else, will you, Hattie? It’s not just about you. Hermione might have known about them bothering you, but who’s to say they’re not bothering someone else? So, if you tell me about them, I’ll be watching them more intently as well to make sure they’re not bothering anyone, not just you.”

“And you know you can always tell me,” Hermione said.

Hattie’s eyes were wide when she turned to Hermione. “Really?”
“Yes. Really. Now, here’s Professor Dexter’s letter to Professor Slughorn to explain your absence —be careful not to lose it.” The brunette reminded Hattie that she hadn’t taken the letter from the table yet. The first-year nodded and secured it in her bag.

“Thank you, Professor, Hermione.”

“You’re welcome, Hattie.” Professor Dexter said warmly. Hermione gave pretty much the same answer.

“Thanks for your time, Professor.”

“Oh, not at all, Hermione! I’m thankful that you’d thought to intervene, actually. It’s not as if us Heads of Houses actually have a lighter teaching load than other teachers,” he said wryly.

“I couldn’t have stood by.” She answered.

The professor snorted. “Many would have. ‘It’s just kids’, they’ll say, or ‘it’s not my business’”

“The only thing that evil needs to win, is for good to stand by and do nothing,” Hermione replied, her voice grave. It caused her teacher to look up and see the weight she carried in her eyes.

“It’s personal to you, isn’t it?” He asked softly.

“Unfortunately.” She replied. “But I’m sure I’m boring you with my certitudes, Professor and you have other things to do…”

It was after a few more words of assurance from the Astronomy teacher and leave-taking from Hermione that they finally left, with Tom giving a brief and polite goodbye as well.

The stairs down Astronomy Tower were fortunately wide enough for them. It was a little tight whenever Hermione stepped a little too fast that she forgot to fall behind Hattie, but it wasn’t the steep murder devices that was tower stairs in most medieval castles. The slope was gentler, perhaps already made with rowdy first-years in mind. Hogwarts certainly was better planned and designed.

“You’re one of the prefects, aren’t you?” Hattie asked, turning around towards Tom. Hermione couldn’t help holding the young witch’s shoulder because stepping sideways down stairs wasn’t what she’d call a safe idea.

“Pardon me?” Tom said.

“Hermione said that she knew two prefects. I think I’ve just found out that one of them is you.”

Hermione sighed. “Alright. I should’ve introduced you properly. Tom, this is Hattie Perks. I came across her having some problems with her year mates when I was on the way to Astronomy. Hattie, this is Tom Riddle, one of my good friends and yes, he is a Slytherin prefect, as you can see from his badge.”

Hattie beamed. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Riddle.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Miss Perks.” Tom gave her a slight bow. He managed this even as they were walking down.

“Don’t even try to curtsy on the stairs, Hattie,” Hermione warned. The girl froze when she realised what she was doing, and Hermione let out a relieved sigh that she’d averted that potential accident. She did send Tom an exasperated look because he started it, but all she got out of him was an
amused chuckle.

“You didn’t tell me one of the prefects you knew is your beau!” Hattie said in stage whisper the next time Hermione accidentally fell into step next to her. She rolled her eyes.

“He’s not my beau.”

“He went to your class to find you. He’s definitely your beau.” She said this without a doubt.

Hermione could see Tom trying to hide his smile at the conversation. The brunette didn’t even bother to whisper her answer. “I’m pretty sure I would know if he was my beau. There’s just been no signs of it.”

“Really?” Tom asked, eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Yes, really. We’ve never gone on dates,” she pointed out.

“You’ve agreed to one this weekend.” He said, providing countermanding evidence. “And there is still time for the rest.”

She decided to just get straight to the point. “You’ve never asked.”

“For a date? But I just did.”

He was playing dense. She narrowed her eyes at him and smiled. “Oh, I don’t know. I mean, if Evariste or Auguste or Daedalus asked whether they can call on me, I really would have no reason to say no.”

She really owed Daphne for giving her all the proper pureblood terms for the closest thing they had to casual dating, which she was sure hadn’t even entered the non-magical vocabulary in this era. Second point in her favour; she wasn’t exactly the insecure Hermione from her youth. She’d never let her hopes and expectations on one wizard to affect her own plans and entire life ever again. Tom’s eyes narrowed even as his smile stayed the same.

“Really?”

“You’re supposed to ask her! Ask her right now!” Hattie hissed in a panic as she waved her arms wildly, unfazed by Hermione’s occasional attempt to hold her whenever her balance seemed to be wavering. “Don’t be a clod and mess this up!”

Hermione couldn’t help it—she laughed. She was sure that the cough she heard from Tom’s direction was him trying to disguise the same thing. Hattie was unamused by the teenagers not taking her seriously as she huffed and turned her backs on both of them.

“Taking into account Miss Perks’ advice,” Tom formally began, “would you allow me to call upon you, Hermione?” She half expected him to actually say ‘my lady’ at the end. He was that formal.

“Why, Tom, I thought you’d never ask. You most certainly can.” She didn’t hide the dry edge in her reply as she gave her reply in the poshest pureblood accent she could.

She counted it as a score on her side when she saw him covering his mouth with his fist, even if there were no outward sounds of laughter.

“You’re both too slow,” Hattie complained, still grumbling in front of them and determinedly not turning around. “I don’t know what you’d do if I wasn’t here.”
Hermione had to hide her face in Tom’s shoulder before she broke out in another peal of laughter.

They both escorted Hattie all the way to Ravenclaw Tower, the girl proudly bidding her goodbye by the wide-open doorway. Hermione smiled at that—she was probably showing off who had accompanied her this afternoon. It must have been some sort of exciting adventure to her, to have skipped class with a fifth year. She closed the door to the Ravenclaw dorms and ignored the changing riddle on its surface.

“We need a headquarters.” Hermione stated as they walked together down the hallway.

“I assume you were talking about the Society.”

“Yes. I was about to talk about this before you pulled me into the meeting with all the Germans and I forgot about it. If we’re going to be pooling all the information and be one of the primary hubs of coordination for the search, we’d need a permanent place to hang a large map of Europe on one of the walls and tack the results on. We’ll also need shelves and shelves to keep any report and I don’t see you wanting to share the Room of Requirement with them.”

“Not really, no.”

“So, it’s going to be one of the spare classrooms, then.” She surmised.

“Hogwarts has a multitude of them. I’m sure the castle can spare one. It’s just a matter of talking with a house elf, telling them what we need and let them find one that fulfils the conditions we need.”

“Alright, I’ll let you pass that task to one of your minions.” Hermione said.

“Minions, Hermione?” His expression was mildly disapproving.

“Friends! I mean, your friends! Merde, Tom, it’s obvious what they are to you that I forget not to outright call them that sometimes,” she said, ignoring his repressed grin. “Pardon my French.”

“Of course. You said something about being one of the hubs of the search, but not the only one. Who were you thinking of sharing with?”

They were taking one of the grand staircases going down that would end right across the castle’s exit to its grounds in three flights. There was no need to look for shortcuts right now, as they still had plenty of time. Hermione mulled over it carefully.

“It’s not that I want to share, it’s that I think it would be inevitable. Wouldn’t the Ministry still want to show that they play a significant role in the search? They can’t just let all the foreigners hog all the glory, right? And who are we? Hogwarts students? The embarrassment might be even worse. I’m quite certain the Aurors would be involved because of this.”

“Or, they could have started a second search network,” he posited. Hermione frowned.

“That’s inefficient. I’m sure they’d want to know what the French and the Germans have found, for one, and it would be useful for us to find out where they’ve gone to and what they’ve found out.”

“How about two search networks that’s still connected and exchange information? One would be ours, the other would be the Ministry’s. That would prevent overlaps in areas.”
Hermione nodded at that as they made their way down stairs and more stairs. They passed students from different years going up on the other side. Recently reminded about her minor celebrity status in Hogwarts, Hermione could easily ignore their looks and expressions of interest in her direction.

“Now, we need to come up with a believable figurehead.”

She saw his look of inquiry and answered him before he said anything. “Because the Ministry isn’t going to take us seriously if they see that it’s a group of Hogwarts students. Obviously, we now need a figurehead that we can work with, as opposed to someone stupid enough to try to take over the project from us. Someone who the Ministry can see as a dependable adult, someone they’d simply leave alone. Naturally, this means it has to be someone with some sort of proven track record.”

“Merlin, Hermione, when you ask for something, you go straight for the sun and stars, don’t you?” Tom said this with a tone of one who found it all to be a great lark—and was now wondering if they can up the challenge and go for the crown jewels while they were at it.

“Oh, don’t pretend you don’t do exactly the same thing.” Hermione said without rancour.

They went down one floor without saying much, both too deep in their thoughts and considerations to converse, finding that it still suited them.

“Have you started charting?” He asked.

“There’s just no time.”

“You can drop two of your classes—”

“No,” she insisted, “I’m sure I can turn a few of them into independent research and then I’ll have more room to move without sacrificing my academic standards. I’m sure I’d have time this weekend. It doesn’t mean I don’t remember some of my rough calculations before though.” As in, the calculations she’d made before she suddenly found herself in Hogwarts again, in a younger body and missing memories. Oh, and half a century back.

She turned to him, watching the placid dark blue eyes. “Why do you ask?”

“It’s something you’ve raised yourself before.” He said.

“Really?”

“Yes. How many people can actually kill Grindelwald? No, let’s change the equation, because given time, effort and intense preparation on the field of encounter to tip the odds in our favour, we can earn ourselves a place within that set. Yet we know that’s not what matters here. Now, how many people does the wizarding world believe can kill Grindelwald? And who are they?” Tom asked.

Hermione inhaled sharply. “Oh. I think I see where you’re going.”

“Yes. That would be our current conundrum. It would be easiest if we can get someone from that set, but the search itself would take time.”

She sighed. It was too bad that Lockhart wasn’t around yet. He really was a convenient catspaw when you need one. He certainly wouldn’t mind being a fake front, and his skills were nowhere near a threat to them while the man had polished his credentials to such perfect shine that everyone else is taken in by the projected image.
To think that one day, I’d actually miss Lockhart. Life sure is strange.

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Chapter End Notes

Additional Notes:

Hattie Perks (OC): First-year Ravenclaw. A muggleborn young witch with light brown hair and green eyes, she hasn’t adapted well to Hogwarts when Hermione meets her. Has the same last name as the witch that was missing from Harry and Hermione’s graduating class, Sally-Anne Perks.

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**27 O Tempora O Mores**

**Chapter Summary**

*Hello prejudice, my old friend. Hermione sees a first-year Gryffindor with an odd gait. Tom dispenses unexpectedly good advice. In which Hermione realises that she does care. Hermione stays on her Path with her principles.*

**Chapter Notes**

This is the *other* bonus chapter (since I apparently uploaded the last one at the wrong date, in case you've forgotten). Don't thank me until you've finished reading it - you may yet come to regret it. Also, Happy Vesak Day for all the Buddhists celebrating! It's definitely a public holiday where I'm from.

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Some technical notes on AO3's "Download Story" feature:

So, I was testing the 'download' feature recently that allows you to download the entire work in one go from AO3 (I tried this out on my computer). It's convenient for people who aren't on a computer, much less have my compulsive habit of saving the fanfics I read by chapter to my computer in the old-school html format as webpage (yes, I do that. I know it's kinda old school. *I know*). That's how I can easily give recommendations for fics in any fandom I've read before, because all I need to do is check that archive in my hard drive.

**The verdict:**

#1) PDF. Pick this if you can. It's the best, honest.
All the story is in there, with the end notes and all the pictures. I would have no idea that this is in anyway extraordinary if I hadn't tried epub format first (my usual preferred format to download fics from the internet).

#2) HTML. Story and end notes preserved intact (thankfully). Seems like only the cover picture and another one or two others were saved? I have no idea why.

#Second-from-last) mobi: Story and author's notes are here, but no pictures. The formatting also feels a bit awkward to me, but that might just be my suboptimal reader. Not bad for a no-frills format, but you could definitely do better.

#Dead Last) epub: SA is screwed in this format - the end notes doesn't show (and that's where I put my glossary and notes on details, dammit). Let's not even mention the pictures. Violently *not* recommended.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
They were going down on their last leg of the stairway when she noticed the student.

Something about his gait was off and drew her eye. He was small, probably a first or second year. He seemed to be walking up normally, but she could recognise the careful way he held himself and how not fluid his movements are. It was as if he was trying to avoid pulling a muscle—*or triggering the pain from a current injury to his side*, she thought.

Hermione had moved before she realised it, pulling her arm away from Tom’s.

To his credit, he’d let her go and just opted to follow. She fell into step behind the young wizard, noticing his Gryffindor tie in a second.

“Going back from playing quidditch?” She asked.

He stared at her strangely. “First-years aren’t allowed to bring their own brooms.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t borrow the school ones. It’s certainly not being used *now.*” Hermione said.

His face became more open as he considered the possibility with wonder. It was fascinating to see how simple finding joy seems to be for kids.

“We can borrow it?” He asked.

“Anyone can borrow it as long as they sign their names. You can play a pick-up game of quidditch that way,” she said. “The older kids usually already brought their own brooms with them, so it’s usually available for the younger years.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Oh, it is,” she assured him. Tom was trailing a few steps behind her. She knew this since she’d seen him move. She let the silence fall for a few moments.

“Are you alright?” Hermione asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t just say it because everyone expects to hear it. It’s alright to say you’re not fine when you’re hurt, you know?” She said.

The brunette could see his shoulders stiffening for a moment. He didn’t answer her, but he didn’t deny it either.

“I’m Hermione Curie,” she said.

“…Adrian Smith.” He stole a glance or two at her but didn’t say anything. *Sheesh, this kid is tough.*

“Do you know that for some healing spells, it’s a lot more effective when you cast them when the patient is wearing less layers of clothing than when they’re bundled up?” She asked.

She watched him freeze before turning to her with the expression of a startled deer. She dearly
hoped he wasn’t planning on bolting.

“Do you?” She asked, still casual. “I’d like to cast several on you, but it wouldn’t work as well compared to if we were to sit down somewhere and you can take your robe off.”

“And please don’t try to run. That would just be annoying for everyone involved, and I’m sure you don’t want to annoy me.” Tom had come up on her other side.

She didn’t turn around, but she suspected that his smile was one of those that looked nice but actually really isn’t. Poor Adrian just deflated at that. She wanted to tell Tom to stop scaring the poor kid, but he did make it easier. She could always put the poor kid at ease later.

“Right! It’s nice to have your cooperation. Now, let’s find a nice empty class to turn to at this landing, alright?”

Adrian Smith was genuinely afraid when they herded him to an empty classroom. Hermione kept the door open because she worried that the poor kid was going to have a heart attack otherwise. She kept up a mild chatter, asking him the standard questions about what year he was in, and how he’d found Hogwarts so far. She’d informed him that she was a fifth-year, and the Slytherin prefect next to her was also a fifth-year.

When she asked him what his favourite drink was, and when she assured him that she can show him a shortcut to the kitchens to get some, she could see him starting to relax. It was enough for her to get him to sit down on a chair and coax him to open his shirt.

The bruises she saw there made her grit her teeth, but she kept her expression pleasant. She was only going to scare the poor kid otherwise. He was already swinging his legs a little as she cast healing spell after healing spell. It was mostly just *Episkey*, but there was a more complicated one she had to use when he winced as she carefully pressed his back. Internal bruising was beyond the reach of the usual *Episkey*.

The Gryffindor first-year insisted that he’d only fallen down the stairs. Hermione wasn’t sure she can convince him to tell her otherwise. Heck, she healed him because she wasn’t sure if she could persuade him to go to the infirmary. She’d assured him that she was done and he could button his shirt up. Yet she had no idea what she could do for the rest of his troubles.

It was Tom who spoke up when Hermione was worrying her lip with her teeth.

“You know that you have to strike back, don’t you?” Tom asked.

Adrian looked up at him with the same startled expression Hermione had seen before. Tom was leaning against a wall, casually twirling his wand. “If you don’t do that, they’ll see you as easy picking for the rest of the year. Do you actually want to be a punching bag for a whole year?”

He stared at Tom uncertainly. “I thought prefects are supposed to tell us not to hit other people?”

Tom smiled. It was the sort of grin that a mouse sees before the snake clamps its jaws around its neck and breaks it.

“Who said anything about attacking? There are many ways life can get inconvenient. Someone’s shoelaces might always be untied or always tied to each other. Any glass of milk they touch might instantly curdle, or all bottles of butterbeer turn to vinegar. Ink bottles refuse to close properly near them, though it is such a pity about all those scrolls in the bag, isn’t it? Look at all the homework
that has to be redone. It’s such a shame.”

Adrian’s eyes were wide. “That’s…”

“Accidents happen all the time.” His voice was deceptively soft. “There happened to be a book in the library titled ‘Beginner’s Curses, Hexes and Jinxes’. Prove that you’re not an idiot and learn the spells in it.”

“Yes, Sir!”

He seemed amused to have earned the breathless respect of a Gryffindor firstie.

Well, Hermione really didn’t want to condone revenge, but she wasn’t sure if the Gryffindor prefects didn’t already have too much on their hands to handle watching yet another first-year. And Tom was being helpful—much more than anything she could’ve done short of hovering over the poor kid all day. If she had to balance between Adrian’s bruises and some other kids getting curdled milk, she would certainly go for the curdled milk.

“How do you know all that, Tom?” She asked curiously.

“I was a first-year once, Hermione,” he answered. “The lions are fools enough to mark him so. The snakes, on the other hand, have never left a bruise. A first-year has to be very creative.”

His expression was perfectly placid, as always. Unaffected. He was no less serene than a cloud passing over the world, it gave an ethereal air to his already striking looks, leaving observers with the impression of seeing some otherworldly prince.

Yet she couldn’t do the same. She couldn’t hold on to the same distance and disinterest even when she was aware that it was something already past. Hermione hadn’t expected the surge of anger she’d felt, along with the futile wish that she’d been a first-year with him. Though what a tiny Hermione could do when she hadn’t studied that much magic yet was questionable. It didn’t change her wish. It didn’t stop her from moving now.

“Hermione?”

He sounded surprised. She did just suddenly hug him without any warning. His bewilderment didn’t stop him from closing his arms around her in turn. When did his presence became something solid and reliable for her? When did she found him a dependable partner, regardless of some of the differences in their opinions?

“I’m sorry,” she said, knowing it was inadequate but having nothing else to offer.

“For what? It’s not your fault.” Tom said, still not quite understanding.

Hermione chuckled in surprise. She had thought mercy to be beyond him. She hadn’t realised that it also meant that sympathy was beyond him, even if it was directed towards himself.

She pulled herself away. There was still Adrian to face for now.

“No, but I’m sorry you had to go through that. I wished so much that I was already at Hogwarts then, just so I can make them pay. I don’t know what first-year me would have been able to do, but I’m sure I can come up with something when I have enough incentive,” she said, her hand still on his upper arm.

It was his turn to be surprised, startled into stillness at his spot. There was a deeper emotion
churning in his eyes, but she didn’t have time to observe it right now. Hermione had returned to Adrian Smith again, kneeling in front of his chair to be of the same height. He had just finished putting on the rest of the layers of his Hogwarts uniform and was fiddling with his tie.

“If you still have troubles after this, find me in the Ravenclaw Tower. Look for Hermione Curie, don’t forget that.” She said.

“B-but I’m a Gryffindor.” He was confused.

She stared at the ceiling and counted to three, exhaling a long and annoyed sigh. “And I’m a Ravenclaw and Tom’s a Slytherin. We’re in Hogwarts and there are four Houses here. I don’t see a problem, Adrian. Do you?”

Perhaps it was her use of his first name that did it, but she could see him swallow with difficulty before he rubbed his eyes with the sleeves of his forearm.

Hermione spoke again. “Listen carefully. Don’t let some foolish Ravenclaw ignore you either when you knock, just because you’re a first-year. Tell them that you have a message to leave at Lucretia Black’s dorm, and if someone wants to be responsible for the message not getting through, you’re fine with it. Ask for their name. I can promise you that anyone would rather forward the message than getting called out for obstructing Lucretia. Do you remember all that?”

“Leave a message for Hermione Curie at Lucretia Black’s dorm?”

“Good.”

“Or, you can tell him to leave a message for one Hattie Perks, first-year Ravenclaw,” Tom interrupted. He’d come up with a better alternative on the spot. “Ask her to pass it to Hermione and I’m sure Hattie would do exactly that.”

Wow, I didn’t think of that before, Hermione was slightly stunned at how fast he made connections.

Adrian Smith nodded firmly, with much more confidence than before.

“I’ll remember.”

He had stood up now, picking up his bag with an ease that Hermione didn’t see before. It eased a weight in her chest. Instead of directly leaving, Adrian cautiously walked towards Tom. He stopped a metre away and gazed up solemnly.

“You don’t look weak at all,” he stated carefully.

Tom had a smirk on his face. It struck Hermione that Tom wasn’t hiding who he was right now, that dangerous edge that he usually folded away was in full display. This also included that frisson of magic that had a noticeably dark component to it. It did not seem to discomfort the first-year at all.

“Oh, I don’t?”

The Gryffindor nodded. “You don’t. Why would they pick you?”

“Well, most first-years would not have managed to look dangerous yet. To tell the truth, most first-years aren’t dangerous.” He replied.

“So, you became dangerous.” Adrian mused.
“Oh yes, I certainly did.”

The first-year stared at his shoes, lost in his thoughts for a while before he looked up again.

“Do you think…do you think you can teach me how?”

Tom laughed. The sound was free and captivating, but it was not exactly safe. It was a call of the wild.

“Are you sure you’d want to learn from me?”

Tom stared him down, but the Gryffindor first-year didn’t waver, resolutely staring back.

“I will promise you power, but it will not be easy. I’m not part of your pride, little lion. I don’t forgive people just because they say they’re sorry. I don’t let people walk away from their promise, just because they’re having second thoughts. Once you’re with me, you’re with me.” The last words were said in a low voice, implying a promise tied with something more than just words, perhaps with blood and magic.

“I do, however, value loyalty and obedience.” He finished, as calm as he’d been.

Hermione found herself trying to stop Adrian by reflex before she held herself back. What was she going to do, anyway? It was clear that no one had seen what happened to him in Gryffindor Tower. She’d already considered that the prefects might have too much on their hands, didn’t she? And Tom was with her. He wasn’t going to chance madness and death via dark arts—he liked it a lot less than she did.

Even if he was sounding really like a dark lord right now.

“**I do.** Want to learn from you, I mean. I do.” Adrian confirmed.

She had a feeling that Pettigrew wasn’t going to be Tom’s first Gryffindor follower anymore. That is, if he was ever that in the first place.

“Find a Slytherin first-year called…hmm, what was his name, again? Rosier. There’s a first-year by the name of Jonah Rosier. Tell him that Tom Riddle sent you to join. He’ll tell you what to do.”

“I…” The Gryffindor’s throat seemed to close up. Tom was watching him with the magnanimity that a king afforded to his subjects easily, simply to show that he can.

“Thank you.”

“Why, you’re welcome, Adrian.” He patted the first year on his shoulder.

Standing so much straighter now and with a far more confident nod, Adrian Smith awkwardly took his leave from Tom, pausing by Hermione to thank her and bid his goodbye as well.

“So,” Hermione said, “that happened.”

Tom pushed back against the wall and stalked towards her. The classroom door closed with a wave of his hand. They were face-to-face now, and she found her hands over his lapels without a thought.

“I was wondering,” he began, “whether you truly wish to have been a first-year at Hogwarts. You do realise that it’s already history, don’t you?”
She could feel that he’d been holding the question back for a while as he stared at her with a weighted expectation.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“‘Yes, Tom. Yes, I very much know that it’s past, that I can’t change it. I know that it doesn’t even need to be changed because obviously, you’re very much fine right now.’” She read out all her own objections at the top of her head easily because she’d already tried listing them to herself. It still didn’t work that much better either at easing her concern.

She raised her hand to the side of his face and their gazes met. His expression was completely open to her right now, with none of his personas and pretence. The most dominant she could see was bafflement. Tom still couldn’t understand why.

“It doesn’t stop me from wishing it all the same, from wanting to be a tiny Hermione, sending jinxes and hexes at them. I’ll send ones so embarrassing that they’d rather not tell who the culprit is when they reach the infirmary. I’m sure little me can find an explosive diarrhoea curse and rash-in-suspicious-places hexes somewhere while she rationalises that she’s doing this to help her friend, so it’s alright.”

“Tiny Hermione?” He was enchanted at the image. She sniffed.

“Obviously I was short as a first year and I’m sure you weren’t tall either. Look, I know my annoyance doesn’t make sense. It’s just something that you feel when you care about someone, alright? You hate to see them hurt. You want to destroy the source of their pain and make them feel better, even if it was something that happened in—”

He kissed her and this time it was all fervour and fire, as if the very flames of life would die within him if he did not feed it with her own spark. And oh, he certainly fed her spark, caressed her with a devoted desperation of a man ensuring the dryad of his dreams was not merely his delusions.

It should have been telling for her, then, that she understood his sharp gasps as he laid his forehead on her shoulder while she held him close. It was the breathing of someone recently resurfaced from a deep dive and just enjoying air again. It was the relieved exhale of Robinson Crusoe when he found out that he was not alone on the island, and therefore not fated to slowly drive himself mad without another human being to talk to.

It’s impossible to truly understand what loneliness is like unless you’ve had company before.

Hermione was beginning to suspect that Tom had thought that it was completely normal to make your way through life alone, untouched by anyone or anything around you and connecting with nothing either. To find out that it didn’t have to be that way was an understandable shock.

It should have been telling that she wanted to keep holding him close, to let her hands wander and caress with a gentleness that many people in her time would say was undeserved. Well, she could have chosen to just leave far away and let the British wizarding world sort out its own problems, after all. She’d done her part. Yet she didn’t. Hermione made her choice to stay and fight again.

_He who fights monsters should look into it that he himself does not become a monster_, Nietzsche had warned. Hermione knew her limits well enough by now that she’d so far successfully held herself back from becoming a witch that ended up devouring the land with destruction and death. Yet she was only too aware that you cannot work closely with someone and remain indifferent to them or their fate.
People become attached.

“Does this mean that you’ve decided to stay, Hermione?” He asked.

Hermione couldn’t help stiffening at first, before she forced herself to relax.

“What do you mean?”

He chuckled. She could feel the vibrations easily as they were still in each other’s embrace.

“You’re not a very good liar. I could see it when you were still in the infirmary and recovering your strength. It did not matter that you were transferred to Hogwarts with all your appropriate papers following. It did not matter that you had nothing but the clothes on your back and your wand. If you had found a clue about those who had attacked you, if you thought it was a better idea to leave and hunt, you would have done that without a second thought.”

Tom stepped back, and her gaze met his dark blue one. He was calm and assured; it made it harder for her to deny his words. Hermione had sneaked out of the infirmary at night a few days before she was discharged to see what she could pick up from the location that she’d woken up in at the Forbidden Forest.

She had found nothing.

There were no recent steps but hers walking out. There were no residual traces of strong magic around the place, and certainly nothing like anyone apparating on Hogwarts grounds. There goes an easy way to start her investigation.

“You’ve told me yourself—you do not fear death.” He said, simply.

“You said that you will always fight a dark lord whenever you find him. You know Grindelwald is one, you take a dim view of his supporters and sympathisers, and you can fight. You are more than capable holding your own against a few extremists and even more than that if you did not face them head on. You are aware of the fight against him in the continent. To take the final conclusion that you can easily leave Hogwarts to fight on your own when you think that it’s necessary, is merely an exercise in logic.”

“But I’ve said that I’ll assist you, and that’s as good as a promise,” she murmured.

“And I’m sure you’ve realised just as easily that technically, you would still be assisting me if you choose to fight Grindelwald directly, right now, in Europe.” He answered, easily seeing the true implications she’d left within her own words.

How did he see that?

It is true that she did not exactly lie about who she is, nor did she hide what she thought was important to her. But most would not have thought that as much as she loved learning, as much as she loved being in Hogwarts again, she had never considered being here indispensable. She understood Evariste’s restlessness and the French Gryffindors’ rowdiness. She could sympathise with Sigmund’s prompt agreement and the Germans’ thirst for action.

“I’ll ask again, Hermione. Have you decided to stay?” Tom Riddle asked.

Would she leave now? Take off to the continent and directly help some of the teams searching for Grindelwald’s base? Fight his hexenmeisters where she encountered them? Would she accept the possibility that she might have to use fatal spells? Sooner or later, she will kill someone in her
battles.

*He who fights monsters should look into it that he himself does not become a monster.*

No, she knew how to stay away from that slippery slope. She, Harry and Ron had always helped each other that way, to remind themselves of their humanity. It was why she could appreciate Luna’s chatter now (it was soothing), or gardening with Neville. It was even why she didn’t mind occasionally having tea with Ginny and Daphne, and then listen to the Slytherin act outraged at all the blasphemies against fashion and good sense that every other passer-by was committing (it was always hilarious). Ginny would insist that Hermione update her wardrobe and let her help at it. It was how she could even listen to Draco complain about the most recent idiotic Act he had to read on the Wizengamot. Draco, one has to admit, has complaining down to an art form—he was even witty about it.

…but they’re not here, are they? She was alone. If she went off on her own to Europe, would she be able to hold on to her humanity that easily? To remember that all the fight is to save people and that the killing is incidental? That it was not her life’s purpose or achievement to be able to kill as many people as quickly as possible?

*(Wait, why did I even think that? I dread to know the memories that I’ve forgotten…)*

*We’re not alone,* a younger, more optimistic part of her reminded Hermione. *We’re really not.*

She already has friends who would not leave her alone here, friends who would gladly support her. Then, there’s also the enigmatic wizard standing in front of her.

Hermione had a feeling that if she were to step up to his side, he would never let her go. ‘Possessive’ was a word too light to describe him. *(Oh, we can always leave,* her wiser, cannier self that she calls ‘Unspeakable Hermione’ said, *we can destroy him, kill him, and then leave. That option always exists).*

Yet she already found it difficult to do that, hadn’t she? Especially when he was well avoiding the worst depths of the dark arts. He wasn’t killing people and now she was just going to kill him because she wanted to leave easily, without fuss? To kill simply because it was convenient, wasn’t that the first step towards being a Dark Lady? He still argued, of course, and she argued right back, but he also listened.

Attachments form.

Tom, to his credit, gave her time. Yet she was sure she’d seen something new in his eyes; a glimmer of hope.

“What if I chose to stay?” She asked, giving her curiosity a free rein.

“Well, I’m not sure I can offer you anything you deserve, considering that I don’t have a penny to my name.” Tom casually said. Hermione raised a sceptical eyebrow. *Technically,* he was an orphan, yes, but it wasn’t as if he hadn’t been pulling the strings of several pureblooded Slytherins already.

“But there is this wizarding world that’s been ripe for the taking for a while.” He added, no less flippant. She couldn’t help the smile that was starting to break through her reserve.

“Is there, now?”

“Yes. We can take it, the two of us together.”
She would have replied as flippantly if she hadn’t seen him staring at her without waver...st that towered over any mere zealot. He took it as a matter of fact that the world was his and that he’ll take it one day. Yet she had a feeling that there was a part of that faith that he accorded to her too, though she had no idea where to begin to measure it.

“You have to know, I won’t ignore people looking down on muggleborns.” She said.

He huffed. “Obviously. I’m not blind, Hermione. What are those first-years you were collecting earlier otherwise?”

“My background would give you problems.”

He waved it away. “Your background is whatever we’ll make it to be.”

She scoffed. “How do you change muggleborns?”

“I’m sure your parents are muggleborns who’re descended from several generations of squibs,” Tom said as easily. One really should admire the speed of his reasoning and his mental flexibility. Though his ability to lie without even blinking might be a bit concerning to most.

“The wizarding houses don’t always track them beyond the second or third generation.”

Hermione blinked. “You’re taking this far easier than I’d thought.”

“I did read about Mendelian genetics. Being at Hogwarts is no excuse to be uncultivated,” was his dry reply. “Besides, power is power, no matter the source.”

“Your inner group leans toward pureblood supremacy,” she pointed out.

“Always change the bait according to the fishes you actually wish to catch,” he replied. The brunette stared at him in disbelief.

“You…you were faking it?” She asked, dismayed. He didn’t lose his smirk.

“Faking is such an ugly word, it’s so…déclassé. I knew what they wanted and offered them their dreams, Hermione. I can be whatever they wanted me to be, and I am always what I needed to be to win.”

“You built a persona to sell to them.” She stared at him as realisation sets in.

“It’s not really that hard to create yet another self and step into it if you’ve always been trying them out all your life.” He smiled and it really was very charming. The irony of it was that it was probably one of the few times that he meant it—he was proud of his skills as any artist would be.

In that moment, she saw a young Tom Riddle; the orphan who did not quite fit in with his detachment from the others. He does not understand them, he could not be them and the other children disliked and feared him for his difference. He knew he could not stay that way if he did not want to face their suspicions all his life.

Yet he was intelligent and highly observant. Thus, what he did was to perfect his imitation.

Hermione spluttered “You-you… That pureblood agenda of yours would have cost many muggleborns their lives!”
“And if I were to take up the cause of the muggleborns, Hermione, do you think they would not call for an overhaul of the Ministry selection system? Like the one Minister Spencer-Moon is working on, perhaps? Why, let us even question the competence of the staff that is already employed now! I have no doubt that there are many purebloods that are incompetent in the Ministry, but if you were to fire half of the people working there immediately, how many families have you just consigned to losing their income? You should also remember that these people have not the slightest idea of how to live in modest economy.”

Tom slid some of her errant curls back behind her left ear.

“It is certainly not a quick death, but is a slower one through poverty better?”

“They wouldn’t do that…”

“Oh, give the average man power, and you’ll soon turn them into tyrants. How did Robespierre’s republicans fare when they held power, by the way? They had such wonderful values too; they wish to avoid embroiling the state in excessive wars, to push for universal male suffrage. Values many people still believe in even now.” Tom’s grin was sharper than a knife.

“Did those idealists became wise and enlightened rulers?” He asked.

It was a rhetorical question for both of them.

Robespierre started the Reign of Terror, yet he had been such an idealistic young man that his nickname was l’Incorruptible, ‘the Incorruptible’, and it was a title that not even his enemies could disagree with. None was more surprised about his violent drive once they’ve risen to power than the moderate allies he sent to the guillotine himself.

“The fastest way to unite a group of people, is to give them a common enemy.” Tom said.

“Whichever path you will take, you will always find an enemy for the people,” she stated. Hermione had seen the dark side of his sentence all too easily, to understand his methods for herself.

He shook his head.

“I don’t find anything. Everyone already know who their enemies are. After all, they always insist on telling me about them, complaining about all these people who don’t understand and are making their life difficult. If only someone would come and help stop these people from being so troublesome…”

“Fear,” Hermione breathed out slowly. “You were always going to use fear, uncertainty and doubt, aren’t you?”

Tom acknowledged her with a brief nod. “It’s the easiest of various strings to pull. It certainly doesn’t mean I cannot use others—one must always be flexible.”

It was all…it was all a game to him, wasn’t it? All these strings crisscrossing the world and people—he wanted to be able to control most of them, and so he entered this game. It did not matter which of the puppets he’d had to cut away. The games might change, the puppets that followed him and moved to follow his orders might change, the puppets whose strings were cut and were thus eliminated might also change. He will simply keep up.

“Adapt. Evolve. That’s your byword,” she whispered. “You easily change your form to best overcome any obstacle in your way.”
He looked surprised but pleased.

“Why, yes. Certainly.”

To him, all that mattered was that he ended at the top.

“I thought someone who loves nature as you do can appreciate that.” He said.

All was expendable except for him. His magnetic smile was almost painful to see right now.

He acted with a single-minded determination and skill that she can’t help but objectively admire. He was still young and his actions could stand to be more efficient—but even then, his moves were already elegant.

(Just like his appearance.)

She can almost imagine a hundred years from his rise, there would be a magical oil painting in the style of the old masters as a centrepiece in a museum. The Portrait of the Tyrant as a Young Man. There will be a battlefield in the background, with carrion birds circling for flesh above. But most would not even notice, too distracted by the charming and gallant figure sitting against a stone, a scroll and quill at hand. They would fail to notice the significance of his armour, the blood stains on his attire, and only see the poem he was writing and the interesting perspective he could give them on past eras.

A new generation would venerate him, would exalt his legacy.

“You’re a work of art, aren’t you?” She asked dryly.

“Hermione?”

“You are. Even if it was the art of manipulation and destruction.” Her voice was flat.

Tom was staring at her quizzically now, at her odd tone, at the warring emotions playing out across her face. He noticed when sombreness draped its heavy cowl over her shoulders and stepped forward to follow the inclination to relieve the weight from her. Yet when she raised her head, she saw him pause with uncharacteristic caution as he found that he could not read her easily.

She wasn’t surprised; she was unsure whether she herself knew what she felt.

“Hermione.”

“I do care about you, you know? Perhaps even more than I care for most people at Hogwarts now. Perhaps more than is wise.” She said, frankly, uncaring that it was more truth than she would ever be ready to tell.

She savoured the surprised expression that lit his face. It made him look younger, like an actual teenager for once.

Her smile was bittersweet, an uncommon union of both yearning and regret. She kept no pretence and had no fear of him. He could not help but lift his fingers to try to trace such fleeting wonder of which he was the sole cause, taking another step closer. Her lips parted slightly at his touch.

Hermione would not lie to herself, for any reason. Do not think dishonestly, Musashi had stated—it was interesting that he did not say do not be dishonest or be truthful. To be dishonest with someone is to choose to gain something by cheating them, and at the same time opening yourself for their
possible retaliation. If you are harmed in return, that is simply the price to pay for walking the path of the swindler. But to think dishonestly was to cheat yourself, with not even a temporary benefit of short-term profit. She was also all too aware that a clear sight was necessary to maintain accuracy for someone forecasting the future.

“You cared?” He asked softly—incredulous but intrigued, he took in every inch of her face with an avaricious focus. It would be unnerving if she didn’t already know that particular abnormal twist of his mind.

“I tried not to, but I should’ve known it was impossible.”

“Really? Why is that?”

She shrugged, much more nonchalant than she actually felt.

“I always end up caring. Always. Apparently, even when it’s someone with a soul as amoral as yours.”

“Should you tell me this?” He asked, curious but not caring either way. His touches were as light as a feather over her skin as he memorised every shiver and reaction. There was still that covetous glint in his eyes as he filed away in mind all the little things that affected her most.

“Why shouldn’t I?”

Yet Hermione’s principles and ideals were also a part of her. What once might have been the brittle naïveté of a schoolgirl with extensive book knowledge had been tempered already by the dilemmas of the real world into steel. Her ideals, even more than her wand, was the weapon that she wielded against the chaos and injustices of the world. Her principles were what allowed her to clearly see that she had not let any power she wielded seduce her towards tyranny.

Hermione could not abandon her own Path without losing herself to become someone else entirely.

She stepped into his arms and kissed him without her qualms in the way, without the usual restraint of her common sense or even her old self-doubt. She kissed with the blissful surrender of a siren spellbound by her storm of sentiments. It did not matter that she’d sunk his ship, if later she’d smash the sailor she’d saved against the sharp stones. It did not matter if he were to sober up soonest and stab her for his own survival. In this second, she showed him the splendour of her soul’s desires, sincere and spilling forth ceaselessly.

How does a mortal man defend himself against an assault spun from his dreams? He doesn’t—he succumbs.

And even Tom Riddle was still mortal.

When she drew back, he had somehow sat down on the teacher’s chair and she was on his lap. Her heart beat as if she’d just run half a mile and his breathing was audible to her. She laid her forehead gently against his with her eyes half-closed. She was all too aware of his hands clasping her with care; the way any man would consciously hold a goddess in his arms.

“If I let myself, I can easily fall in love with you, Tom Marvolo Riddle. But I think you must know this first. I’ll fight to save people. To send or condemn many of them to senseless deaths would be beyond me.”

She voiced her thoughts with shaking breath.
“I can’t do it—not for myself, not for anyone.”

With one last kiss, she stood up and left him in the empty classroom without looking back.

Chapter End Notes

I’m actually pretty proud of this chapter and its ending.

*Author ducks tomatoes and other rotten vegetables thrown*

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Musashi – Miyamoto Musashi:** (Japanese History, Eastern Philosophy) c. 1584 – June 13 1645. Born as Shinmen Takezō, he is a Japanese swordsman, rōnin and philosopher who rose to prominence at the end of Japan’s Warring States period (戦国時代 – Sengoku Jidai, 1467 – 1603 CE). Hermione quotes the English version of one line from one of his two books (both famous), *The Book of Five Rings*. Also famous for having an undefeated record in his 61 duels. The impression of him that I get from reading his work is that he’s a pretty chill and straightforward guy, if sparing with words.

**O tempora o mores:** (Latin) an observation made by Cicero. Translates literally as ‘Oh, the times! Oh, the customs!’ but more accurately as ‘Oh, what times! Oh, what customs!’ or alternatively ‘Alas the times, and the manners’. The themes of his orations when he says this is deploring the degradation of the current age compared to the previous one. The current vernacular equivalent of this would be “Kids these days. Back in my day…”

Wikipedia tells me the exact points he did this is in the fourth book of his second oration against Verres, and First Oration against Catiline.
28 Compromises

Chapter Summary

Daedalus Bones almost crashes into Tom Riddle. Tom is trying to undo this mess. Hermione in her dorms with friends. Tom Riddle drops in at Ravenclaw Tower. Hermione misses what the whole fuss is about.

Chapter Notes

Random author's note: It has come to my attention that the fact my sister is a doctor would mean different things in the US than where I am. Here? The best universities are state universities, partially government-subsidised. All that means is that you have to pass the highly-competitive university entrance exams, but after that, you're good and it doesn't break the bank (as long as you don't drop out). It also meant that even my sister doesn't know anyone in her faculty (medicine) who had student loans, not even partial, and neither do I nor any of our siblings.

In other words, being a doctor isn't that extraordinary or extremely expensive here (as long as you can pass the state uni entrance exam, the medical programs at private universities are pretty expensive). Yes, I'm currently living in a developing country (middle income country, based on the GDP per capita). The best universities here still regularly gets into those international university ranking lists too, so the standards aren't that different.

So, um, my condolences for anyone in the US?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

28 Compromises

Daedalus Bones caught himself before crashing to the person rounding the corner at almost the same time he did.

“Sorry!” The blond did a double take just to assure that it was who he thought it was. “Oh, hullo, Riddle. Fancy seeing you ‘ere. I don’t think I’ve seen you around often—the tower isn’t exactly close to the dungeons, is it?”

“Well, you happen to find me walking here today.”

The Slytherin’s smile was oddly non-humorous.

“The only thing in this direction are some empty classrooms and the Ravenclaw Tower,” Daedalus shrewdly noted.

It wasn’t as if he knew much about his fellow prefect; yet compared to the others who’d just been
sworn in at their fifth year, Riddle already had a reputation. He was already helpful to the teachers before he became a prefect that many people from other houses had some idea of who he was already.

“You look like you’re in trouble,” Daedalus said point-blank when he didn’t get any reaction. He thought Riddle sent him a chilling glare for one moment before it turned out to be just an annoyed look. Even that gave him pause. He couldn’t remember the other prefect with anything less than an amiable smile. *More than he looks, that one.*

“Why, whatever gave you that idea?” Riddle asked, this time actually smiling.

*Right. Forget that I ever wondered why he hadn't smiled before—apparently, he’s creepy when he’s pissed off.* He surmised that Hogwarts was lucky they haven’t seen an aggravated Tom Riddle before. *Well, if I’m truly set on risking my neck, I might as well hang for a sheep as for a lamb.* He went for frank honesty.

“Because Curie stepped into the common room an hour ago looking like her familiar just died. Lakshmi told me; you know how you can always trust any news she brought.” The blond said.

“When the truth can bring mayhem, why bother with lies?” Was Riddle’s dry reply.

He laughed. Apparently, the polite Tom Riddle had been holding back his sharp tongue all this time.

“Yes, that’s our Lakshmi for sure. Considering that she’s also looking to ‘have some words’ with you, I don’t really recommend that you go up to our tower right now.”

“Why not?”

“Did you bring any gifts?” He asked back.

The seventh-year watched the other wizard’s brow creasing. It wasn’t quite befuddlement, but he was sure Riddle found his question alien. He held back his sigh. He got this.

“Look, if you mess up with the Missus, the first step in fixing that is to bring gifts.”

“What do you mean by ‘mess up’?” Riddle’s gaze was piercing.

Merlin, he *knew* the fifth-year had a charismatic presence, but to feel vaguely intimidated by someone two years younger felt ridiculous, even if he couldn’t stop the instinctive feeling of wariness.

Daedalus did sigh then. He scratched the back of his head and slouched a little, ensuring that his posture read more as harmless even as he kept a careful eye at the other prefect. He didn’t need Riddle to see him as a threat. That would just be so bothersome to his easy and comfortable life at Hogwarts.

“Are you telling me that you didn’t put that sad expression on Curie’s face? Because if you didn’t, well, pardon my mistake. You can go straight up to find her, then, and distract her from whatever it is actually made her feel bad.” The blond gambled.

Judging by the way the other prefect seemed to be thinking things through, he thought he’d gotten it right. This was no stranger to him. Daedalus had given advice on courting to an entire spectrum of Ravenclaw years. All just because he was a laid-back person who’d gone out with witches, and that he did not care about faulting people and more about fixing problems. You’d be surprised at
the degree of disasters people had confessed to him before they ask for his help.

“A gift.” Riddle stated.

“Well, I’d call it a peace offering. Show that you’re coming in good faith, you know? Of course, it works better if you know what she likes.”

“And then everything will magically be better?” That ironic edge to his voice had cropped up again.

The older blond let out a bark of laughter. “Morgana and Circe, no. When is life ever that easy? It just means you can start talking from a neutral point, instead of continuing to get caught in whatever last emotional state you’re both in before.”

Riddle was entirely unreadable once more. Daedalus knew when to bow out when he reached the limits of his expertise.

“So, good luck. I’m just going to go to library, do some essays and maybe catch a nap.”

“You nap in the library?” The Slytherin was mildly amused.

“I’d sleep for too long and would miss supper if I sleep on the bed now. I’d have taken one of the couches of the common room if it wasn’t for all the drama.” He shuddered.

“What sort of drama was it?”

“Well, Curie was doing her homework in the common room to make it easier for the younger years to ask her about their homework. Hornby passes by with her posse and thinks it’s a good opportunity to throw some shots at her. You know, the usual.”

Tom Riddle’s smile was amiable once more, the height of good manners. He would’ve been surprised at the change if he hadn’t suspected there was more to the Slytherin after he agreed to come to the Society meeting.

“Well, thank you for the advice. I suppose I better come up with something first then.”

“You’re welcome. Again, best of luck to you.”

Phyllida Spore was just tidying up in the last of the greenhouses. She’d sent her sixth and seventh year teaching assistants off for the day; who among the Hogwarts teachers actually wish to grade all the first, second and third year essays? It was mind-numbingly repetitive after the first year. What she hadn’t expected was to see Tom Riddle knocking on the door.

Her eyebrows rose towards her hairline.

Phyllida knew the Slytherin wizard was highly intelligent. She’d heard her peers discuss him with excitement often enough at the teacher’s lounge. She simply didn’t think she’d encounter him, considering that he’d decided not to focus on her class and specialisation at all. It was one of the classes where his schedule apparently diverged from Hermione Curie, as she’d heard through the teacher’s lounge grapevine.

Then again, Hermione’s schedule was insane, even according to the teachers. There were bets on how long she’d be able to keep it up, and bets on which classes she’d drop first.
He was carrying a box at hand and looked unusually restrained as he entered.

“What brings you to my corner of Hogwarts?”

Tom let out a soft sigh, his expression apologetic. “I might have made a mistake, Professor, and thus in need of your help. You see…”

As she invited him to sit down, she saw the summer pudding he’d somehow procured from the kitchens. Considering that the dessert usually took some time to make, she’d to admire his dedication. So, she sat and listened.

Hermione refused to say a word to Lakshmi no matter how much the dark-haired witch cajoled and persuaded her. She merely said that she and Tom was going to ‘talk about it’ and that was it. She did gain some degree of amusement in frustrating her insanely curious dormmate. Eugenie, she could see, was highly sympathetic even if she was at loss about what to do. The blonde had picked up the British habit of preparing tea whenever someone was upset and had just made a fresh pot. Hermione couldn’t regret the chamomile tea she was drinking since it was rather relaxing.

The lemon meringues and lemon Nagasaki cheesecakes were nice too. She’d graciously thanked the house elf Pinny who’d brought it for them, with a promise to chat further later.

“What was very bad?” Eugenie finally asked with earnest blue eyes.

“What was very bad?”

“Your argument with Riddle. You’ve been sighing more than usual.”

Hermione huffed, half in wry laughter and the other in acceptance. “We didn’t have an argument. It was more of a…a misunderstanding? No, not really that either. I understand where he is quite well, and I told him exactly where I stood in case he’d missed it before to make things clearer. It’s a…disagreement, I suppose. We don’t see eye-to-eye on certain elementary things.”

It covered the gist of the issue while still being vague. Eugenie didn’t seem to be troubled by the lack of details at all. The brunette was also aware of Lakshmi circling somewhere in the back, at least until Eugenie huffed.

“Oh, for goodness’ sakes, Lakshmi. If you’re not going to go out at all, you might as well take a seat at the table.”

The dark-haired witch did exactly that.

“Was it about the possible names for your firstborn children?” Lakshmi asked.

Eugenie choked on her tea and had to cough and try to clear her airway. Hermione drank without any trouble and raised an eyebrow at her friend.

“Now that is what I call a trivial difference.” Hermione said.

“You don’t want to marry straight out of Hogwarts and he does? To his credit, that’s actually what’s normal these days.” She guessed again, her grin sly. “Would you rather live together in sin,
then?”

The blonde Ravenclaw’s cheeks were suffused with colour now as she stared wide-eyed at Hermione.

“You… Is he actually courting you? Do you have an arrangement? Isn’t this a little too soon, Hermione?”

The brunette sighed. “Lakshmi’s exaggerating as usual, Eugenie. Don’t mind her.”

Surprisingly, the blonde actually glared at the other Ravenclaw. “You can’t do that! It’s risky for Hermione’s reputation!”

Lakshmi blew a raspberry. “Oh relax. Notice that I’m doing this in our dorm? Where no one else can enter and listen? If we can’t speculate here, where can we let our imaginations loose, otherwise? Sheesh, take all the fun out of life, will you?”

Eugenie was observing the two of them with some confusion before finally settling on Hermione.

“So, what is he to you?”

“A good friend,” Hermione blandly answered, ignoring the outright cackling on Lakshmi’s part and the disbelieving look on Eugenie’s. “Alright, he’s a bit more than that, but I don’t let my imaginations get carried away like Lakshmi’s. It is what it is and whatever will happen after this, will happen. I’m not going to speculate endlessly when I can just live my life. I do have more important things to do.”

“Well, that wouldn’t go down well with Riddle’s admirers,” the blonde mused.

“You know, I’ve heard about that once or twice, but I don’t think I’ve seen any. Are there really any, or is this just one of those things that get exaggerated at Hogwarts?” Hermione asked. Her friends stared at her in disbelief. Lakshmi even opened her mouth once before closing it again as she failed to find any adequate words.

The brunette huffed. “What? I’m being serious!”

“Did you not notice the glares sent your way during dinner times at the hall?” Eugenie asked, askance.

“She didn’t,” Lakshmi answered with a grin. “She really didn’t.”

“It was enough to make me feel uncomfortable and I’m only sitting next to you!” The blonde complained.

Lakshmi extended one finely painted hand and patted Hermione’s. “I’m sure you don’t care the slightest about them, darling. Which is nice, because I’ll pass that message on to them. It would be entertaining to see them spit more bile because of it and choke in their own anger.”

The brunette was still trying to wrap her head around her friends’ explanation.

“There are admirers? Really? Whyever for? He’s…he’s Tom Riddle. He’s very intelligent and charming, yes, but he’s also annoyingly two-faced and so calculating that he’s never out of his political mode!” Hermione said.

Eugenie seemed confused at her description while Lakshmi indulged herself and laughed again.
“Oh, Hermione. I love you. Don’t ever change, darling.”

It was an apple-cheeked Hattie-Perks that dared to walked straight up and knocked on the doors of their dorm. Lakshmi opened it and stared at the first-year Ravenclaw with incomprehension.

“Why is there a squirt in front of our door?”

“I’m not a squirt!” She insisted.

“You’re not even a third-year. You’re absolutely a squirt.” Lakshmi said easily, patting the top of her head and ignoring the indignant huff that accompanied it. Hermione had slid next to her dormmate to check on who their guest was.

“Oh, Hattie! Hello, what brings you here?”

“I have a message,” Hattie said, very serious.

“Oh, you do?” Lakshmi said with visible amusement. Hattie glanced at her once before focusing on Hermione again.

“Tom Riddle is at the bottom of the tower looking for you.” The first-year’s unbraided hair fell down her back in waves. Hermione thought it must be impractical to keep neat for a girl her age.

“Alright,” she said, still staring at little witch’s hair. “Why don’t you tie your hair back. It might get caught in something.”

She shook her head with determination. “Nu-uh. One of my dormmates taught me a hair-brushing spell. It’s not as good as the real thing, but it’s not bad if you just want to make it look nice. So, what should I say to him?”

Hermione sighed. Well, she was going to go down in twenty minutes or so for supper, anyway. Why not go down now? “I’ll be down in five or ten minutes.”

The first-year scrambled down the stairs once more. Lakshmi eyed Hermione curiously.

“How did you even get to know an ickle firstie?”

“Some of her year mates were bullying her. I scared them off.” Hermione answered. Her friend nodded sagely with complete understanding.

“Ah, that explains the hero worship, then.”

The brunette frowned. “What hero worship?”

“Well, if you don’t see it, I’m probably just imagining things,” Lakshmi said flippantly, giving her best doe-eyed look that made people focus only on her beauty and nothing else. “Don’t mind my rampant speculation, really.”

“Lakshmi, come on…”

“You did say that I often let my imaginations run away, didn’t you? I’m sure this is just one of that.”

Hermione huffed and was soundly ignored.
The dark-haired Ravenclaw only whistled with a disgusting amount of cheer and went off to commandeer the bathroom. She thus monopolised it (for what Hermione now knew) for the next quarter of an hour.

When Hermione walked down to the common room from her dorm, she had not expected to see Tom casually sitting on one of the armchairs, chatting with some other Ravenclaws. She recognised one of them as the wizard in her Advanced Transfigurations class. She remembered the sixth-year witch as one of the Ravenclaw prefects in the Society meeting. The other two witches were definitely out of their depth—their eyes glazed over the more fervent the discussion turned.

As she approached, she could hear their arguments. They were discussing permanent transfiguration.

“No one has really addressed why we can transfigure wood into coal or soil, and yet turning a lump of clay into a twig is beyond most of us,” the sixth-year witch said.

“Well, that’s obvious, isn’t it?” This was her Transfigurations classmate that she recognised. His name starts with S which she couldn’t recall right now. “Magic has its limitations and one of them is creating life. A twig always has to come from a living tree. You can’t just…make it all up with soil.”

“And yet the fact that we can turn the twig into soil means that there’s already a relationship between them. Why can’t we try the change the other way around?” She asked.

“Destruction is always easier than creation, Julia” Tom answered. “We can burn almost anything, but can we easily unburn them as easily as we’ve burned them?”

She could see realisation lighting up more than one face, even the two other witches who’d been speechless so far.

“It’s all thermodynamics. Entropy in a system always increases,” Hermione added.

They turned around as she spoke. She didn’t miss the way Tom’s smile was a touch more real now when he saw her.

“Entropy… I’ve heard that somewhere. Something about degree of disorder and chaos,” Julia muttered. “Come on, Adil, help me with this.”

“Yes, Shafiq, do tell us about it,” Tom cajoled.

Ah, Shafiq! So that was his name! Hermione thought. Shafiq obliged. “Well, Julia, it’s mentioned at the very end of our double Advanced Transfigurations class. Something about the state of the universe, how order is always unravelling into disorder, simply because there are more ways for something to be messy than there are ways for it to be neat and ordered.”

“And that’s the Second Law of Thermodynamics.” Hermione said.

“Hermione, how nice of you to join us,” Tom greeted.

“Hello everyone,” Hermione gave a general greeting.

Now that Eugenie and Lakshmi had pointed out the presence of Tom’s admirers to her, she could see how the expressions of the two tag-along witches to the group soured as she arrived. Not that it
made any difference because she still didn’t consider it something important enough to care about. She remembered who the sixth-year prefect was at that moment—Julia Goldstein, lover of books and discussions.

“Curie,” Julia Goldstein nodded to her. “Please, please tell me that you’re going to join the Advanced Transfigurations study group one of these days.”

It was Adil Shafiq who answered first with outright disbelief. “With her double set of classes and extracurricular activities? I wouldn’t count on it.”

His expression was mirrored by Tom’s more polite scepticism.

“Maybe,” Hermione hedged. “Or, you can just catch me when I’m doing homework in the common room. Like this afternoon.”

“Dammit, I passed the common room when I was going out this afternoon! I missed you?” Julia was disappointed with herself. Hermione could only shrug helplessly at her fellow brunette—where Hermione’s hair was curly, Julia’s was enviably straight as a pin. Like most witches in this era, it fell far below her shoulders.

“As exciting as our conversation had been Ladies, Gentleman, I’ll have to take my leave now.” Tom said.

Shafiq’s expression was knowing even as he bowed out. “Certainly. Riddle, Curie.”

Julia’s smile also had the bemusement of a co-conspirator as she ignored outright Hermione’s imploring glares to *stay*. “Yes, we’ll just leave you two alone. I’ll see you later Tom, it was nice to talk to you Curie.”

*Oh well. We’d have to talk sooner or later, anyway.*

When the goodbyes were exchanged, they left. Tom had stood up and walked to one of the farther corners of the common room; it was an armchair that faced a bookshelf. She followed out of principle because Tom’s hangers-on were still milling about aimlessly. He gestured for her to take the armchair and she did, while he seated himself on its accompanying ottoman instead. To her surprise, he carried two boxes. One was a flattened square, while the other was a box that was on the small end of medium.

“What are these?”

“Peace offerings. I was reminded that if I was about to declaim *mea culpa*, it would reflect my realisation of my fault if I were to take the first steps to amending that before further talks take place.”

She couldn’t see if he was regretful, but she did notice that his hands were now clasped together once more. It was an oddly static gesture for him. It was alright, though—why would she even expect regret out of him if she didn’t think he even understood why? She opened the more box-like box and smiled at the small cake inside it. She supposed she could have it for tea at her dorm tomorrow.

“Orange, rose and mint cake? Why, Tom, you shouldn’t have!” She was pleased when she said this. It was one of the desserts she’d requested from the kitchen for her picnic.

“You did say you liked orange.”
“I did.”

“It might also interest you to know that Chakravarty was actually the one who passed the recipe to the house elves.” He said. “I asked them about the details around the recipe. They mentioned about how the combination of spices and ingredients reminded them of some recipes for Afghan sweets that they have.”

What made her smile wider was the realisation that Tom Riddle actually stopped and chatted with house elves just to find out interesting factoids he could tell her about the cake. Not that she thought Tom realised what her smile was about. At any rate, it was an interesting thing to note about her dormmate and also something to ask Lakshmi about at their next tea. She closed the box again (undoubtedly with some minor preservation charms laid into it) and opened the one that was more of a flattened square.

This time, she gasped.

It was a crown of flowers. The camellias were a mix of the common magenta and vermillion red, and they were fragrant. Intertwined between them were bursts of smaller flowers. Their primary petal (petals?) were a coin-sized head in bright orange, their shapes reminding her of orchids though not precisely so.

“Camellias and…?”

“Kennedias,” Tom answered.

She raised her eyebrows. “I’m not receiving flowers without knowing what they mean now, and I haven’t had time to read about them.”

“I know.” He said, handing her a pocket book on flowers. “This is from the Malfoy family library. Keep it for as long as you wish.”

She had to chuckle at the remark, but she took the book all the same.

“Check the Kennedia first.”

She saw that the sunburst of orange flowers was indeed more visually dominant than the camellias, which meant it was the main flower in the arrangement. Hermione couldn’t help but laugh when she found it. It said, intellectual beauty. The brunette raised an eyebrow at him.

“Smooth, Tom. Very smooth.”

He bowed from his seat. “I do my best.”

Considering that the second bloom would support the first, the more common camellias would then mean perfection, while she was sure the red one was unpretending excellence instead of a flame in his heart. There was no way he was that sentimental. They were woven together with the help of a silver ribbon.

“Why, if you flatter a girl so much, Tom Riddle, she’s liable to grow a big head.” She said, though still very much flattered at the effort. He made the garland with the same technique she’d shown him, ensuring that there was actually two circle of living plants there.

“I’ve figured that you won’t, Hermione,” he replied. “You see, you already have a large character flaw that narcissism has no space to take root anymore.”
“Really?” She asked, curiously.

“Yes. You have a hero complex.” He answered.

“I don’t…” she began. He arched an eyebrow at her in challenge and she found she couldn’t exactly deny him.

“Oh, alright. I might have a little bit of it, Tom. A little.” Hermione insisted.

“As you say, Hermione.”

“You do know that it’s only polite to not disagree with a lady, don’t you?” She archly asked.

“Where did you hear me disagreeing?” Tom’s words were dry and Hermione chuckled at that.

“I’m going to put the cake in my dorm. But you do know that I’m going to wear this to supper, don’t you?” She asked him, lifting the box with the crown of flowers.

“It’s yours, to do as you wish.” He answered. Tom paused for a moment before he asked again.

“Have you decided to stay, Hermione?”

He was completely calm and also absolutely serious. The intensity in his eyes made her breath caught in her throat, but she can dismiss it easily as a purely physical reaction even when deep inside she knew it wasn’t true.

“We’re going to have to talk about your methods, Tom.” Hermione finally said.

“As I’ve said before, I’m not limited in my methods. That would mean predictability and I do so hate to be too predictable to my enemies,” he replied.

“So, you won’t mind?” She asked, her voice soft.

“I won’t mind what?”

“To make compromises.”

She could see him taking a long, careful breath, his gaze straying away to the rest of the room for a moment before he returned. Tension flickered in and then vanishing again from the line of his jaws.

“When did I give you the impression that I won’t compromise?” Tom asked.

Hermione realised that this was the first time she saw Tom even the slightest bit upset. He’d always had a fine control over himself and his reactions that she’d never seen him unsettled before. It left her feeling more than a little adrift, her thoughts suddenly rising in a cacophony of confusion. There were a hundred and one little conclusions that suddenly crossed her mind for his various actions and behaviour. She pushed it all away for now before they overwhelmed her under their tidal wave.

“Your people. You’ve always overridden them so easily…” she started.

“I don’t seriously consider the wishes of the puppets, Hermione. They’re not you.” He answered. “Your arguments always have some sort of merit instead of mere emotional wailing like theirs.”

“Would you seriously consider my thoughts and opinions? Respect my position no matter how different it would be from yours? Respect me?”
“I certainly would—and you know that I’ve always respected you.”

“Then yes, I’ll stay and change the future from beside you.” She answered.

“Then we’re agreed.”

Before she realised it, he’d moved forward to place a kiss on her lips. It was slightly longer than a moment, but not long enough for her to notice that her hand was holding the side of his face. He drew back just when she’d leaned forward.

“Would you like to go down to dinner right now?” He asked.

“After I place the boxes at my dorm? Yes, sure.”

Of course, it was impossible for Hermione to drop the boxes at her dorm without catching the attention of her dormmates.

“Ooh, what’s that?” Lakshmi asked, just fresh out of the bathroom.

“Tom brought me a cake—we can have it for tea tomorrow. By the way, Lakshmi, I’ve just found out it was your cake recipe, so I’d probably want to hear your story about it.” Hermione said.

The dark-haired witch took it in a stride.

“Ah. It must be Grandmother’s. I think I remembered telling the house elves about it when I felt homesick, sometime in second year or so. Yes, you can ask away about it.”

Hermione settled the box of cake and took the box of flowers. She carefully took it out and went off to find the nearest mirror.

“Wait, wait, wait! Now, what is that, Hermione?” Lakshmi asked, with all the righteousness of a police inspector carrying out a raid. One Eugenie Delacour, just as curious, stood right next to her.

“It’s obviously a crown of flowers.” Hermione deadpanned.

Eugenie rubbed the bridge of her nose in frustration as Lakshmi shook her head.

“No, that. I mean, you went down empty-handed, presumably to meet Tom as our local squirt had informed you earlier and now you have a flower crown. I’m not the only one seeing the conclusion here.”

“Appeasement? That might start at appeasement, but that very well doesn’t end there.” Lakshmi expressed her opinion loudly and clearly.

Various aggravated sounds as well as random flapping of hands ensued among Hermione’s dormmates, not that she really paid attention to the specifics of their frustration (what they were even frustrated about, she had no idea). When the bathroom door opened again, Lucretia walked
out into this odd tableau. She stared at them with uncertainty for a few seconds.

“You have a flower garland,” Lucretia noted.

A beat passed. “Why yes, I do,” Hermione confirmed. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to wear it.”

“Why are you wearing a flower garland?” The Black witch asked with bafflement.

“Because I wanted to?” Hermione replied back. The brunette was already drifting off to find a mirror so she could securely place it on her head. Probably with the aid of some sticking charms.

“Tom Riddle gave her that and she’s going to wear it to supper!” Eugenie finally managed to let out a series of sounds that made some sort of sense. Lucretia’s attention turned to her.

“Really? That’s lovely. Is he courting her?”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to ask!” Eugenie wailed, her pretty nose scrunched up. Lakshmi extended her arm in sympathy and pulled the blonde to her side before patting her back.

“He’s a good friend!” Hermione called back.

The three other witches exchanged meaningful glances with each other. Eugenie’s was as much confused as she was exasperated, Lakshmi’s was outright disbelieving while Lucretia was not quite sure how to approach all this…madness? Weirdness? The unspoken conclusion seemed to be one they all heartily agreed, though.

“If I have just two very good friends like that who were competing with each other, I’d be an engaged witch right now,” Lakshmi gave her expert opinion.

“I have good male friends. None of them has ever given me a crown of flowers.” Lucretia said diplomatically as the three of them were slowly making their way towards Hermione.

“Maybe you need to show them how to make it. I did give Tom a demonstration. It was during our picnic, Eugenie, right after you left.”

Several more wordless glances were exchanged between the three of them.

“Did he ask to for permission to call upon you, Hermione?” Lucretia’s voice was serious when she asked this.

“He did. I said yes.” Hermione replied, missing her blonde friend’s facepalm.

“That’s the first thing you should have told us!” Eugenie complained, her face slightly red. “It would completely explain why he’s giving you a crown of flowers!”

Well, Hermione didn’t really consider her maybe/not-really/not-quite a relationship was anyone else’s business but her own. It’s not as if she was really certain that she knew what she was doing (other than making sure Tom wasn’t going to blow up the world).

Lakshmi was laughing hysterically before she covered her face, trying to get herself to calm down. It didn’t work easily, she was still trying to hold back giggles.

“Well, I’m not completely blind on pureblood courting rituals,” Hermione answered, her crown of flowers settled firmly over her brow. She was determined to have a good time during supper, and the small-mindedness of current era Hogwarts wasn’t going to stop her.
“To call on someone is your equivalent of...casual dating. Or well, not-so-casual dating, I suppose. But I get it. It’s not that important in the grand scheme of things, as in, I can have more than one gentleman caller, right? It’s different from actually proceeding to courting, which is a state that does have a muggle analogue so I do understand what that means. As you can see, we’re not courting.”

She shrugged. “Keeping that in mind, I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Technically…” Lakshmi said between gasps of breath. “She’s not wrong.”

Eugenie was taking deep breaths because she seemed to be close to ranting. Again. She must have silently counted to five before she started speaking again.

“Since many Beauxbatons-going or Hogwarts-going witches are not going to hold debutante balls during their school year, the acceptance of an official call at school is a big thing. This means...this means that you’re officially accepting gentleman callers and anything more serious than that.”

“Ah. Alright, then.” Hermione said.

Lakshmi was still failing in her fight against giggles. Eugenie and Lucretia were exchanging glances that to any discerning observer clearly meant ’are you going to tell her this, or shall I?'

Unexpectedly, Lakshmi beat them to it. “It means, you’ve begun open season!”

“Lakshmi…” Eugenie rubbed her face with a tired murmur.

“Accepting a gesture as noticeable as a crown of flowers implies you’re accepting people approaching you for courtship now, Hermione.” Lucretia clarified.

It took Hermione several seconds to get what she meant. So, in the absence of a debutante ball, receiving a blatant gift could be taken as...a sign that she was now openly considering anyone who might be interested in her hand in marriage? And this is something important because...oh, right. Because witches mainly go to school to meet wizards and get married, right? Hermione thought with a mental snort.

Whenever I think I've forgotten when I'm stuck in, something else reminds me.

The brunette snorted and shook her head. “Well, I don’t think it would come to anything. I’m not as beautiful as any of you and I certainly didn’t come from a famous or old wizarding family.”

“I disagree with your opinion of your attractiveness. On the other hand, does not mean you have no prospects at all, or that there are no wizards who wouldn’t be an opportunist if they think you can bring glory for their family name. You’re going to have to be more careful from now on, Hermione,” Lucretia corrected.

She seemed completely serious that Hermione could not wave her concern away easily. It was rather flattering that an experienced pureblood witch like Lucretia was taking Hermione’s prospects seriously.

“You can say that again when someone actually tries to formally court me. Which I still think is something that’s going to happen when pigs fly.” The brunette insisted. “I’m going to go down to dinner right now. Does anyone want to come as well?”

“Is Tom still waiting at the common room?” Chakravarty asked with interest.
“Yes, why?”

“Oh, good. He can escort us ladies, then. Come on, Eugenie, Lucretia. Don’t you want to come to the Great Hall with us too? It would be…fun.”

Lucretia sighed but it was clear that she found this to be amusing as she smiled and agreed. Eugenie loudly huffed and resigned herself to getting stuck near what would probably be another spectacle. Hermione, on the other hand, didn’t really get what the whole fuss was about.

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Chapter End Notes

Additional Notes:

Julia Goldstein (OC): Sixth-year Ravenclaw prefect. Her name, ‘Julia’ is the female form of the Roman family name ‘Julius’, as in, Julius Caesar. I thought it would be fitting to follow the naming theme of Roman generals if she was going to be the aunt or grand-aunt to present-day canon Anthony Goldstein. More of a bookworm and general lover of knowledge, her personality is one that is well-suited to the academia. As such, she doesn’t exactly enjoy what she sees as the more tedious aspects of prefect work.

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29 The Complexities of Calling & Courtship, Advanced Astronomy

Chapter Summary

Supper: in which Julia chats with Hermione and tells of the sixth-year French Gryffindors. Hermione gets even more bewildered by the focus on courting and not-yet-courting. Chats with Auguste Murat. Advanced Astronomy class. Hermione finds something in the past of the odd Orphe/Orpheus Dexter.

Chapter Notes

The first impetus for this chapter is when my sister asked for a clarification about the difference between calling, courtship and all that jazz. She's not exactly an avid reader of western historical novels to already have a general idea of it. Then, Orpheus Dexter enthusiastically took over the other half, and this is the result.

Also, longest end notes ever. I had to do some rapid editing to fit it all in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

29 The Complexities of Calling and Courtship, Advanced Astronomy

Hermione liked the smell of flowers when she was feeling down. It made her feel better. Turning flowers into crown so you can wear them was Luna’s simple, straightforward idea of applying that thought.

It wasn’t rocket science (ha!)

Yet from the number of students that did double-takes when they saw what Hermione was wearing, apparently, a crown of flowers was some sort of Political Statement in Hogwarts. For or against what, Hermione had no idea. She was pretty sure that Hogwarts wasn’t completely blind to the earlier magical traditions of the druids that were more closely-aligned with nature. Thus, woven chains of flowers, the sort that Luna made on a daily basis, really shouldn’t be alien…

Oh, who was she kidding? She wasn’t talking about scholars of British magical history. She wasn’t talking about the Unspeakables who were always up to trying new things. Of course, whether those new things were a good idea or not was a different issue. Still…it was the spirit of the thing. (She had seen Malina walking around with a glass hat that was also a brain aquarium, complete with the single floating brain. Hermione didn’t even try asking what she was supposed to be doing. Some things, you were better off not knowing).

Eugenie saw the other French Ravenclaw and waved at him. This meant that their seating position was more or less decided on that basis.
As Tom escorted them to their seat at the Ravenclaw table, she saw the French wizard standing up as they arrived. He was across the table from Hermione—Eugenie had split up from them to walk on the other side of the table to sit next to him. Oddly enough, Lakshmi decided the same. Hermione was going to sit next to Lucretia.

“Auguste! You don’t mind if we sit with you, do you?” Eugenie asked when they were rather close already. “Unless you were expecting other company?”

He had stood up for them. Hermione almost stared at him strangely before she remembered that it was the gentlemanly thing to do when ladies were arriving at the table.

“You could never be a bother, Eugenie. Mesdemoiselles Black, Chakravarty and Curie, welcome. Monsieur Riddle, thank you for escorting them.”

“It was a pleasure, Mr. Murat.”

Tom nodded back while Hermione had to stop herself from gaping at the sheer strangeness of the scene to her. It was the first time that she experienced full-blown pureblood tradition and manners, and she was still not used to it even with all the practice.

Some more polite words were exchanged and Tom took his leave from all the ladies present, though he did specifically bid Hermione farewell last and his nod to her was slightly deeper than the rest. Unfortunately for Hermione, she either had no idea about comprehensive pureblood etiquette, or it went wherever the hell the holes in her memory went. Tom’s gesture just seemed like another nod to her.

The sixth-year, Ravenclaw prefect she’d seen earlier was close by. The other brunette casually shifted herself a few positions to end up near Hermione, her waist-length ponytail swishing as she moved. **Julia**, she reminded herself, **her name is Julia**.

“You don’t mind if I take the seat next to you, do you, Hermione? You don’t mind if I call you Hermione, right? We do take Advanced Transfigurations together.” She said, rather rapidly.

“Oh, it’s alright, as long as I get to call you Julia.” Hermione said.

“Absolutely! Now, I hear that Bernadotte has managed to persuade the kitchen house elfs to try cooking his mother’s Chicken a la Provençale. I’m looking forward to seeing it show up on our dinner menu.” Julia said with enthusiasm.

“Bernadotte?”

“French Gryffindor? Very long hair in a braid? He’d be a Casanova if he wasn’t such a joker. He might not look like it, but he’s pretty responsible, which is why he’s the sixth-year Gryffindor prefect.”

“Oh,” Hermione nodded as she tried to put a picture to the name. She remembered his blonde house mate, Ceres, facepalming next to him and elbowing him. “Pip, was it?”

“Yes. That’s Philippe Bernadotte alright. I call him Bernadotte because for some reason, it annoys him more than if people call him Pip or Philippe. Ha! Made me sound all grown-up and respectable, was what he said. There’s time enough for that later, don’t you think?” Julia said this with a mischievous grin, and Hermione couldn’t help but chuckle with her. She was an unexpectedly chatty witch, easy to talk to. Her brown eyes were warm and open.

The brunette felt bad that she hadn’t included Lucretia in the conversation, but then noticed that her
seventh-year friends had spotted her and taken the seat at her other side. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. The food hadn’t appeared on the table yet, but the drinks had. Hermione went for some grape juice.

“He seems to be close to…Ceres, was it?”

“Ah, Ceres Victorinus—the other sixth-year Gryffindor prefect. Yes. Ceres grew up in France even though her mother is English. Their families are close because they both came from martial people.”

*Two French transfers both ending up as prefects?* Hermione decided to follow her curiosity.

“How did Gryffindor sixth-year end up with them as their prefects? I’m sensing there’s a story there.”

Julia laughed. “Well, they’re both pretty hard workers, so nobody was surprised that they got it. There’s also…hmm, I can’t quite put a finger on it, but I’d say Dumbledore actually knew their families, because I heard Daedalus hear him say to Dippet that they both could use the ‘command experience’. As if prefects ever ended up commanding much! I mean, it’s only hearsay, and it might have nothing to do with them being prefects, but I’m just passing it on so you’ll know.”

Julia leaned forward, imparting a little bit of Hogwarts gossip. “I think the Prewett matriarch is frustrated that neither of her boys get the position, though I’m sure both Paul and Peter are plain relieved. They’re really not looking forward to the responsibility.”

Hermione idly wondered whether Paul or Peter were Ron’s grandfather or just his granduncles. Her forehead creased as she thought over it. It would seem that Dumbledore was pulling some strings for both Ceres and Bernadotte. Yet could she say that her and Ron’s appointment as prefects wasn’t the result of Dumbledore pulling some strings too? It wasn’t as if Julia was saying that the two of them were bad prefects either—for all she knew, they might still have made it even without Dumbledore’s additional support.

“Why did Dumbledore bring up ‘command experience’, anyway? And what about their family?” Hermione asked. To her surprise, Julia was grinning.

“I knew you’d wonder!”

“Julia?”

“Ahem. So, this isn’t exactly common knowledge, alright? Ceres doesn’t mention it because to her, it’s better safe than sorry when she’s considering the safety of her family. Bernadotte is much the same, though he comes from a more paranoid angle of never being sure where Grindelwald’s agents are.” She spoke softly while frequently eyeing the table; she was having a hard time picking between several available juices. At one point, Julia decided to just go with raspberry for now.

Hermione stared at the other witch with some uncertainty.

“Are you sure you should be telling me this?”

Julia patted her arm. “Hey, you’re the one trying to coordinate a search for Grindelwald’s base, right? You’re fighting on the right side. Besides, if you’re going after Grindelwald, sooner or later, those two are going to join you and you’d figure it out anyway.”

“Alright, if you’re sure.” Hermione dubiously said.
“Yes. It’s not top secret or anything, it’s just like those war effort posters back at London, you know? ‘Loose lips sink ships’ and all, and the annoyingly missing road signs in Grandad’s village. Gets more visitors lost than anything, than stopping non-existent Jerry parachutists, but what do I know of our government?” She was getting distracted with her own complaints on wartime Britain. Hermione was lead to conclude that Julia was either a muggleborn or a half-blood if she was still rather aware of the war outside the wizarding world.

The food appeared on the table, and Hermione heard the excited chatter from across the table as Eugenie spoke in rapid-fire French with Auguste.

“Ah! Poulet à la Provençale! Let’s see if they’ve managed to render it well,” Julia said with almost the same amount of enthusiasm as the blonde Ravenclaw across her.

“Bernadotte must be weeping tears of joy at the Gryffindor table,” Auguste remarked dryly.

“Well, I’ll say it smells better than the old steak and kidney pie—which is currently making a return. Who on the high table keeps ordering it, anyway? I’ll certainly take my chances with the Poulet,” Lakshmi concluded from Auguste’s other side.

“Oh my, it certainly seems like the kitchen managed to do the recipe justice,” was Lucretia’s comment. Her friends seemed to be interested in the chicken now that she’d rendered her opinion—not that Hermione thought Lucretia was even aware of her own influence.

It was hard not to be interested when it also smelled so good. Auguste Murat ended up being designated as the unofficial chicken carver and he bowed to the assignment with grace and competence. There was something captivating about the fluidity of his movements. It was the natural elegance of one who was taught to refine it from a young age, Hermione supposed. Julia helped herself to some once Auguste was done. She also helped pass some chicken to Hermione’s plate too since she was closer. They lost themselves to the chicken for a while and it was worth it, as the flavours of the herbs could be tasted deep into the meat.

Julia spoke up again after a while.

“Anyway, here goes. From what I know, there’s always a Victorinus in the Army or the Auror corps. Honourable people. The Bernadottes were also a martial family with their own honour, though a bit unusual to most.” Julia said with a quieter voice. “I suspect many of them are in the Resistance right now in France.”

_Ah, that would explain their caution. It might also explain why Bernadotte is just as eager to go as Evariste is if he feels that his family is risking their life while he’s safe over here._

“The Bernadottes are unusual?”

The other Ravenclaw pursed her lips, trying to find the words for it.

“Nowadays, some of them tend to enter be Hit Wizards or the Army. A few are in the Aurors, I heard but their oldest occupation is still mercenaries. They’re loyal to a fault as long as people keep paying, though. I don’t really care, but that bit tends to be one of those things polite society doesn’t talk about, you know? So be careful not to mention it when our more…esteemed colleagues are around. Oh, and don’t ever accuse Bernadotte of being a turncoat if you’re not looking for a duel.”

Even at a hushed volume, Julia didn’t lose her rapid-fire pace. It took some effort to follow, but her London accent was pretty comforting to Hermione as she continued to eat her chicken.

“Alright, the purebloods might look down on mercenaries. Got it.” The brunette said in a daze.
“That’s it. Bernadotte himself doesn’t really care, but you know how some purebloods are…”

Hermione stared at her with wide eyes. Mercenaries? There were wizards (and witches) who were mercenaries? She didn’t even know until now! Who would employ them, anyway? Also, how did the wizarding army work? Because as far as she knew, Britain only had the Auror corps. Did France actually not expect the Aurors to also be their army? Because Hermione’s experience with the British Aurors was exactly that; they were also the armies of their society.

(Whether it was a good idea to unite responsibilities for policing and for subduing enemies of the state under one institution was a whole field of argument for another day).

Julia took a long draught of her raspberry juice before asking her next question with a too-relaxed attitude and her normal speaking voice.

“So, what’s the story behind your flower crown?”

“What, this?” Hermione patted the garland on her head. She was suddenly aware of the many pairs of eyes that followed her movements. Ack. “Well, I was feeling rather morose in the afternoon, so I thought I’d wear it to make myself feel better. Because unlike a bouquet, the fragrance follows you where you go.”

Julia was staring at her with uncertainty. Some of her bangs fell in front of her eyes and she pushed it aside easily.

“That’s it?” She asked Hermione.

“Well…yes? Why else?”

“Because you have an admirer who chose to gift you with it?”

Hermione couldn't help but laugh, at least before she realised that Julia truly meant the question instead of making a joke. The time-stuck witch shook her head. “Come on, it’s not exactly a crown of roses. That would be the queen of my heart or something, right? This is just, well, flattering, but nothing to be too excited about.”

Julia suddenly turned to the people across the table.

“Eugenie, Murat, tell us something.”

“Yes, Mademoiselle Goldstein?” His hazel eyes were calm.

“What is it, Julia?”

“Well, Hermione’s flowers are wonderful, isn’t it?” She started, letting the expected agreement came and went. She focused on the French wizard. “Now, tell me honestly, would you consider gifting such a crown to a witch you know without second thoughts? Say, to Hermione here?”

Eugenie stared at Julia with the desperate look of someone who wishes to wildly step on your foot but was unfortunately too far away to be able to do anything. Preferably before you ask the Hungarian Cultural Attaché for news about his wife when he’d just gotten divorced (this actually happened to Hermione),

Auguste only smiled, unbothered by the question. Hermione had a déjà vu to Michelangelo’s statue of David from his beatific expression. He’d been observing her flower garland in the last few moments. She belatedly remembered why his last name was familiar; he was the son of the exiled
French Minister for Magic.

“For one who is as...intellectually bright and compassionate as Mademoiselle Curie?” He turned to Hermione and spoke frankly. “Allow me to be direct, Mademoiselle. You are truly interesting, but I’m sorry to say that I cannot open myself to such a serious possibility before we know each other better.”

Hermione was too confused to react. What?

“If you’re actually interested in getting to know her further, Murat, then you should say so. She would appreciate the directness and it would remove any doubt about your interest.” Lakshmi suddenly added.

Eugenie was biting her lip. “Auguste, don’t let Lakshmi pressure you into anything you don’t want to do,” she nervously insisted.

Auguste Murat’s movements were captivating because they were not merely elegant—they belonged to a wizard sure in his purpose. The dark-haired wizard did not disguise his dislike for the Vichy regime of France. Hermione overheard someone asking him earlier whether he was prepared to fight them. He answered with a resounding yes, even as he clarified that it did not mean he was stupidly suicidal as attacking them alone. He’ll make a plan first.

“You need not worry for me, Eugenie. Chakravarty can only advise, but my choice is my own.” He said this without looking away from Hermione. “I would like to be able to call upon you, Mademoiselle Curie, though I’ll have to say that regardless of how spirited some of my countrymen could be, I certainly would not be reckless enough to offer you courtship right now.”

“Courtship?” Hermione choked on the word.

He nodded, but with a casualness that hadn’t changed. “That would be too fast for both of us, yes? Even if we knew each other by reputation, we are but acquaintances. I wouldn’t dare to offer as far as the one who gifts you your crown, but if I were only to call on you and get to know you, it would not be so rushed.”

Hermione was too relieved that he wasn’t asking for a courtship that she almost forgot to answer him. At last until she felt Lucretia nudging her from the right, her long hair brushing Hermione’s upper arm.

“I think you haven’t answered him, Hermione,” she spoke so softly that it was too easy to miss.

“Ah, certainly...Auguste, is it?” The brunette asked. “My answer is yes.”

“Thank you, and yes, I’d prefer if you were to call me Auguste. May I call you Hermione, then?”

She nodded. “Of course. All my friends do so.”

His smile was relaxed and in turn put her at ease. “Then I will be glad to name you among my friends, Hermione.”

Hermione ignored Lakshmi’s satisfied expression, or Eugenie’s still-nervous one. She was just too glad that Auguste wasn’t one of those impulsive love-at-first-sight wizards either—he only wanted to get to know her better. There’s really no harm in having more friends, she thought.

That was before she tried to remember what Auguste said about ‘the one who gifts you the crown’. He didn’t dare to go as far as the one who did that when he and Hermione barely knew each other.
What did he mean by that? After all, Tom only asked to be able to call on her, exactly the same as Auguste just did.

Right? Right?

Lucretia spoke up before Hermione had finished untangling her thoughts. “Well, at least we do know that Murat is a respectable family. They’re not that old.”

Hermione had to hold back a snort. Almost every other family is ‘not that old’ compared to the Blacks.

“They have historically unfortunate Bonapartist leanings too, but they are either ministers or department heads. They always end up leading at someplace in the government. I know that most regards Tom Riddle as an enigma, as—pardon the pun—a riddle, but anyone who would pay attention can see that he’s going to rise and rise quickly once he’s out of Hogwarts.”

“That’s nice to know,” Hermione absently said, out of anything else to say and still too busy thinking.

She knew all that about Tom and tuned it out. But Hermione was honestly glad that they now have the contact for the French Minister for Magic in the form of Auguste. She was also glad for Lucretia’s confirmation of how much connections Auguste would have. It would make coordinating the search for Grindelwald’s headquarters run more smoothly. That was it.

“…I think you’ve been doing very well for yourself, Hermione, even if you only end up as friends.” The Black heiress finished.

Hermione didn’t quite get her conversation thread and she turned to the black-haired witch.

“Oh! I must be murmuring again. I’m sorry. Well, I just thought that you already have Tom Riddle and Auguste Murat calling on you right now. It’s not the courting stage, certainly. Yet you’re still far closer to marriage than most witches had gotten with both, at the same time. It is rather nice to know that you’ve already managed so far, isn’t it?”

Lucretia was stating all this dispassionately, as if she was merely tallying the current quidditch scores in a running game.

It was hard to be annoyed at her when she wasn’t even encouraging Hermione to get married, or even to actually date either wizards. This was just another of her particular adaptations to pureblood life, a developed reflex—a moneylender easily knows how much cash he has on hand; a farmer knows how many days left until harvest, because that’s the number of days left that he has to watch out for unexpected frost; an unmarried witch from a good family counts the wizards close to her and tallies their husband-worthiness regardless of her own interest in them.

It was an occupational hazard to being a witch in this era, much like a gazelle always remembers where all the predators on the plains are—well, that metaphor just turned morbid, didn’t it?

“Would you like some of the blanc mange?” Lucretia offered Hermione dessert, this time with a lot more emotion in her voice than her previous careless and random observation of Hermione’s prospective partners. Never mind that the heiress’ calculations about potential were spot on.

“Yes please,” Hermione said, feeling a headache coming on.
“Huh. I absolutely didn’t expect that when I asked him about it, you know?” Julia commented from Hermione’s left in a low voice. “I expected him to just say ‘no’, because ordinary friends don’t do that…but I guess you’ve caught his interest. Um, congratulations, then?”

“Julia, he just wants to be friends,” she pointed out with a long, tired sigh.

“Sure. But not many wizards bothered to officially call on you even when they’re actually trying to get to know you. I guess it shows that he really came from one of those honourable families. Even if it doesn’t get through, it would be a good mark on you. You have good luck, Hermione.” Apparently, even Julia who was at most a halfblood is already well-attuned to the reflex.

The brunette rubbed her temples and wondered whether there’s a term for jetlag that occurs from time-travelling. Technically, it was closer to a culture shock, but does saying it even make sense when you came from the same culture? It was…time-shock, maybe? Yes, that’s it. Does drinking ginger tea help? Would it be better if she just lay down on her bed and sleep?

Hermione was pretty sure that her queasiness came from time-shock.

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The brunette found herself cursing the old-fashioned clock sounding the alarm, even though she set it herself. The fact that she was a light sleeper unless tired meant that she was the first to wake up to it. She Hermione sighed and pulled herself to a sitting position. She might as well turn it off and wake Eugenie herself. No need to wake everyone up just because the two of them had Advanced Astronomy class.

“Tempus,” Hermione murmured, wand in hand.

She had already started padding barefoot across the dorm, to the bed nearest to the door. Pale green numbers floated up and announced that it was a quarter past twelve. It was technically the early morning of Friday rather than Thursday. She sighed. The vagaries of astronomy meant that everyone was at the mercy of the stars’ and planets’ schedule when it comes to direct observation (the one on their books today were the outer planets). The more theoretical part of the class can thankfully still be held at a more human and regular schedule. Like say, seven at night.

“Eugenie? Eugenie. Come on, wake up. We’ve got class at one out of all things.”

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Hermione went down from her dorms with Eugenie, the both of them still yawning. If there was one benefit of Astronomy class, it was that no one had to wear their uniforms.

She was surprised at the number of people downstairs, though, considering that it was Advanced Astronomy. Shafiq was there, thanking a house elf who’d brought the tray as he passed on mugs of either coffee or tea to anyone who wanted one. Julia waved at Hermione, and as she approached, the time-stuck witch could smell the coffee wafting from the cup. She had no idea how Auguste Murat could look well-groomed—alright, to tell the truth, Hermione had no idea how Eugenie’s blonde hair was still straight and shiny, but she chalked that up to her part-veela ancestry. There were other fifth-years as well as sixth-years that Hermione didn’t recognise also milling about, bleary-eyed.

“I didn’t know this many people took Advanced Astronomy,” Hermione said, bewildered.

“Coffee? Tea?” Julia prompted out of nowhere, her voice was also the scratched sound of those only half-awake.
“Coffee, please and thank you.” Hermione said.

“I’ll take tea, and yes, thanks.” Eugenie added. The blonde considered Hermione’s question.

“Well, the advanced classes taught by the Heads do tend to end up with more of their house members than others. It’s just…it blends over, you see? When you talk about the subject, sometimes you also end up talking about House matter and the opposite is also true.” Eugenie said.

Julia went off to get a mug of coffee for Hermione and Eugenie.

“I guess it leads to their house members get an unexpected edge in the class. Or maybe, they simply feel comfortable enough to know that they can talk their troubles with the professor that they decided to take the risk of taking the advanced class.”

They took their mugs from Julia gratefully. It did seem that the Ravenclaws were rather prepared to fortify themselves for Astronomy class compared with other Houses. They had the system of preparing hot coffee and tea ready, for one, along with some snacks. Hermione had thought to go down to the common room early to give herself enough time to wake up before she set off to class. With the unexpected number of students also taking Advanced Astronomy, it was proving to be a convenient time to chat too.

“So, what made you take Advanced Astronomy?” Hermione asked Auguste. He was wearing a neat jacket over his pyjamas and somehow the effect was still sharp. Damn Parisians, she wryly mused with unabashed envy.

“What made you take Advanced Astronomy?” He asked back.

“I take nine advanced classes because I enjoy learning and well, to be honest, not all the materials in these classes were new to me. I might as well get credit for what I already know. Now, what about you?” She shot back, before taking a long draught from her mug of coffee.

He hadn’t expected her to answer so easily, nor did it seem that he had expected her answer at all. His smile was rueful and it took him a few moments to catch up.

“Your flower crown isn’t a lie at all, is it?” He commented. Auguste explained further when she raised an eyebrow at him. “The tribute to ‘intellectual beauty’ and ‘perfection’. Your admirer is certainly sharp to have realised that so soon.”

“Oh, it’s not exactly a secret that I’m taking nine classes. I’m sure everyone thinks I’m crazy.” She shrugged the praise away easily. Auguste was not as easily diverted.

“Hermione, I took Advanced Arithmancy. Professor Lagrange was one of the teachers I respected even at Beauxbatons, and I did not exactly miss the depth of your answers there.”

That made her blush. It would probably take some time before Hermione could adjust her arithmancy perspective to the level that was asked for in the class and she felt guilty when some parts of her answer were also something other students might find confusing.

“You’re going to follow the steps of your father very well, aren’t you, Auguste?” Hermione keenly observed.

“Why do you say that, Hermione?”

“You’d do well as a politician—you’ve successfully managed to evade answering my question.”
She startled a laugh out of him before he answered her. “Ah, pardon me. When one is too used to
dodging reporters, it becomes a habit after a while. Well, I took it because other than outright
Divination, it’s part of the Trifecta of Augury, of course.”

“Trifecta of Augury?”

“Why, Ancient Runes, Arithmancy and Astronomy,” he stated. “Ancient Runes and Arithmancy is
a broad field that has many other applications and purposes now, but the oldest branches of all of
them has always been for trying to predict the future.”

His expression was self-deprecating. “It’s something useful for someone leading the government to
study, yes? To see whether a course of action has good odds of success or not? To see whether
there might be unexpected reactions to it? Perhaps if we’d done it properly before, we would not
have been taken by surprise by Grindelwald.”

That startled her to a pause, before she thanked Auguste for being honest with her.

He was surprised but also amused, thinking that they’d talked about something so trivial. “Think
nothing about it, Hermione. We all have our reasons that draws us to the fields we find
interesting.”

It occupied her mind even as people started leaving for Astronomy Tower, with Hermione and
Eugenie among them (Julia was catching up with some other sixth years).

Hermione had thought of divination as a load of rubbish, but that was before she found out that
there were real seers in the wizarding world. Her time as an Unspeakable also put her in contact
with people who study prophecies, and reading some of them, she could see how prescient they
were. As always, the problem was that they were never too clear before the foretold events
happened. Of course, the apparent ‘gift’ of divination wasn’t actually something the possessor
could use. It simply turned them into a weathervane of the time flow that were sometimes
‘fortunate’ enough to have future events shake them as the storms and bad weather of history
occur.

A part of her that did not believe in mumbo-jumbo fortune-telling wanted to dismiss the idea of
forecasting the future as impossible and a waste of time. Yet, what was meteorologists studying the
weather and putting up predictions for the weather forecast about if not the same thing? They are
trying to predict the state of the weather system at a particular time in the future, based on what
they knew of the system in the present. The progress of modern arithmancy was such that the field
had more in common with meteorologists than palm readers.

Hadn’t she been charting history, calculating probabilities to see which events were close to
inevitable at short-term and which were meaningfully changeable? What was she about to do in the
present (past) that she was stuck in, if it wasn’t changing the past with a lot of future prediction
thrown in?

Considering that she’d never taken Advanced Astronomy before, she’d mostly known the field
from all the star and planet and moon charts one ended up having to make. Other than for students
too obsessed with their own zodiac, there hadn’t been much material on trying to look ahead.

She realised that she couldn’t go into Astronomy with her old suppositions of how improbable it
was to forecast the future.

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Hermione went through the Astronomy class with the ease of one who knew what to expect. She’d made star charts before and had made the schedule for planets too. The change in her current class to making direct observations of the outer planets were interesting, though. It was one of the few times that she was surprised by how advanced some part of the wizarding world were compared to the muggle one.

There were telescopes in the Astronomy tower that can easily provide high resolution pictures of the gas giants as long as someone managed to find them and aimed them correctly. What she hadn’t expected was the ‘star lanterns’ placed in front of the viewing hole that projected what the telescope sees on the wall across it. Well, the Astronomy Tower was covered with French windows on all seven sides, but there was a screen that can easily be moved around, and it was placed there now.

“So, has everyone found Uranus?” Professor Dexter asked. He actually seemed more refreshed than he seemed when they saw him at lunch at the high table. Various sounds of agreement and confirmation was heard.

“Right. Let’s see if you have it right, then. We have the screen in place, now let’s see if everyone has managed to find it or was just nodding along.” Professor Dexter said this with a smile. “In case you’re still looking, I’ll give you a hint—it’s on Taurus.”

Hermione would swear that his usually placid expression was just a wee bit evil. She saw several pairs discreetly checking their telescopes again, hoping that they could find Uranus in time. The smarter ones straight out turned to their neighbours and asked for help. She and Eugenie certainly had no problems at all and had even fitted their star lanterns to their telescopes. All that was left was to activate it with a tap of their wand.

“Alright, now, turn it on everybody.” Their Head of House directed.

Several lanterns at once projected the findings of their telescopes. Some hadn’t had their lens adjusted that the planet was merely a bluish green blob. One picture was too faint and needed the light to be brightened. A pair of wizards sheepishly waved the flag of surrender and outright asked Professor Dexter for help. All the star lanterns turned on was excessive, of course—why would the class actually needed to see nine or ten pictures of Uranus? It was probably an indirect test, to see how many people could actually find the planet. Not that it was a bad thing—like the other gas giants, the planet was beautiful and mesmerising to watch.

That was when she noticed the bright spots. They weren’t very big, but they were rather noticeable. She wasn’t the only one, because she heard murmurs from her left and right.

“Ah, yes, you’ve seen the feature I want to discuss most! We’re currently seeing the north pole now because the planet is extremely tilted compared to others, so those are polar storms. Now, I’ve counted the students in this class, and there’s enough to make six groups of three. I’ve asked you to form them the last time, and they’ll be your permanent group for the planet observations.”

Their pale teacher cleared his throat. “Now, I’m not exactly forcing you to make a group with three members. You can choose to just pair up with someone. You can even choose to do it yourself, though I’d say that’s pushing it. After all, do you really want to have to do all the night observations, six days a week, on your own? With two other people, all you’d be responsible for is two days!”

There were some chuckles of acknowledgement at that, and people had started moving around to pick their partners.
Hermione was lucky that when Eugenie was entrusted to be her guide by their House Head, she’d also arranged for that. The transfer student was in one with Eugenie and Julia.

“Keep up-to-date sketches on the planets, though I’ll accept if you only do it six days out of seven—everyone wishes to have a time off. I’ll promise to give anyone that does all seven days extra credit. You’ll notice that I’m not just asking for sketches and observations on Uranus,” he pointed out to the things he’d written out on the blackboard. “The gas giants are clearly a priority, because as you’ve seen with Uranus and as you’ll soon see with a few others, they’re experiencing storms across their surface. That’s right, the spots you see? Those are storms. The two largest are certainly larger than the whole earth. Just in case you have no sense of the scale.”

“All other homework would be individual ones. Don’t worry, I wouldn’t be giving many since I’m sure this is going to take up enough of your time.”

Relieved sighs were heard all around.

“After we’re done with the observations, we’ll address their relative position around the sun along with the more traditional calculations of seeing which planet is close to other and which ones are perturbing each other’s orbit. The usual.”

He paused for a moment before continuing with a more jaded tone. “If you anyone wants to start writing each other’s horoscopes, you can go right ahead as long as you keep it out of the report book. I don’t need to know who’s currently being unlucky in their love life.”

There were some snickers, but the class was mostly well-ordered as they started.

Hermione stayed to read records at the Astronomy Tower’s library after the class was over.

Tom did come to her side and asked her what she planned on doing. She said she wanted to ‘check some things’. It was enough for him and he left with the other students. Professor Dexter was slightly baffled, but he let her as he left for either his office or his quarters once more. She was flattered that he’d entrusted her with the key.

Contrary to other classes and to what people may think, the homework for astronomy wasn’t useless. The best of the students’ works and records were actually archived. Her Advanced Astronomy class wasn’t the first to have to draw the clouds of Jupiter and the rings of Saturn, or to note the current position of the planets. There had been generations before her and their records filled shelves.

There was an itch at the back of her mind that she needed to scratch, a pattern that she couldn’t help seeing. At first, Hermione was sure she was wrong. She was imagining things, surely? The human mind loves connections and it might have seen something that wasn’t there. Still, since she knew what she was looking for, it only took her an hour to go through the records of the last several decades and read the ones she wanted.

Hermione knew this was the wee hours of the morning. Considering that she was knocking the quarters of the astronomy professor who was never seen before lunch, he was probably still awake.

Her guess was true. Orpheus Dexter opened the door to his quarters, looking mildly distracted.

“Hermione? Is there anything I can do for you?”
She had her bag, of course, with several scrolls filled with notes from her using the copy spell on the records of previous students. Hermione could not stop the gravity of her thoughts from influencing her tone. She stared him head on, with a confidence that was not common among people her physical age.

“How long have you known?” She asked.

He let her in out of puzzlement but kept the door open. Considering that the room had a magical heating system, he did not exactly need to worry about the draught. His long braid almost got caught at an umbrella handle on the umbrella stand as he turned around, but he absently pulled it away.

“How long have I known what? Please, take a seat, Hermione.”

“Mars is ascending,” Hermione quoted. He did not seem to consider there was anything problematic with what she was saying and nodded in agreement.

“Well, it is. It’s going to keep getting bigger and bigger as we see it get closer and closer to earth.”

“I found a copy of an old report of yours for the Ministry from almost a decade ago, made under the name of the Royal Society of the Sages of Stargazers—it was before you accepted the teaching post at Hogwarts. In that report, you said: Mars is ascending, caution is warranted. The interpretation on the storms of Uranus is to watch out for the occurrence of a primal chaos. Saturn exhibits a chain of storm at subtropical latitudes—prolonged struggle before renewal. If an upcoming conflict can be solved with negotiation, it should be settled so. The Ministry should carefully monitor discontent and dissatisfaction among the people and address their concerns promptly.”

Hermione generally remembered it, though she did occasionally glance to the scroll she was carrying to make sure that she hadn’t missed anything. The last line, though, was something she remembered all too well.

“Anything left to brew and ferment will explode into a prolonged armed conflict.”

Professor Dexter’s smile was tired. For all that he looked as if he was in his thirties, wizarding longevity informed her that he could easily be a decade or three over that.

“Mars would be at its closest in 1943,” he replied, quoting from the same report verbatim, “we can only relax our guard once that year passes.”

“You wrote all that in 1933. They didn’t listen to it, did they?” Hermione noted. He sighed, closing his grey eyes as he rubbed his forehead.

“Why should they? We were only minor diviners, astronomers. None of us had a prophecy.”

“You knew the war was coming.” She stated.

He shook his head. “No, we don’t.”

“But I thought—”

“Well, we hoped it wasn’t a war, as it was one of the worst outcomes that could happen. For all I knew it could be a plague, a volcanic explosion, a prolonged cold spell for the whole planet that would mean longer winters for several years, an unexpected famine.”
“Professor,” Hermione said firmly. “You mentioned Mars. The report by the team you lead mentioned the increasing storms or the turbulence of the storms in Jupiter and Uranus at some point. I find it hard to believe that your first concern wasn’t war and was famine instead.”

“But it wasn’t strictly Mars, that was why we were all worried enough to sit together and write a joint report,” Dexter corrected. “Saturn, after all, heralds the death and rebirth cycle natural to agricultural societies. Yet nowhere it is required that the process be peaceful. In many mythologies, the death of old deity in winter and the rebirth of the young deity in spring is usually violent. If I remembered correctly, I’m sure there was a conjunction between the planets mentioned somewhere in the report too.”

Hermione nodded in surprise, realising his point.

“Saturn exhibits a chain of storm,” she repeated. He smiled at her comprehension.

“Exactly. We saw the potential for a downward spiral of chaos alright, the ‘death’ phase of the death-and-rebirth cycle, along with the possible rise of conflict in society. Famine would still fit the bill for all three. Even if it only affected the muggle world, it would also bring difficulties to us—the wizarding world simply does not realise just how much we buy from them. Even if we grow more than enough food for ourselves, we still buy many other products from them. Or it could have been a Plague. If it was deadly enough or the death toll high enough, it could easily cripple the magical government—and chaos would ensure. It would also still fit the theme of death and rebirth.”

He paused, his clear eyes meeting her gaze after a moment of thought.

“How many key officials do you think you’d need to take out from the wizarding government before chaos hits, Hermione? Before someone decides that it’s the perfect time to usurp the Ministry and take power? It’s not as many as you think. There, now you have your armed conflict to go with the plague.”

The blond professor spoke this with his quiet, even tone, but it only made the images he drew more chilling. He had been considering the possibilities much longer than she did. Perhaps it never went away from the back of his mind through these years, his own personal ghost haunting him.

Dexter sighed.

“My colleagues were incensed when they heard that our report was only read, and yet nothing came out of it. But I’ve always been more aware than they are that our field is too vague. We know something big can come up, but we can’t exactly narrow down the possible what to others. You can get better details with arithmancy these days, or even the old-school use of ancient runes.” His smile was rueful.

“That’s why I resigned and decided that I can make a greater difference teaching the next generation to read the skies.”

“Did you figure that out from reading your horoscope?” She asked.

He chuckled. “No. I asked for a friend of mine to run arithmantic calculations on the three paths that occurred to me then. To divine with astronomy is to paint with the broadest and most sweeping brush. It is actually not too suited for personal forecasting. Well, you can see whether something sinister or something challenging lurks in the future, but there’s not enough details to do something about it, you know?”
She had never truly considered that the head of her house could have had another life before Hogwarts, that he was not just a sedate professor more occupied with teaching and grading homework. He had seen something, read a warning with his skills. It was just a pity that he hadn’t been heard before, and the degree of ignorance from the Ministry was enough to make him reconsider his career.

“So, what do you think about the war, then?” Hermione asked.

“It’s exactly as you’ve read before. There’s no way that it will be over before 1943. I doubt that it will be over even at 1943.” He tapped his nose in thought. “Daedalus told me what you were doing. I didn’t pass it on to the other teachers because I don’t see why it has to be their business. I wish you good luck, Hermione. You’d need it.”

She stiffened slightly, “what I’m doing?”

“Searching for Grindelwald. I hold to my prior position, though. As I’ve said, this won’t be over before 1943. Thus, I foresee that you have at least a long, tiring year looking for him and finding nothing.” He said. He did not seem judgmental or interfering at all, and Hermione relaxed at that.

“Now I want to hold off the search until the middle of 1943.” She jokingly complained.

He grinned. “No, that would just push back your results by another year. Sometimes, there’s simply no substitute for hard work.”

“Urgh. My finding the report wasn’t of much use at all, then.” The brunette groaned.

The expression on her Head of House’s face was now more serious than she’d seen him.

“Your timing was wrong. If you had read it before it all began—assuming you were already born and active, of course—you might be able to head things before it descends into the current mess. Now? Now that ball has been rolling for a while, carrying its own momentum. Mars is already ascending, perturbing earth’s orbit. If you were to stop it now, you’d need not a little amount of effort.”

He shrugged helplessly. “Though again, whether you could figure out what was wrong based on our vague warning is an entirely different matter.”

“Ah, I see. Thanks for clarifying things, professor, and I’m sorry to have bothered you at this hour.”

Dexter smiled back at her. “I don’t mind. Not many realises the potential of astronomy. As for this unnatural hour, well, unfortunately an astronomy teacher is also a rather unnatural creature. It would actually be difficult to find me at a normal hour.”

Hermione laughed a little herself before she took her leave. It was when he’d escorted her to the door that the professor gave her his last words.

“Hermione?”

“Yes, Professor?”

“Keep going in the direction you’re at right now. You’re doing the right thing.” He said.

Well, that was rather unspecific. “Um, thank you, I guess.”
His farewell smile was mysterious. “And give my regards to Tom Riddle. He’s better off listening to you than only his naked and uncontrolled ambition.”

Before Hermione could ask for clarification, the door closed behind her.

“What—What on earth did he mean by that? He can’t just say that and leave!” She complained to no one in particular. Of course, the corridors remained silent and no answer was forthcoming.

~ End of First Arc – Adaptation ~

Chapter End Notes

**End Notes:**

**Additional Notes:**

**Auguste Alexis Murat (OC):**

Fifth-year Ravenclaw, French transfer from Beauxbatons. The classes that he shares with Hermione are ADADA, Advanced Arithmancy & Advanced Astronomy. His name is from *Caesar Augustus*—yes, that’s an emperor’s title. He's the son of the French Minister for Magic in Exile. The French Minister for Magic in France right now is someone affiliated with the Vichy government and is a collaborator with Grindelwald. Generally level-headed, Auguste already has a lot of practise in politics because his family has historically been statesmen and bureaucrats.

On calling & courtship (cultural background construction):

In case it’s not clear, I did end up making three official, old-school relationship stages to exist that’s not outright marriage: 1) A wizard is only a gentleman caller, the 'getting to know you' phase. 2) Outright courting phase, where the wizard declares serious intent. 3) Engagement, which everyone expects to end in marriage.

I can’t imagine that marriage is casual affair in a culture that prizes bloodlines (and rarely, talent), especially back in 1940s, so I decided that the wizarding world is still somewhere in late 18th/ first half of 19th century on this.

In 19th century England, what exists is generally the courting and engagement stage. Why? Because even a close friendship between two people of the opposite sex might end up getting lumped into courting by observers. Yes, they all have marriage on their minds because marriage is Serious Business among the gentry then. I thought I’d give the characters less drama by making up a lesser step compared to those two.

I reason that the wizarding world can afford be a bit more laidback on the issue of
getting young people married compared to the non-magical culture it's embedded in, since their life expectancy can easily reach twice of non-magical humans. There's plenty of time for anyone to settle down, have kids, before it's too late.

The magical means of contraception are generations away from crude methods used by non-magicals even in the mid-20th-century. It might as well be space-age tech compared to that of cultures from older eras/lower on the technology tree. These lower the odds of witches getting pregnant—or knocked up by the 'wrong' people. Even if the norms of local non-magical population do tend to seep in and change the local wizarding community, these would help relax it. If any pair from the opposite sex get too close, it's doesn't automatically mean that they needed to be married to each other immediately.

**More cultural notes:**
(sincerely, skip this if you're not that into worldbuilding. Jump straight to the notes after this on planets/astronomy, if that's your cup of tea)

I realised that more than one pre-20th century cultures—and even some 20th century cultures—places a premium on female virginity. Well, I don't think the wizarding world will be enamoured of the idea for very long. Why? Firstly, because they have a very effective and efficient methods of contraception. Unexpected pregnancies can be greatly reduced. The other is due to the level of healing/tissue reconstruction magic; restoring the hymen is probably just a spell away (no matter how complicated or long that spell might be, I bet it's not hard to find a healer/nurse that has mastered it).

In this case, it merely becomes a cosmetic attribute, doesn't it?

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**On the planets:**
astronomy related stuff—I have no idea who's still reading at this point

Mars is indeed closest to earth at July 2018, August 2003 and September 1988. I extended that backwards to 1973, 1958 and 1943. If anyone has a more precise astronomical calculation showing my calculation of super-Mars to be off by a few years (1941?), they're welcome to message me with their source.

If you wish to see Uranus (and Jupiter) sometime in October 1942 around the latitude of Northumberland (as that’s roughly where I locate Hogwarts), you’d be best served to check after midnight. The planet is not visible after sunset. In 1942, Uranus would be mostly presenting its north pole towards earth.

The storms of Saturn and Uranus wasn’t generally visible in detail before the 1960s since telescopes weren't strong enough. I've found no record on their storms before, because there hadn't been any records. I'm making it all up, but for all I know there might actually be storms at the outer planet in the 1930s and 1940s.

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30 On Conjurations and Accidents

Chapter Summary

Advanced Potions and Transfigurations. Dumbledore detours and talks about the conjuration branch of magic. Hermione chats with the Ravenclaws about ADADA. Accidents happen.

Chapter Notes

Edited to add a PSA (mirrors the one in chapter 62): This is a good point to say that I made a Character Appendix for Strange Attractors in the Wattpad version of my account (Orange et Blue Morality). Why in Wattpad? Because I can upload my sister’s moodboards there, that’s why, so some character bios already have pictures and stuff. This is just in case anyone needed a quick reference of who’s who.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~ Second Arc – Opening Gambits ~

30 On Conjurations and Accidents

The classes on the first half of Friday went as well as it could’ve been.

Hermione chose Advanced Potions and Transfigurations. She’d been missing double Advanced Transfigurations the last time around instead of the double Advanced Herbology that she could’ve taken at the same time slot. This certainly meant that she shared both classes with Tom and Advanced Potions with many of the other Slytherins as well. Her suggestion that she and Tom might try partnering with other people had him staring at her with polite scepticism.

“Well, I wouldn’t know the rest of the Potions class that well if I always end up partnered with you, would I?” She had asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t know the rest of the Potions class that well if I always end up partnered with you, would I?” She had asked.

“She did have some academic curiosity on how he managed to create an echo of menace; on some objective level, she could still say that he was being polite and helpful. He just ended up sounding as if he did not.

“So, she ended up partnered with Tom at Advanced Potions again, and of course they finished within the estimated time frame (far faster than the next pair of potioneers, that was for sure). It
also meant that they had time to spare since they didn’t need to redo their work on any phase. They had started bottling at this point.

“Potion of Dreamless Sleep,” Hermione said. “I did wonder for a moment why we’re doing this again, at least until I noticed that Professor Slughorn asked everyone to make the quadruple batch recipe with extra-large cauldrons to fit. The first try was just to make sure everyone knew the intricacies of the default recipe and wouldn’t now fail and waste so many ingredients.”

Tom looked up from his own work. “And now, what do you think? Is it only to teach the students how to handle the scaling up of a potion recipe?”

“We’re sending all this to France, aren’t we?” She asked.

“Vive la Résistance,” Tom replied drolly.

“It’s going to be quadruple batch all the way from now on, isn’t?” Hermione concluded.

Tom only gave her an amused smile and no words. At any rate, it was enough of an answer for her.

In Advanced Transfigurations, her argument to partner with other people held more weight, as it was not so Slytherin-heavy as Advanced Potions seemed to be. She certainly recognised Shafiq and Julia easily and waved at them from the door as she parted ways with Tom. Abraxas was sometimes eyeing her with a squinty look, as if he couldn’t quite figure her out, before following Tom all the same.

The Ravenclaws were happy enough to have her company.

It was when she talked to Julia that Hermione realised that Hogwarts’ advanced classes were marked as Advanced I and Advanced II, and people fifth year and above were free to take one after the other. Only the resolutely studious took Advanced II. This was also why she was in the same class as sixth-year Julia Goldstein who decided to try Advanced Transfigurations this year.

“So, if I already took some Advanced II classes when I’m in sixth-year…” Hermione began,

“Then you’re going to have some seventh-years as classmates too.” The other brunette finished.

“Ah. Not that I’m complaining, I’m just curious—why did you only take Advanced Transfiguration now?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be taking Advanced Potions II if I didn’t focus on it before, nor would I be in Advanced Arithmancy II. I simply hadn’t been that interested in Transfigurations.” Julia finished. She was also apparently content to still be taking the standard DADA class at this point.

They managed to chat a bit before they were joined with the other Gryffindor Hermione had seen attending the Society, the one she remembered better than the distant de Montmorency—Rajesh Setalvad. She now knew how he received a quick invite when the meeting was planned in just several hours; Shafiq and Julia had several study groups with Oswin and Emma, that was where they first heard it. The two Ravenclaws themselves had been in classes with Raj—as they called him—and as they remembered his rather spirited defence of fighting against invaders, they pulled him in.

Dumbledore arrived, his long auburn hair and beard was distinct and easily visible from the distance. The transfiguration class continued on the previous theme of affecting permanent change (of course). Hermione had checked the syllabus and covered the area she might’ve missed when she didn’t attend the double Transfigurations timed at the same time as Care of Magical Creatures.
“Yes, Mr. Shafiq?”

“Conjuration is defined simply as the branch of magic where we create something out of nothing.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Thank you, five points to Ravenclaw. Yes, the simple definition for conjuration as I’m sure you’ve all know from third year states that it is the type of magic that creates something out of nothing. It is generally elemental in nature. Who among the Hogwarts fourth-years have not lit something on fire with a well-placed *Incendio*? Did anyone use anything else other than their wand in doing this? Of course not. The fire is created straight out of the energies of magic.”

She knew this already and listening to it was as comfortable as wearing a pair of old pyjamas.

“Let’s try a different, and some say opposite, spell. *Aguamenti.*” Hermione found herself already smiling slightly at the thought of one of her favourite spells. “Is it a conjuration? Yes, Miss Pickering.”

Dumbledore picked someone on the other side of the class, and a witch answered him.

“It is. We know this because dispelling the spell does not remove the water. It is then a conjuration spell to have created something new from nothing.”

“Yes, thank you, Miss Pickering, five points to Hufflepuff. The water stays after one casts *Aguamenti*. Most have never really thought much about it because they just let the water flow away. Now, I will tell you all something new. *Incendio* is indeed one of the purest example of conjuration—magic generating the energy to burn. *Aguamenti* is not exactly conjuration.”

There were some uncertain murmurs around the class.

“Yes, well, it is technically put under conjuration to simplify understanding. You’re all taught this before, haven’t you? But you’re in Advanced Transfigurations now, not Transfigurations, and it would behoove you to study the difference to be able to deepen your craft.” Hermione wouldn’t be surprised if today’s class would see some students quietly deciding to return to Transfigurations instead of Advanced Transfigurations to avoid the headache of the foundations.

“The conjuration branch actually holds two distinct types of magic, the *actual conjurations*, sometimes also known as the *pure conjurations*, are like *Incendio*. The *quasi conjurations* are like *Aguamenti*—it gives the impression that the caster has created something new when he or she has merely summoned it. Does anyone truly believe that they have created a new life when casting a spell such as *Serpensortia*?”

More relaxed sounds of denial went around and there was even a quiet chuckle or two. Yes, they never really knew how the snake got there in *Serpensortia*, but no one was cuckoo enough to think they’ve actually just *made* it.

“Yes, I’m sure everyone here remembers the fundamental laws of magic taught in first year, one of
which is that it cannot create life.” Dumbledore said. “Along with the next principle that says magic cannot create love.”

“Serpensortia merely summons a snake from an environment that is not wildly different from where the caster is. It is also rather good at finding snakes that are not personally tied to anyone, so it will never be someone’s pet you are summoning. Aguamenti is a more archaic and more powerful spell. Can anyone tell me why?”

It was quieter now, with fewer students volunteering. Hermione raised her hand this time.

“Yes, Miss Curie?”

“Because Aguamenti pulls water vapour from the air above the caster and summons it to the witch or wizard’s presence. When I say ‘above the caster’, I truly mean that the water is taken from the air at what the wizarding world calls medium-flying heights.” Hermione answered.

That drew more than one wizard or witch in the room to a pause. Dumbledore was rather satisfied with the result.

“Exactly. Five points to Ravenclaw. Aguamenti draws water from the air. Despite the sound of the incantation, the Romans did not come up with Aguamenti. We know this because we have evidence of a few older spells with different incantations, but very similar magical forms in their structure. They have copied and modified from an older source. Like most spells of this complexity and scale —many of which we have not yet quite understood or managed to reproduce—the conventional notation for its origin is Atlantis.”

That brought some excited murmurings, which Hermione couldn’t blame. She was always excited to hear when spells could have their source traced back to Atlantis too.

“I’m sure Filius would be glad to enlighten you with regards to the technical details if you were to reach the end of the first Advanced Charms class.” Dumbledore finished with twinkling blue eyes. There were several groans around the room, as none were looking forward to doing it, but they wished they could hear more about spells from Atlantis. That was exciting.

“ Compared to Aguamenti, Serpensortia is simpler. It does not try to collect a scattered collection of water, spread within the air, and then pull it into liquid. It only needs to find one snake that would not instantly die on the caster’s location. Then, it’s task is done. These, ladies and gentlemen, are spells from the quasi conjuration sub-branch.”

“Now, can anyone tell me if it’s not actual conjuration that these spells do, then what do the spells from the quasi conjuration sub-branch do?”

Dumbledore scanned the room. Hermione was sure that a few students even ducked to avoid his gaze. She raised her hand calmly instead of truly pushing it high up. She was on the second row already—she wasn’t exactly invisible.

“Mr. Riddle?”

Hermione had never really paid attention to Tom’s accent before other than how it was sophisticated. Now, with only his voice to focus on, she realised he’d honed it to be finer than many purebloods’.

“To be precise, the so-called quasi conjuration sub-branch actually consists of summoning spells.” He said.
“True, five points to Slytherin.” Dumbledore said. Hermione had to give credit to Dumbledore for knowing which students were most likely to know the answers to which questions. He gave more students the opportunity to give a correct answer as well as the slight rush of managing to do so. At the end of the class, the highest points would still be gained by the smarter students, but they don’t end up absolutely dominating the field. There were also surprised sounds around the class as people realised what Tom’s answer meant, but Hermione wasn’t really paying attention to that as she already knew about it.

“What have we learned now? That spells that are true conjuration are actually very small and very limited in number, mostly elemental ones. Wind and fire spells are that certainly, but we’ve found out that even water spells are quasi conjuration instead—it is only some form of complex, distant summoning. This is because the laws of magic constrain all of its branches, including conjuration.”

“If spells that we had thought to be capable of creating things from zero turns out to not be able to create things from zero due to their limitations, then what about spells that transform objects?”

“What does this mean for real transfiguration?”

He paused, waiting for them to take it in.

“Simple. The same thing applies. You follow the law of magic relevant in this case; you cannot create matter from nothing. You cannot transform something from nothing. You also cannot turn objects into nothing.”

Dumbledore walked to the other end of the classroom again.

“You cannot make stone out of air. You cannot make fire out of water or water out of fire. You cannot transform a chicken carcass into air. Naïve transfiguration relies on the imposition of your will on the universe. Real transfiguration relies on knowing what the object is and changing them. This also requires that you know the limitations of the object itself and the limitations of magic.”

“To the trained practitioner, there is a wide gulf that separates what is improbable and what is impossible. Now, the hard part is to tell difference between the two of them and to know why.”

“Problem solved,” Julia whooped with victory. “You couldn’t have been that good in Defence if you didn’t know transfiguration inside and out.”

“I did scratch some notes on my textbook,” Hermione insisted.

“Yes, but only that through the entire class?” She didn’t quite believe it. Hermione sigh.

“Well, I’m already familiar with the material—”

“I knew it.” Julia whooped with victory. “You couldn’t have been that good in Defence if you didn’t know transfiguration inside and out.”

Hermione stared at her carefully, trying to recall her face from some of her memories. “I’m pretty sure you’re not in Advanced Defence.”

“She asked me for my memories of your fight with Riddle,” Shafiq clarified from her left. “She had a pensieve for such purposes and I easily obliged. It was such an epic fight that I think it actually needs to be spread far and wide.”

“I’m seriously asking to move to Advanced Defence now if that’s what we can expect at every
meeting.” Julia said.

“Oh, it was fantastic.” Raj said from Julia’s right with unabashed enjoyment of an aficionado. “I was there, and I still needed to also borrow Goldstein’s pensieve to replay it several times. They went total war on the class—well, Curie more than Riddle, actually, his style is still closer to a duellist than hers is, but he started slinging the big spells at the end too. It made me wish Professor Merrythought would allow an open field, anything-goes fight like that more often. I want to go against Riddle or Curie here.”

Rajesh Setalvad had piercing grey eyes and spoke with the conviction of a freedom fighter, and thick dark curls that easily made him look younger. Basically, he was the ideal type of person you’d choose if you want to send someone to fight a Nazi invasion with only an old rifle. Or to lead a cell that would coordinate guerrilla warfare in conquered territory.

“You’re nuts. Absolutely nuts.” Adil Shafiq muttered. He explained further.

“Look, Hermione messed up the whole field. At the end of the class, the remaining tables that survived being used as cover had blood sprays from the speed and force of their cutting curse that manages to get through and more than half of it was on fire.”

“In splinters and ashes, at the end, to be exact,” Rajesh corrected him. Seeing the exasperated look on the other wizard’s face, he took it to mean that his classmates wanted to hear all the gory details.

“Curie flambeed a bunch of tables in a large Confringo that forced Riddle to try for triple Protego. Seeing him pull that on the spot was awesome. You can even feel the pressure because you can see he wasn’t that certain he’d manage it instead of just two—and we had seen earlier that two wasn’t enough to hold all that back.”

The taller wizard cringed.

“Yikes! Don’t remind me. That burning explosion of tables was flipping scary. I’m quite sure Riddle had burns on his left forearm from it!” Shafiq replied.

“I finished healing those in the class. It was minor burns.” Hermione interjected.

“Yes, but that was an excellent demonstration of the flame whip, Curie.” Rajesh assured her. “At some parts, you’ve burned right through the coat’s sleeve, and even his shirt. I commend on the sensory thoroughness of your memory—I remember the scent of burning human flesh very well.”

She was starting to pity Adil, who was looking a little green.

“I replayed the memory of that fight three times,” Julia said, as they all began to put heavy books and parchments back into their bags.

“In the last two repeats, I followed Riddle’s movements right by his side. And you know what? His reaction speed was slowing down! I think he knew it too, and that was why he went for the physical tackle. He would’ve lost otherwise.” Julia shook her head rapidly. “I don’t want to go against Hermione here. I certainly don’t want to get poisoned.”

Shafiq was staring at Hermione with the wide eyes of a startled fox. She was almost tempted to yell ‘boo’ to see if he’d jump.

“If we are ever fighting in teams, I am absolutely on your team. You’ll remember that, right? Or, um, do I have to bribe you with something? Honeydukes’ truffles?”
“Yes, yes, you can be on my team, Adil.” The brunette said it quickly, though she couldn’t help the smile that came up with the idea of a chocolate bribe. Her housemates really were too paranoid about this.

“I still can’t believe you used poison. How did that even fly with Merrythought?” The Ravenclaw wizard asked again.

“There was nothing too harmful used, alright? Tom and I agreed that we’d use any spell we know as long as we can heal it.” Hermione said with exasperation.

Other students had started to filter out of the class and they began heading in more or less the same direction. Tom had gone on first with his band of Slytherins and raised a hand to her that was more-or-less ‘see you later’. She waved back in reply, trying to ignore that little bit of fondness that she felt when she saw him, or how her lips had involuntarily quirked into a smile.

“Oh, I can agree to that. I don’t really mind the poison if you can heal it. Anyway, we can build resistances to poisons, right? What sort of poison do you recommend I’d start with if I’m interested?” Rajesh asked, utterly serious, ignoring the ‘just how masochistic are you?’ looks sent his way by Shafiq and Julia.

“Hermione, you’re the Nightingale of Hogwarts. I’m beginning to feel that you can heal a lot of things short of bubonic plague. Wait, maybe even bubonic plague! Um, please don’t use bubonic plague in fights against me? Or the Black Plague? Pretty please?” Julia asked with some trepidation.

“I’d never use bubonic plague!” Hermione protested. “That’s biological warfare!”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of this ‘biology warfare’ you’re talking about,” Julia said, her thick eyebrows still furrowed.

“Is this some muggle form of warfare that I don’t know about?” Adil asked as he eyed her warily. “Some form of muggle warfare you’re actually really good at, but doesn’t want to do for ethical reasons? I’m right, aren’t I?”

She rolled her eyes. Well, as someone who studied medicine, yes, she could be really good at it if she wanted to. Julia had taken one step to the left to be able to carefully observe her.

“Um, Hermione?” Julia asked, treading with the care one gives a live bomb and berserk lunatics.

“I won’t use it, alright?” She sighed.

Alright, the rules hadn’t exactly been set by the UN in the past that was currently her present, and even the Allies could get pretty brutal in attacking the Axis forces in her current present—hello, firebombing? And Churchill was all gung-ho for it in the war, she remembered. On second thought, it might be why neither Adil nor Julia was much convinced, though.

“Why not?” Rajesh asked curiously.

At least he accepted her glare in good nature and didn’t press her further.

Yet just because civilisation hadn’t upgraded their standards didn’t mean she was going to be lax with hers! Not to mention that the disease might spread back towards your own homeland, though hmm, that might be an interesting technical challenge to overcome, isn’t it? With the right pre-emptive vaccine on your own population, it might be possible to weaponise the plague…
No. She shook her head internally, firmly putting a stop to that line of thought. There were lines that she wouldn’t cross. There is no way I’m considering this.

“It’s…oh, never mind, I’ll explain later. I suppose the proper rules haven’t been codified yet, but it’s ugly and it’s inhumane to use against other sentient beings.”

The four of them slowly walked out of class and presumably towards the Great Hall for lunch.

“And I’m with Adil here. If I finally move to Advanced Defence, I’m absolutely on your team. I don’t care what I need to do or what role I need to play in it.” Julia insisted.

“What if I wasn’t on the same team as Tom? Wouldn’t you rather be on the same team with him?” Hermione asked back. “You saw that he’s just as good as I am, right?”

Adil and Julia exchanged glances before they both shook their heads at the same time.

“Definitely not,” Adil concluded.

“Agreed.” Julia said. The navy ribbon that she tied her hair in fluttered with her movement. “I get the feeling that Riddle’s a lot scarier than his excellent student persona that we get to see most of the time. He just has that edge of something that you can’t quite define. I’d rather take my chances with you. Ravenclaws unite, right?”

“Well, I’d rather be on your team than Riddle’s too. He’s a bit shifty, isn’t he?” Raj asked.

“A bit shifty’ is putting it mildly,” Adil said.

“I don’t actually mind, though. He looks like he’s a good fighter if you can push him to take the fight seriously,” the Gryffindor replied with ease. His expression didn’t change even as the two Ravenclaws gave him looks of disbelief.

“Really, Raj?” Adil was sceptical.

“An excellent fighter is worth his weight in gold in the field.” Rajesh shrugged, before turning to Hermione. “Though if I have to be on the third team that have to fight your two teams, that would still be interesting.”

The Ravenclaw wizard shook his head in disbelief.

“Nuts.”

“Actually, I simply wished to get better as fast as I can.”

Hermione found the paper at the end of her Advanced Potions class. She didn’t know who placed it there.

Well, that wasn’t quite true. She did wonder when some Slytherin girls seemed to be drifting too close to her table a few times during class. It wasn’t as if any of them other than Emma had ever tried talking to her. And she hadn’t actually talked to any single one of them excepting one of the German witches. The brunette had a feeling it didn’t quite count since it seemed that they identify as Prussians more clearly than they do as Slytherins.

She had suspects, yes. She simply did not have a more exact knowledge about them. One of them had wanted to meet during lunch, and Hermione didn’t see any reason to say no to it. Why would
she care if whoever it was turned out to be one of Tom’s admirers whom she never really noticed? She supposed that whoever the witch was, she could vent, Hermione could pretend to listen (but was actually counting the time until she could return to her own affairs again) and life continues on.

*The top of the stairway before third-year Charms classroom.*

She supposed they picked that location because they’d be finishing the standard Charms class at the time.

To tell the truth, there were actually two stairways near there. Hermione simply used the empathetic locating charm that was becoming her go-to spell in wandering around Hogwarts these days (she owed Tom for showing her that one). It made for a good conversation starter when people see the wand turning in her hand like a compass needle, and it was a good answer for when anyone asked her why she was wandering at a particular corner of Hogwarts. *Don’t ask me why, the spell directed me here.*

It was a nice, diplomatic answer.

*(See Daphne? I can be diplomatic. That last one was an accident. How was I to know that telling the Bulgarian Magical Attaché that I last saw his wife going into that wing with a man ended up with him finding her in flagrante delicto with a co-worker and starting a fight in a wizarding embassy?)*

So, Hermione was climbing up a set of stone spiral stairs, and at the end of it, she saw three Slytherin witches.

“So, what is this about?” She asked, straight to the point.

“You need to stay away from Riddle,” the petite one said.

“I’m sorry, but who on earth are you? All of you?”

The brunette could see all of them bristling at her casual question. Hermione was going to have pity on them, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t going to be blunt when they were the same.

“You dare to say that to Jemima?” This was the taller, more intimidating one who was saying it. It certainly wasn’t the one looking like a pureblood princess with her nose high in the air.

“You can give me your names, or I can just walk away right now. Because meeting with people you don’t know in a dark corner? That’s the definition of a mugging.” Hermione remarked. They were more invested in this meeting than she was, anyway. She could already see that even as they were bristling at her accusation. The petite witch in front of her spoke up quickly.

“Violetta Carrow. The lady you can never hope to emulate is Jemima Avery and that’s Prudence Thicknesse.”

*Prudence? Hermione thought with disbelief. And here I thought Puritan names went out of style after the 17th century.*

“Alright. I’m sure you know who I am, so let’s get cut straight to the chase. What do you need to meet me for?”

“Stay away from Tom Riddle. Consider this your only warning.” The petite one said—*who was it again? Carrow? Yes, Carrow.* Well, that was cliched and not helpful at all.
“Well, why don’t you tell him to stay away from me. I wouldn’t be this close with him if he wasn’t also looking for my company, you know?” Hermione just had to say that. First, because it was true, and the second was…well, alright, plain old Hermione Granger she’d never been in this situation before and a sense of morbid curiosity was telling her to milk it for as much as it was worth. It was like watching an accident in slow motion—you can’t look away.

Cue several outraged gasps, the loudest coming from the blonde with the perfect mane of hair.

“You! How dare you say that!” Oh, the princess can speak for herself, I see. “You brazen trollop!”

Hermione just stared at her with a sense of amusement and disbelief. She actually had to hold back the urge to laugh right there.

“If all you wanted to do was to call me names, you can do that while passing the corridors. And here I thought this wouldn’t be a complete waste of time.” The brunette mused.

“Can’t you see you’re only going to bring him down? Tom is going to go to high places and he can’t be seen with the likes of you.” Carrow cut in again.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Tom has a brain, alright? Which is more than I can say for any of you. If he doesn’t want to associate with me, he’ll say so and I’ll respect his wishes. You’re his…who are you again? I really can’t say I’ve seen you around him at all, and I know his various circles by now.”

Alright that was mean, she admitted as she saw the blonde clenching her hand in anger at that and the others quivering with indignation. That was mean but so very satisfying, and she found it hard to regret it much. She just kept her bland disinterested look on, knowing that it would annoy them much more than anger.

“He’s just accompanying you out of pity!” The tall witch with the Puritan name insisted. Hermione couldn’t help the bark of laughter that escaped at that.

“Tom doesn’t have pity, dear. You are kind of special that way, aren’t you?”

“If it wasn’t for Slughorn tasking him with being your guide, he wouldn’t have to waste his time with you at all!” Carrow said again.

“Well, no. I spent that much time with him because he took the same seven out of my total nine classes.” She answered smoothly. “How many classes did any of you share with him, by the way? Advanced Potions? That’s one. Oh, maybe three at most?”

From the looks on their faces, it was the truth if not very close to it.

“Are you getting to the point any time soon, by the way? Because if not, I have places to be.”

“You’re truly, really that selfish, aren’t you?” The princess among them asked in disbelief.

The reality denial in this one is such…wow. She has no words. “Are you saying you’re not trying to monopolise Tom Riddle for yourself? Because it certainly looks that way to me. You won’t even ask him for his opinion first—which I still did, by the way. What? Did you really think I made the second flower crown I wore on my own? It was a gift after our first major disagreement, Ladies.”

She gave them a mysterious smile and didn’t even bother with clarification, letting them draw the worst conclusion possible.
Evil, evil Hermione, she thought, but really, these girls were making her id itch to come out and strike back just because how predictable they are.

“Right. So, this has been a massive waste of my time. I think I’ll just be on my way to the Great Hall.”

She turned around and walked down the stairs.

Well, to be honest, she’d just taken the first several steps when she heard a frustrated screech and felt a shove. A part of her berated herself for lowering her guard with people who clearly thought of her as their enemy.

Hermione fell down the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

Additional Notes:

Rajesh Setalvad (OC): Fifth-year Gryffindor prefect. Driven, with a sharp intellect that will not be out of place in Ravenclaw, Setalvad nonetheless has what Lakshmi calls ‘the unfortunate habit of picking up causes’. He shares four classes with Hermione; Advanced Transfiguration, Advanced Charms, ADADA, and Advanced Ancient Runes. ‘Rajesh’ means ‘ruler of kings’, a high king, if you will. Setalvad is a surname included on the list of the Four-Fold Families. His family is a global one and still keeps in touch with the branches in the Gujarat Province of the Indian Empire.
31 Traces

Chapter Summary

A controlled fall. Hermione is at the infirmary. Tom visits. Chats. Tom’s last Advanced DADA class of Friday. The Ravenclaw Adil Shafiq gets cornered by Tom Riddle.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the reviews and feedback, guys! I can easily update somewhat regularly for now since they inspire me.

Random:
Me: *Picking up one brother's phone* Huh, cats. Why does he have to use pics of his cats as wallpaper? At least I used some landscape. Nice and neutral.
Also me: *Scrolls through phone picture folder trying to find one particular pic*. Argh. Where is it? Can't find it among photos of the cat.
...
*Facepalm*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

31 Traces

As Hermione fell, the larger part of her was taken over by her reflex of what to do in an uncontrolled fall—try to control it. This was done by tucking her head in and ensuring she was rolling forward. Well, rolling down was a lot bumpier than rolling on a flat plane, and a hell lot more painful, but at least she could be sure that the Aurors’ aikido sensei was going to be proud of her reflex.


Hermione banged her elbows at least twice, scratched various parts of her and certainly bruised her shoulders who was taking the brunt of the impact that would’ve been taken by her head. She was pretty sure her back was black and blue from getting bounced off the stairs. Her head was spinning by the time she reached the landing at the bottom of the stairs (thank goodness there was a landing on every floor). She took her wand out and ran a diagnostic spell by reflex. No broken or cracked bones. Good. It was annoying that she still hadn’t had enough calcium yet, though. She tested her ankles and only found a minor sprain. A minor healing spell took care of that. Mobility was important.

Secondly, she was lucky her bag fell when she was first pushed—she wouldn’t have been able to roll properly if any part of her was entangled. Admittedly, she’d had lightened her bag that it wouldn’t be a deadweight, but getting tied up would still be a concern. A flash of vanity made her cast a spell to tidy her mass of hair and ran a hand through the loose curls falling beyond her shoulders. She might be bruised, but she wasn’t going to have a bird’s nest on top of her head.
The third thing that crossed her mind was, *Tom is going to kill somebody.*

A groan escaped her. Hermione didn’t need him on the warpath and casting Cruciasus left and right, even if she thought the idiots probably could use a lesson in how it felt. It would certainly make them less impulsive the next time around, and maybe they’d learn how to *not* anger the wrong witch or wizard. But no. Dumbledore’s suspicions were just going to flame into full-blown paranoia if he did, and she’d rather not antagonise the transfiguration professor and wizarding powerhouse on the side of ‘good’ unnecessarily.

*And because casting Cruciasus is wrong!* She slapped her forehead. She was starting to think a little too like Tom. A reminder every so often wouldn’t be amiss.

Hermione settled for climbing up the stairs first to retrieve her bag. She figured the three idiots were too shocked with what one of them did that they wouldn’t hang around. If they did? Well, Hermione wasn’t going to be nice with the spells she can cast, that’s for sure. She trudged up the stairs, wincing every time she pulled another muscle or used parts of her that would rather not be used. She can really sympathise with little Adrian Smith right now.

Her guess was correct. They’d scattered. Her bag was on the second step down from the top and she picked it up.

It would be better if Tom heard about it directly from her than from anyone else, because she was sure it was going to sound worse than it actually is. But if he saw her with the bruises, well…

Cruciasus. There would be lots of Cruciasus all the way and maybe someone would end up dead.

*Right, bad idea. Infirmary it is, then. Nurse Edelstein can get a full account of the bruises and then heal it up. And then I can send news that I’m in the infirmary.*

Maggie Edelstein would rant, rave, and even curse, but she was a professional. She cast healing spells after healing spells while at the same time keeping up a running commentary for her preliminary report with a dicta-quill. Maggie was going to insist on Hermione giving her the name of the three Slytherin witches, but she was stubborn.

“Just write it down that anyone can ask me personally if they want to know. I can’t tell you. If there’s a record of it somewhere, there’s a chance that Tom is going to get his hands on it, and then someone’s going to get hurt.” The brunette said.

Maggie raised her eyebrows but did not express disbelief. *Well, that was new,* Hermione thought. Most adults she knew didn’t seem to seriously consider Tom Riddle as a threat. She wondered what Maggie had seen that she’d accepted it without comment.

“You can just tell me and I’ll keep it. I won’t write it down.” The nurse said.

“How good are you at occlumency?” Hermione asked.

“All medical personnel have some basic competence at it to preserve patient confidentiality. It’s no good keeping secrets if our minds can be scanned easily by any random passer-by, right?”

The nurse’s smile faded when she saw that the Ravenclaw student only shook her head. “Not enough. I know you’re past the basics, but you need to already have a solid mental foyer or welcoming area to distract visitors and fill it with basic mental constructs scattered around. Enough to hold back and raise the alarm for you. This is at the very least. Anything weaker than that and
you wouldn’t even notice that he’s already rifling through your memories.”

Nurse Edelstein’s laugh was awkward and thin. “Riddle?”

“He’s an accomplished legilimens, Nurse Edelstein. I’d know, because he did try to prod my mental defences and failed once. I’m rather proud of my occlumency skills.” She answered. “I managed to counter-attack and we ended up just kicking each other out of our respective minds.”

“No, I mean…he’d just…randomly go through other people’s thoughts? Like that?”

Hermione could see that the nurse was moving towards dismay and she moved to assure the nurse.

“No, he doesn’t actually make it a habit. It’s too much of a bother, to be honest.” Not unless he was interrogating someone or trying to pry a secret, I think. But that was nothing that Maggie needed to know. “It’s just that in this case, he’d go all ‘the ends justify the means’ because he wants to find the culprits so bloody much.”

She took a deep sigh.

“Look, I’m doing damage control right now, alright? I know he’d be annoyed that I didn’t go directly to him when I was hurt, but if I did that and then he saw the bruises, someone’s going to die.”

Hermione said it in a mater-of-fact way, without dramatics of exaggeration. Yet from the weight of Nurse Edelstein’s expression, the nurse took it seriously.

“He’s actually rather scary, isn’t he? And here I thought you said he wasn’t your beau,” Maggie said in a half-joke.

“Well, he wasn’t back then.” Hermione muttered.

The nurse gaped. “Hermione! Are you saying—?”

“I thought I might as well since we’re going to work together so much.” The brunette said.

Maggie Edelstein narrowed her eyes at Hermione. “That doesn’t sound very romantic. It doesn’t even sound as if you’re even interested in a relationship at all.”

Hermione huffed. “Yet it’s true. I just try not to think about him too much at the time being, alright? Tom gives me a headache. He’s going to end up as one of the masters of the universe and I’d probably need to keep an eye on him on his entire life to make sure he doesn’t start doing anything too questionable, but otherwise, he’ll be a productive and upstanding member of society.”

The ironic twist to her lips probably didn’t help matters. The brunette ignored the baffled look that the nurse was currently sporting. She rolled her eyes and spoke up again.

“Fine, he’s also very clever and he’s good looking. It’s really no hardship at all to be with him. Now, does that satisfy your curiosity already? Can we get a move on?”

Maggie Edelstein sighed and rubbed her temples. It was clear that she wasn’t sure what to think about the most recent development.

“So, now that you know about his tendencies, I’ll keep the names to myself, thank you. It’s enough that I know who they are. Now, how are we going to send a message to Tom right now so he doesn’t hear it from the rumours and assume the worst?”
Nurse Edelstein managed to get one of the house elves to drop a message to one Hattie Perks that a certain Hermione Curie was looking for her in the infirmary. Hattie stood up from her seat at the Ravenclaw House table and almost ran all the way up, while Nurse Edelstein asked the returning house elf about what they’re cooking for lunch today (she and Hermione was going to end up having lunch in the infirmary, after all).

Hermione recognised the house elf as Pinny. She had met her in the kitchen first, and Pinny was also the one who brought her the cakes for yesterday’s tea. Her colourful apron made out of various tea cosies that its surface looked quilted. The brunette cheerfully greeted the house elf.

“Pinny! It’s funny to see you here now.”

“Pinny serves Missus Hermione. Pinny is of course here.” The house elf insisted.

Well, that was awkward, Hermione talked to the elf, determined to find out what she liked (Hermione wanted to be able to give the house elves something even if they don’t care for money right now). When Hattie arrived, breathless with enthusiasm and her light brown hair flying behind her, Nurse Edelstein had to ask her to take a breath and slow down. She was a weird mix of excited and terrified when she saw the fifth-year witch on one of the beds and she practically bounced all the way there.

“Hermione! What happened? Are you alright?”

Hermione reflexively cast a spell to put the first-year’s wavy hair in better order. “Calm down. Yes, I’m alright now. It’s just that Nurse Edelstein doesn’t want to let go of me yet. ‘For observation’ she says. I just think she’s lonely.”

“I’m not lonely,” Maggie Edelstein insisted.

“Well,” Hermione said. “I just wanted you to pass on a message to Tom at the Slytherin table. Just tell him that I had an accident but I’m fine. You’ve seen me awake and chatting, and in fact, I’m currently waiting for lunch with Nurse Edelstein right now, and that he doesn’t need to worry. Now, can you repeat that?”

Hattie nodded. “You have an accident and you’re at the infirmary, but you’re fine now. You’re also asking him not to worry?”

“Yes, that’s about it.” Hermione said with a smile. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I can’t imagine anyone else I can get that wouldn’t make a big fuss about it and would make Tom worry even more.”

Hattie huffed with pride. “See? I knew he was your beau even before both of you knew it.”

Hermione grinned, too amused. “Well, I suppose you do. Thanks for your help, Hattie.”

“You’re welcome, Hermione. It’s no trouble at all.”

And with that, the first-year was off. In the end, Hermione didn’t want to imagine what sort of gruesome accident Lakshmi might accidentally (or not-so-accidentally) infer she was suffering from if the dark-haired witch was the one delivering the message. Eugenie would also be too genuinely concerned that it might give a similarly worrying image, while an impersonal note also fails to deliver emotion and intonation, leaving too much room for misinterpretation. Now, Hermione simply hoped that her guess was right and that Hattie’s optimism would shine through in
her delivery.

Apparently, even Hattie was not enough to sway Tom Riddle. It was either that, or he was the world’s most negative pessimist. It was only some ten minutes later when she saw the infirmary door open and his gaze unerringly found hers on the infirmary bed she’d begun to think as ‘hers’.

“Hi,” she waved a hand at him when he had reached the bottom of her bed.

Tom didn’t say anything, only walking up to her side. His left hand holding the side of her face with a gentleness that she still found surprising when coming from him. She was distracted by his stormy blue eyes before she realised he was casting several spells with his right hand. The first, she noticed, was actually the diagnostic spell she had taught him.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“That was the first thing I checked, Tom. No broken or fractured bones. We’ve gotten the bumps and bruises as well. It’s just that Nurse Edelstein is paranoid and she wants me to stay longer for observation. Seriously, I can just walk out right now—”

“Don’t you dare!” Maggie Edelstein’s voice came up from the other side of the infirmary.

“No need to worry, Madam Edelstein. I won’t let her,” Tom coolly replied, his expression implacable.

“Thank you, Mr. Riddle.”

“Spoilsport, both of you,” Hermione replied, and was soundly ignored by both. She pouted.

Tom leaned forward and kissed her; she found the sharp edge of his emotions to be a familiar taste than threatening. He held her tighter than she’d expected, but instead of uncomfortable, the honesty in his grip only made her own thoughts stutter. It was his frank concern and unrepentant anger fuelling his desperation that made her melt towards him, to seek him out and try to soothe him as she ran her hands through his hair. She was *fine*, really. She was alright now. Though all these kisses were wonderful and she was happy enough to continue them.

“Well, if I had any doubts at all that he was your beau, I don’t have them now.” Nurse Edelstein’s voice broke through the haze clouding Hermione’s mind.

Even though they separated, Tom easily slid his arm around her back. Hermione might be blushing, but she was also grinning.

“Which part of ‘it’s no hardship at all to be with him’ was ambiguous, really?” She wryly asked.

Tom himself was unfazed at having been caught red-handed snogging in the infirmary, *by the Head Nurse*. “Yes, Madame Edelstein? Is there something we can help you with?”

Maggie Edelstein stared at them for five seconds. They simply stared back.

The nurse sighed. “You two are *not* cute at all. Why can’t you be one of those adorable, loving couples that’s gives joy and happiness even to the people watching?”

There was a slight crease at Tom’s brow. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, don’t mind her, Tom. I think we just broke her rose-coloured view of the world.” Hermione
remarked. “I’m sorry Nurse Edelstein, but I suppose we’re just of the practical sort, really.”

“What happened to Hermione?” Tom asked, cutting straight through the chatter (that he saw no point to).

“She fell down a flight of stairs. She’s fine now.” Maggie said. “There really is no terrible wounds or hideous injuries. I’m afraid if you’re looking for drama, you’d be sorely disappointed. I’ll let her go this evening, just to be sure, but she’s more or less fine—”

“And I’ve said that myself!” Hermione interjected.

“—so, I suppose I can let you continue your visit as long as you’re discreet, Mr. Riddle.” The nurse finished.

“Of course. Thank you, Madame Edelstein.”

With some more dissatisfied mumbling about kids who grew up too fast and can’t even enjoy life, the gleam of Nurse Edelstein’s copper head walked away from them and back to the infirmary office. Tom turned to Hermione again.

“What happened?” He asked.

“I fell down a flight of stairs.” She said. Which, of course, did not satisfy Tom at all.

“I’ve seen you move in Advanced Defence, Hermione. It’s your precise awareness of your surroundings that allowed you to utilise them so well in your attacks.” He watched her carefully as he spoke. “I find it hard to believe that you’ve failed to realise that you were near a flight of stairs.”

“Well, it did happen, my falling down the stairs, I mean.”

“Hermione.”

Tom tipped her chin up so she couldn’t avoid his gaze. He didn’t even have to try legilimency (which would only piss her off and gain him nothing); he was content with merely trying to read her face. Hermione bit her lip because she knew in her gut feeling she was going to lose. His voice was deceptively polite, his hand caressing her cheek.

“Who was it?”

“Tom…”

He stepped away, his attention was sharply focused on her the way the alpha wolf of the pack waited for a challenger to flinch first. Fortunately, she was rather good at holding her own.

“Give me their names, Hermione.” He ordered.

“Why are you saying they?”

“It couldn’t have been just one person to have caught you off guard.” He answered. A small smile that wasn’t quite friendly rose on his face. “I was right, wasn’t I?”

Hermione sighed. She knew she wouldn’t be able to hide it from him; she was always too open in her expressions. Even Maggie Edelstein knew that she couldn’t have fallen on her own in the first ten seconds—though admittedly, she was experienced at reading trauma wounds too.

“Let me handle them,” she finally said.
“Hermione—”

“They crossed me, and they’re mine to teach a lesson to. I’ll admit, I’ll probably take some time to come up with something suitable that I still can live with, but I can do it. We don’t need you to go all ‘burn their fields and salt their earth’ that would get all the wrong kinds of attention, Tom. De-escalation is a thing.”

De-escalation was also one of The Met’s 21st century policing principles that Hermione was too happy to study about and help Susan Bones devise a custom manual on it for the Aurors. Being part of Her Majesty’s Government meant that there are now (gasp!) ISO standards they have to fulfil. Along with other bureaucratic hoop-jumping.

Tom was certainly not on board with the de-escalation plan. His approach was closer to a mafia don’s.

“They hurt you. They have to pay.”

His voice was soft, but the coldness in it was reaching liquid nitrogen levels. His eyes? His eyes were closer to a pair black holes. Hermione shivered. Whether it was purely on a psychological level, or if he was collecting large amounts of magic around his aura that just grates on the nerves, she didn’t know. It did not discomfit her, though, because she knew he was furious on her behalf.

“Oh, Tom…” Hermione sighed.

Was that fondness in her voice again? It was. Dammit. She cursed herself for somehow already not seeing him as this horrible, terrible faceless threat looming over wizarding Britain. He still could be a threat and he could easily be terrible, but she’d realised now that he’s the last thing from out-of-control. He did say he can compromise.

“Are you planning on going straight to class after this, or were you going to skip at least one to accompany me?” She asked.

Her sudden change of topics didn’t startle him.

“I might not mind missing the next class.” He stated.

“You’re going to miss the first class of double Advanced Defence, really?” She was rather surprised. “That’s certainly going to be a stain on your perfect student image, isn’t it?”

Tom shrugged. “It’s just one class, Hermione. I’m sure worrying over you in the infirmary is an acceptable excuse. They’ll be sympathetic to my concerns about your injury. After all, no one is aware how serious or light it is right now.”

His answer was still calculating and absolutely unromantic. Yet she had a slight smile on her face as she shifted to the farther side of the bed and patted the spot next to hers. “Leave your shoes on the floor, then. I really don’t like dirt on the bed sheets.”

He observed her curiously for a few seconds before he did sit on the bed and pulled his shoes off. He leaned back against the pillow propped in front of the brass rails next to her. She drew her knees up and leaned them against his thigh, tucking herself by his side. The brunette rested her head on his shoulder and she could feel his arm going around her. She caught a whiff of the faint scent of oak and something else that was his cologne.

“You were going to find them and cast the Crucius Curse on them, weren’t you?” Hermione asked.
She could feel him shift slightly, probably to turn and look at her face. She was still calm and she knew her tone reflected that, so she merely waited.

“It had crossed my mind.” He admitted.

It was probably the closest he’d say in a place that wasn’t private. “Maybe you’d go and find a few of your friends and ensure you all have good alibis before and after the event. That’s rather important.”

“You’ve thought about this.” Tom remarked.

“Mmm, yes. I’ve been thinking about it for a while. The thing is, it didn’t matter that you didn’t do it. Even if someone experiences genuine accident, as long as the person has some record of conflict with you, it can be read as the effects of hidden interference by a suspicious mind. We both know that you already have someone highly suspicious of you.”

They didn’t need to name any names—both of them knew it was Dumbledore.

“Now, common knowledge says that the Cruciatus is the easiest and most painful torture spells that can be used, and that is why it’s one of the Unforgivables.”

“It truly is the easiest to use.” Tom said.

“Oh, I have no doubt,” Hermione said, easily slipping into her academic mode that she didn’t stop to wonder too long about what sort of testing Tom had done to be able to say that. “And considering that not many pain-inflicting spells affect the whole body, it doesn’t have many competitions. Add the sophistication that had gone to its construction, well…it’s an excellent creation of a master and at the same time a terrible thing.”

“But?” He asked.

Hermione balked. “But? Why should there be a ‘but’?”

He sounded amused now. “I am recognising your pattern, Hermione. I’m sure you’re trying to dissuade me from something yet again.”

The witch huffed. “Well, you know that I think the Cruciatus is a barbaric instrument, but I’m sure you already know that and don’t need me to spell it out to you.”

“That is where you’re interesting. You do not go into the tedium of using morality as a crutch and excuse, though you clearly have them and passionately follow them.”

He didn’t react to her audible snort and a mumbled, ‘what use is it if you don’t even care about them?’

“When you present me your arguments, you chose to use reason and logic. Sometimes, you also include the not-very-common, common sense. You can clearly argue about them instead of simply taking the moral high ground and assume that it gives you the right to order other people around.”

Tom was absent-mindedly stroking her hair. Hermione was not made for idle stillness either, as she had decided to begin a thorough examination of his blazer pockets for anything interesting. Sadly, he did not even have a single caramel or chocolate square there.

“Well, you see, the Cruciatus might not leave a physical wound, but it does not mean it didn’t leave a physical trace.” She insisted.
“All that pain? That’s the curse overloading and inflicting waves of pain on the peripheral nerves of the victim. The nerves become activated, swamped with stimuli. It’s important to remember that pain isn’t processed in one direction, just from the ends of the peripheral nerves and travel all the way up to the brain. Pardon for my exaggeration, but the actively screaming nerves also releases neurotransmitters of their own to induce the circulatory system to widen their vessels, their pipes. This leaks even more stuff around the area that contributes to the inflammation and sensitivity to more pain.”

“It creates a negative feedback loop too. That inflammation? That soup of alarm chemicals? It’s detectable in the blood.”

Hermione took a deep breath. “If you know what to test, you can prove the use of a torture spell. Test it on various parts of the body and you can prove that a body-wide torture spell is used. Even if you can’t conclusively prove the curse used is the Cruciatus, it doesn’t matter. All the other body-wide torture spells are also banned under different Ministry edicts or Wizengamot act—whatever spell used, it already meant a dark, forbidden curse is used.”

She shook her head, her shaking curls drawing his attention for more than a moment.

“You can’t use Cruciatus casually, Tom. It’s not as undetectable as some people think, especially to people trained to look for it. I suppose that’s what I was trying to say.”

The fact that the spell to detect it technically wouldn’t be invented in two more decades or more was something she’d conveniently not mentioned, even as she sent up a silent apology to the mediwitch for (most probably) introducing it sooner or later herself. Hermione could not in good conscience not spread the knowledge to the wider wizarding world. It was too useful not to.

They didn’t say anything for a while. The quiet of the infirmary was oddly comfortable instead of eerie or strange.

“What’s your plan, then?” He asked.

She paused, not quite understanding his question. Hermione could vaguely feel his hand on her far shoulder toying with her hair. Her confusion must have lasted more than a few seconds since he ended up tapping the tip of her nose.

“My plan?”

“You said that they’re yours. That implies you have a plan in place to teach them a lesson.”

Hermione scrunched up her nose in annoyance. “I’m making one. I’m trying to think of all the ways to make it humiliating without being harmful.”

To her surprise, he laughed. She pulled away slightly to see his expression.

“What?”

“Hermione. I can already predict that your attackers are significantly pureblooded. With their pride in their ancestry and their insistence on holding their name to honourable standards…do you think you would not harm them if you humiliate them? To dishonour them is to bring them pain. It is a way to harm them. There is no humiliation that is harmless to their status and position.”

“…for they cannot bear to be laughed at,” Hermione murmured. She settled back against his solid frame while she lost herself in thought.
“Why, yes, that is one important idea. If you choose to humiliate them, and if you can pull a grand jest, I suppose I can spare them from the Crucius.”

“Does it have to be a grand one?” She asked.

“Nothing less will do.”

“What does that mean? That you’ll track them down yourself otherwise?”

“Yes.”

“But…you’re going to get suspected and—”

“I’ll come up with something else other than the Crucius. Really, Hermione, you’re not the only one who can be creative.” He commented wryly.

She huffed. He just had to add more work on her plate, didn’t he? The brunette resigned herself to wasting some brainpower on the three idiots, but she supposed she can put that off for later. Right now, something else was on her mind.

“Tom? Cases like Hattie and Adrian’s…they’re not really rare at Hogwarts, are they? It wasn’t a matter of coincidence that I saw them. Well, it was a coincidence that I encountered them rather than some other kids, but sooner or later, I was going to see something like it, don’t I? Because the ostracising and the jeering is more commonplace than I’d like.”

His fingers paused at the nape of her neck, raising the fine hairs there and she held back a shiver.

“If we’re speaking of things you liked, Hermione, there are many things in Hogwarts that you do not like.” Tom said, his voice low.

“I was afraid of that.”

“Yet previous generations of Hogwarts students had survived through it all the same. I presume that generations of future Hogwarts student would manage.”

Hermione bit her lip in thought, her forehead creasing. She had even stopped trying to find something interesting in Tom’s pockets, ignoring his perplexed expression at her diligence in searching for who-knows-what (conclusion: he’s an annoying neat freak on that front).

“…you’re planning something, aren’t you?” Tom finally asked.

Wait, was that the first hint of apprehension in his voice? Nah, it couldn’t be, Hermione thought. He was annoyingly unmoved most of the time.

“It all comes down to being a muggleborn, isn’t it?” She asked back.

“Not quite a surprise considering the recent news.” He answered. “Besides, muggles are violent.

Yes, but it wasn’t supposed to be normal. All the low-level bitterness didn’t have to be normal, Hermione thought. They could change it. She groaned when she realised what his last sentence was.

“Do you want to have that discussion about muggle violence now? We can have it now since we both have the free time.”

His shrug was noncommittal.
“You’re well aware of the excesses of this war, or even the last Great War. I’d hardly think that if Grindelwald didn’t interfere, they wouldn’t have happened at all.” He opened his position.

“Of course not,” she agreed. “The situation was already an unstable powder keg waiting for a spark, with the Versailles Treaty not exactly made in good faith. Not that I think anyone has had any experience in making international treaties in good faith yet, at this stage of international relations and diplomacy. It’s just…the size of the war is a matter of numbers. When you’re a society that numbers in the tens and hundreds of millions, of course your wars are going to follow that scale in destruction.”

It was clearly just a matter of demographics, in her perspective.

“When you’re a society that’s only, what, hundreds of thousands? Well, there’s a limit to the scale of destruction you can wreak, right? I think tens of millions of wizards and witches could inflict comparable damage, if not more.”

She’d noticed that Tom had just paused.

“Tens and hundreds of million?” His voice was all too even when he asked her.

“Well, yes. Britain’s population in 1941 is around 38 million people according to the census that year. France has 41 million people according to their last census in 1931, while Germany has almost 80 million people before the war.” Hermione answered, slightly amused. She’d realised then that most people in the wizarding world probably had no idea just how many muggles exist compared to them.

“How did you even know those numbers?” Tom asked.

She rolled her eyes. “We had a similar talk before, remember? When you were asking me about what sort of futures I’ve seen as well as future wars? I thought I might as well check out some muggle almanacs or some such from the library before we have yet another conversation about it.”

His reply was a non-committal hum.

“This certainly puts the scale of the non-magical wars into perspective. And oh, don’t let me get started on the United States. They’re practically half a continent on their own. Their population is immense. They’re certainly in the hundreds million range.”

They did not exactly chat about anything more substantial than that afterwards, but Hermione thought it was a good start to increase awareness of the non-magical world’s scale.

They still managed to catch up with the last class of day, Advanced DADA, because Hermione didn’t believe in missing class for no good reason. Even Nurse Edelstein was worn down by her insistence.

“Look, I’m really fine.” She insisted to Tom. “If you must know, I’m just as annoyed with myself because I was careless with the idiots.”

“Careless?” Tom watched her.

“Careless.” She said, exhaling in a huff. “I showed them my back. I wouldn’t do that again, you know?”
“I was right. You were caught off-guard.” He said with a knowing tone. Hermione didn’t dignify that with an answer.

It was certainly very noticeable to everyone that Tom and Hermione had both missed the ADADA class after lunch. A few students had heard Hermione passing the explanation from Nurse Edelstein to Professor Merrythought as well as Tom’s explanation that Hermione fell down some stairs. More than one student observed that his expression was unexpectedly, scaredly cold. At least a quarter of the class instantly figured out that Hermione’s ‘accident’ wasn’t precisely one.

This included Adil Shafiq and the newly-transferred-to-the-Advanced-class Julia Goldstein, who immediately asked Hermione if she was alright (Rajesh Setalvad was more interested in challenging yet another person to a duel). The brunette rolled her eyes and assured them that she was fine. She missed the looks exchanged between her House mates and Tom, though. Shafiq, seemed particularly contemplative. Something in his expression made Tom sought to talk with him some distance away from Hermione and Julia.

“So, what did I miss?” Hermione asked the other brunette.

Julia shook her head. “Nothing you’d consider important, I’m sure. The previous class is mostly theory. You know, the things to keep in mind when you’re fighting in someone’s manor, unknown ruins, that sort of stuffs. I’m sure you’re here for the practicals though—if so, you came at the right time.”

“Ah,” Hermione nodded with understanding. “Yes, I’ve gone through the material. It’s not a problem at all.”

Tom was still talking with Shafiq, both wizards looking particularly serious. What on earth could they be chatting about? She was pretty sure they weren’t close friends—Shafiq called him Riddle, and Tom also called him Shafiq. For some reason, it didn’t seem like something he was going to tell her, though. Her curiosity was prickling.

After seeing Tom and Hermione’s previous fight, along with Hermione’s duels with Nott, Malfoy and several other classmates in the previous class, Professor Merrythought considered her to be in fine control of herself and approved her to join the class’ more general duels. Tom raised his hand before they were sent off to start choosing partners and duelling.

“Professor Merrythought?”

“Yes, Tom?”

“What’s the purpose of this duelling session?” He asked.

The silver-haired witch stared at him oddly. “Why, to practise, of course.”

“Yes, but is it to practise one’s nerves in a duel and a fight, to be prepared to win or lose, or is it to practise slinging spells? If I use my full speed and readiness, it may unnerve many and eliminate them within the first ten seconds and they’d get a feel of what a real duel would be like. Yet they wouldn’t get enough practise slinging spells that way,” Tom pointed out the two possibilities with all the thoughtfulness of a considerate student towards his classmate.

Galatea Merrythought was an experienced duellist too, and she wasn’t blind to the extent of skill that Tom displayed in his fight against Hermione. She didn’t miss his ambition and drive, though she also appreciated his usually more laid-back approach to duelling. This was because he never
minded to take the time to inform his defeated opponents where they were weak at the end of the
duel—it was almost as comprehensive as her own comments. He really was a blessing for any
teacher to have in their class.

Merrythought grinned. “Feeling a little competitive today, Tom?”

Not that she minded if he were to occasionally flash his fangs further. His smile was a little tight.

“I feel the need to burn off some edge. I’m afraid I don’t have enough patience right now for casual
duelling.”

So, he considered most of his duels casual, eh? The teacher thought with interest. She nodded to
him.

“Go ahead, Tom.”

She mused over the matter for another moment. “Do you think you’d rather have warned them of
your different approach right now, or not?” She asked.

“Well, Professor, awareness of your surroundings and your enemy is a skill that one should
acquire, isn’t it?” Tom asked, his dark blue eyes was particularly unreadable. His usually pleasant
smile had a challenging tilt to it. Merrythought was aware of what Hermione’s short stay in the
infirmary implied and how it relates to Tom’s irritation.

The professor laughed. “Oh, alright. You’ve made a good point, Mr. Riddle. Go ahead and give
the class a challenge, then.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

“Oh, no, thank you. I’ll just be around, enjoying the show.”

When Tom Riddle walked into the duelling arena of the class, his steps were not the walk of a
confident wizard that she’d come to recognise as his usual gait. Now, he stalked forward, his body
language the dominating one of a predator. If she wasn’t mistaken, she was sure she could already
feel the slight magical static around him when they chatted. It was the hallmark of powerful
wizards and witches gathering magic into their aura as they prepared for battle.

Merrythought wondered how fast the rest of her students was going to notice the difference.

The first person that Tom challenged, a Gryffindor, was out by Tom’s eighth spell. If Tom didn’t
quickly flick up a cushioning charm, he’d have crashed right into one of the tables. The second one,
a Hufflepuff, looked like he dearly wished could say no but couldn’t find the word within the time
frame and ended up saying yes anyway. Tom’s fourth spell was an Expelliarmus, his fifth
summoned the wizard’s wand to his own hand easily. After that, the students who are weaker in
duels stayed well enough away from him. Abraxas did volunteer not long after that. He actually
held up for a respectable length of time before he ended up falling. One other student was felled by
a stray spell from that duel, but Merrythought was not sympathetic, as situational awareness was
also one of the things she deemed important.

That was when Rajesh Setalvad had just finished his rather intense duel with House mate Augusta
Delagardie and made a straight line towards Tom Riddle.

“I’d like to challenge you to a fight, Riddle.” He said.

“A fight?”
Grey eyes met blue. “Yes, a fight. A duel wouldn’t show your true potential, and I’m afraid I’m also personally disadvantaged at duels.”

“Not that I disagree with you there, Setalvad, but you are aware that other students are also duelling in this class right now, yes?” Tom’s question was polite, but his smile had a hint of canines in it.

“That only means that they’d best get out of our way if they knew what’s good for them.”

Tom made a considerate effort to look around their surroundings. Several people who’d just finished their duel duly moved to the other parts of the class that did not contain either Tom or Rajesh. A few were still duelling nearby, but considering they were not low-level duellers, they probably could handle themselves (Julia Goldstein was up against Augusta Delagardie while Hufflepuff’s Helene Girard was duelling Ravenclaw’s Ignatius Tuft).

“Well, it seems that we have the needed space, Mr. Setalvad.”

“Indeed, Mr. Riddle.”

They went through the salutes and bow quickly and before long they were slinging spells at breakneck speed. Tom certainly cast faster, as he had managed to silence the majority of his spells, but Setalvad was no slouch with silent shield spells and to manoeuvre around it to send attacks. The back-and-forth seemed to have gone on a long time but might only have been a few minutes. At one point, Tom cast Oleumenti on the floor and Rajesh slipped on the new layer of oil.

The Gryffindor managed to raise a shield quickly enough as Tom’s Confringo arrived in a blast of fireball; it exploded and took down his shield. Tom lost sight of him due to the explosion that he’d almost missed the two tables and a chair that Rajesh threw his way. He dodged. At some point, his opponent had cast Aguamenti on the floor, but Tom barely even skidded. His single slip didn’t affect his casting speed or accuracy.

Rajesh sent two cutting charms and they went through at opposite sides, one slashing his left forearm; behind them, a student yelped as they ducked one of the spells and yet another table that Tom destroyed mid-air with a Reducto. The exchange of spells continued, with the Gryffindor impressively not missing his aim when he slipped and forced himself to leap to a spot with better cover—he had slowed down and his speed made him easy prey to Tom’s intense barrage of spells.

He managed to send a Catherine wheel towards Tom, but the Slytherin cut right through its flames with a fire whip in return. Tom slipped twice but avoided the worst of several spells. He frowned at his unsteady step. Something was off but he didn’t have time to check.

Not long after that, Rajesh gamely admitted his defeat. Tom approached him curiously.

“You were still capable of fighting me, why surrender now?” He asked.

Setalvad’s smile was rueful, but it was lit with a self-awareness that not many his age had. He did not seem to realise the two cuts he was sporting, one at his temple, nor did he seem at all fazed by his loss or surrender. “Oh, certainly. I’m sure I can hold up for another five minutes too. But I saw after a while that you have noticeably more power in your spells than I do, and more than twice my casting speed. A mastery of shield spells wasn’t going to bring me victory.”

Tom nodded. “That was quick realisation.”

“One cannot retreat to fight another day without realising the limits of one’s abilities.” He took a deep breath and said something that was probably not easy for him.
“Thank you for the good fight, Riddle.”

“Certainly. You put up a good defence, too.”

They shook hands, and when Tom turned around, more students conveniently found a good reason to immediately be somewhere else.

It was Hermione who first approached him because she noticed that his step was uneven and she sent one of her rather specific healing spells his way.

“What was that for?” He asked.

“Jelly-legs jinx. It came up on my spell-damage diagnostic. It’s rather different than the usual, though, I wonder why…doesn’t even seem to be that good,” Hermione mused.

Tom chuckled at that but didn’t explain further.

Setalvad had managed to put in a partial jelly-leg jinx. Most would think of it as a bad spell, as it barely altered the victim. Why he thought of making that modification, many people had no clue. Tom, however, had to commend him on the idea. After all, it was harder to notice.

“Did you feel better after all those duels?” Hermione asked, one eyebrow raised.

“It was a nice practice,” Tom answered, staring. She looked alive, magic probably still running in her veins. Her cheeks were rosy and he thought he’d never seen anyone with a more attractive vitality as she did, flush with the fire of her battles and life itself.

He noticed that Gallus Rosier was ambling along some distance behind her and he hid his smirk. Most people wouldn’t even think he was following her, but Tom knew better. If Gallus knew anything, it was to honestly gauge power and to align himself accordingly.

Tom was trying to distract her from something. Hermione wasn’t having that.

“But?” She prompted.

He did not immediately answer, seemingly considering something in his mind.

“But it doesn’t compare to fighting you.”

He did not avoid glancing at her with shyness or feigned reluctance. He simply stared, and the intensity of his gaze caused an unexpected warmth to spread over her cheeks along with an almost fierce feeling to fight singing in her blood. She could almost see the answering call in his in the way he subtly turned with her every step, never breaking their eye contact, their bodies attuned to each other.

“Um, right. Unfortunately, I don’t think Professor Merrythought is prepared for us to destroy the class again. And I’m sure I’ll just escalate in destruction.” Hermione said.

“Really?” He took a step forward.

“Well, I’d have to use different methods and techniques now if I want to keep my edge, right? But that also mean that the destruction could easily be worse than last time, though.” She said. “I’d hate to lose just because I was uncreative.”
“I’m sure you could be very…creative.” His voice was low and soft, and she’d inadvertently leaned forward to listen better. Unfortunately, it meant that she was distracted by his smirk.

Just when she was sure he was losing the thread of the conversation too, Tom stepped back. He almost looked regretful.

“Once more into the breach, then? It’s back into the more routine duels, I’m afraid.” He said, still not looking away.

Hermione released the breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding.

“Right! Back to other duels.”

What was that?

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“Give me your arm, Shafiq.”

Adil Shafiq stared uncertainly at Tom Riddle. He’d just been completely wiped by the Slytherin in their duel. The fact that Riddle’s expression was his usual placid one throughout the whole encounter didn’t make him feel better. Riddle was just…too unaffected. Not even when Shafiq’s spell hit him did he show much emotion—that last one, he’d accidentally used a not-quite-light cutting spell, but the prefect shrugged it off. It actually reminded him of the horror story Julia told him once, about the time one of her cousins had to fight a runaway golem, relentless and unyielding…

“Shafiq?” Riddle raised one well-formed eyebrow, watching him oddly.

“I’m fine.”

“You slipped and knocked your arm against the tables, and then the chair legs.” He dryly replied.

Adil felt himself wincing just from the recollection. Riddle took his other elbow and hauled him up before he even realised what was happening. “If you’ll just roll your sleeves up, I can cast Episkey on them. Any deeper bruise might require something stronger, but I’m sure Hermione can cover that later.”

Ah, so that’s what he was trying to do.

“Um, you don’t need to do that.”

“I know,” Riddle replied, amused. “I wanted to. Now, are you going to let me do this the easy way, or the hard way?”

Adil was already taking his blazer off by some survival instinct before he realised it.

He knew Riddle was joking, and that he really would be healing him instead of hurting, for Suleiman’s sake. Yet something had always made him tread carefully around the Slytherin prefect, and it was recently getting worse. If Riddle had been polite and well-mannered though generally opaque before, the more forceful undercurrent to his personality had been surfacing more often lately.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Riddle, but you’re bloody terrifying to fight against today.” The words had come out before he even realised it.
To his surprise, Riddle chuckled. “I know. You know exactly why that is.”

The Ravenclaw nodded. He did. He’d never thought he’d ever found something relatable about the unnaturally perfect student in front of him, but Riddle’s protectiveness over Hermione was that factor. The recent transfer was someone he’d found to be a genuinely good person.

“I saw her move against you. I can’t imagine her being that clumsy with some stairs.”

The Slytherin nodded. “So, what do you know?”

Riddle’s gaze was as cold as a snake’s. Adil huffed as he looked away and avoided the uncomfortable eye contact. Not that he can draw back when the other wizard was holding his arm (to heal, Adil, just to heal, don’t you bloody panic now). Sheesh, he should really tone that down.

And people say he's not courting Hermione? Are they blind or just desperately wishing he’s single? It’s just a matter of time.

“It’s like I told you earlier—I’m pretty sure it’s not our House. The wizards have no reason to hate Hermione. Speaking of the witches, well, there’s always the ones who’re a bit slow in any place, but I know them. In Ravenclaw and our year, that person would be Olive Hornby and her clique, who’re always thinking they could somehow get one up over Hermione.” He ignored the derisive snort from Riddle at that thought. “Yes, exactly. She’s delusional, but still petty and simple in methods.”

He mused a little more, even exchanging his arm when Riddle gestured at his dominant hand. Well, who was he to stop the prefect from doing his good deed of the day? He certainly wasn’t flexible enough to heal his right arm with his wand in his right hand.

“Deliah Fawley could be a bit of an envious witch, but she’s nowhere near daring or crazy enough to attack someone directly—she talked my ear off about her annoying childhood friend who dares to try to upstage her. She’s just an airhead, but she’s not actually a bully. I don’t even think Doris Crouch has enough, hmm, self-delusion to go that far even if she did have unnerving amounts of admiration for you.”

He tapped the fingers of his left hand on the table. “Let’s try someone from a different year, seventh-year, then. Perhaps…ah, Selwyn. Stephanie Selwyn might be an inveterate socialite and snob, and you can say what you want about the unfortunate nasal twang to her voice, but she still has some class to not self-sabotage like that.”

If they were both from any other year, he might consider academic sabotage, but Hermione was just so far above all others that most don’t bother. That was the general opinion of the scholarly ambitious people that he knew in Ravenclaw.

Adil shook his head. “I really can’t recall anyone who would. I mean, give me a name, any name, and I’m sure I can tell you why it’s not them. I’m sure I can give you information about other witches not of Ravenclaw too.”

Riddle actually seemed…mildly impressed? That’s new, Adil thought uncertainly. He wasn’t sure whether this was good news or bad news for him.

“You seem to be surprisingly well-informed.” The other wizard said.

He let out a dragged-out, exasperated sigh as he rubbed his face with his hands. He was so frustrated at the memory of his summer that he could almost scratch his eyeballs out even now.

“Look, if your mother pulled you to lunches, teas and dinners with her friends and their pureblood
daughters, or if she forced you to attend all the blasted society parties, at some point you could recite their pedigree forwards and backwards. I certainly also remember their talents, their personality highlights, their general appearance—and damn it all to hell, I’ve even started to remember the size of some of the dowries! *The whole bloody mating song-and-dance.* My mother is taking over my brain!” Adil cursed.

It really was one of the noticeable downsides of being an heir from the Sacred 28. It was worse that his family was the main branch—and that two of their branch houses had just died out in some violent conflict in the Indian Empire. It made his mother more obsessed with marrying her children off quickly.

“Well, I appreciate your encyclopaedic knowledge of pureblood debutantes, Shafiq,” Riddle replied in what he thought to be excessively good cheer, ignoring Shafiq’s pitiful groan at that.

“I’ll certainly get back at you if I have additional concerns I’d wish to clarify.”

“Please, for the love of Merlin, *don’t,*” Adil desperately replied.

Tom Riddle only chuckled and patted him on his shoulder. The darkness in his eyes reminded Adil of the endless nothing between the stars.

Inwardly, he sighed. *Dammit. Now, I’m definitely on Tom Riddle’s ‘list of useful people’. He’s never going to leave me alone, is he?*

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Chapter End Notes

**End Notes:**

**List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:**

**The Met:** The London Metropolitan Police Department.

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**Additional Notes:**

*Masters of the Universe:* Term first coined by Tom Wolfe in his 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* to describe the powerful financiers of Wall Street. The phrase has cropped up in book titles more recently after the 2008 economic crisis started by the US’ subprime mortgage crash, usually in books critical of the lack of restraint and/or regulation in high finance or neoliberal capitalism. Used to refer similarly powerful people now (with a heavy emphasis on the financial part most of the time, though sometimes for well-connected politicians too). Not that Hermione is aware how (subtly) anachronistic the term is or how other people might take a different meaning from it.

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**Adil Shafiq (OC):**
Fifth-year Ravenclaw. The classes that he shares with Hermione are Advanced Transfiguration, Advanced DADA, and Advanced Astronomy. The Shafiq family does exists in canon as one of the Sacred 28, though we don’t seem to see their presence in Harry’s generation. His first name ‘Adil’ means ‘Just’. Some sixth sense of his is always warning him to be careful around Tom Riddle, even before he’d seen what Tom was like beyond the high-achieving student and perfect prefect. Clearly has good instincts.

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32 Hunts I

Chapter Summary

Hermione’s last ADADA class. Several duels happen with the Slytherins. Hermione meets two French wizards in class. Auguste and Evariste has a misunderstanding. Musings on past possibilities. A low-key search spread among a few. Lakshmi is drawn in.

(Summary applies to both chapters titled ‘Hunts’)

Chapter Notes

Updating a bit earlier because I might forget otherwise in the frenzy to finish chores so I can sit down and watch the football world cup (which is the sport that actually involves a ball that you hit with your foot). Go England!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

32 Hunts I

Hermione remembered her conversation with Tom on the way to their ADADA class.

“If you’re going to stay in Hogwarts, Hermione, the last thing you need is to be seen as weak.” He’d said.

“I can take care of myself.”

“I never doubted that. Yet strength is only useful if other people know about it and affords you the respect you’re due.” He calmly replied.

“Unfortunately, the news that you’ve just suffered an...accident will negatively impact any impression of strength or competence. The sooner this misunderstanding is corrected, the less you’d need to do later.” He said. She could hear the slight distaste in his voice, as if he also thought it was inconvenient, but considered it unavoidable. Almost like a chore.

Hermione’s mind made the connections. There was only one possible reason that Tom would ever need to say something on strength and intimidating people into respecting you—he was thinking of the Slytherins. Specifically, the wizards that Hermione considers as his: The Walpurgis Knights.

“Alright. Who do I have to beat down now?” She asked outright.

He was faintly amused. “Why, Hermione, such viciousness you have! I’m sure many would be surprised to know the Nightingale of Hogwarts is not the gentle, merciful soul they thought she is.”

She couldn’t stop herself from elbowing him. He was fast enough to dodge the brunt of the attack, and took the opportunity caused by their loosened arms to place it around her waist and pulled her
closer. It was something she noticed in the infirmary. He couldn’t stop touching her casually, even if it was just his hand over her arm or shoulders bumping together.

It’s as if he felt she would disappear if he wasn’t there to anchor her. Hermione shook her head. It might just be her imagination—Tom wasn’t that fanciful.

“Well, how would you rank your men in terms of duelling skills, then?” She asked.

“My ‘men’, Hermione?” He asked with mock disapproval. She rolled her eyes.

“Oh, fine. Your ‘friends’ then, Tom. How would you rank your ‘friends’?”

He laughed at that.

Tom had been rather informative, actually. This was why Hermione was in ADADA, working her way up from the muscles seen most often near Abraxas—Brutus Mulciber and Pierce Parkinson (no, he’s not the heir of the Parkinson family, he’s just a cousin). She raised a double layer of shield the moment her duel with Parkinson started and kept her stance relaxed. She wanted to observe his fighting style a little longer. True enough, it took him four spells to take out her outermost shield. She brought the second layer down herself and started attacking him in earnest.

Her superior speed meant that she could send three spells for two of his. He went down in less than a minute after that. She summoned his wand. Hermione walked over and bowed to him formally and waited for his reply. Parkinson was stunned for two seconds before he closed the duel with a return bow of his own. Only then did she return his wand.

(She wasn’t going to underestimate the threat presented by anyone whose allegiance she was not sure ever again, no matter how weak they seem. Even the best fighters can be brought down by bad luck).

Mulciber had the same speed as Parkinson, but he had better footwork. He went down just slightly longer than Parkinson had and Hermione summoned his wand twice to ensure that it flew away into her hand. She could see his disbelief and resentment. Yet considering that she was still aiming her wand at his neck without wavering even an inch, Mulciber grudgingly accepted his defeat and ended the duel.

Gallus Rosier was a thin and wiry wizard who was more apprehensive than dismissive when she challenged him, and just for that she respected him more. She recognised him as the Slytherin whose fighting style had more dodging and less attacking, but she’d seen him survive Augusta Delagardie’s barrage of powerful spells that none had been a real hit on him (Hermione’s superior casting speed with her shield spells got her through Augusta’s attacks the last time they duelled). She saw his gaze flicker in Tom’s direction for a moment before he nodded and accepted her challenge.

If she thought Mulciber’s footwork was good, Rosier’s was a level above that at the very least. He was fast and he was slippery. He didn’t get many hits into Hermione—heck, she’d stopped worrying too much about his attacks altogether—but he was extremely hard to hit. A jinx here and a scratch there wasn’t what she’d call a proper hit either. A few minutes in and she thought she could see similarities between his style and a wushu snake stance she’d seen Harry demonstrate once (other people travel and collect knick-knacks; when Harry Potter travels, he collects martial arts lessons).

Once she’d gotten a feel for his rhythm and pattern, she could predict opportunities between their attacks and counter-attacks. Hermione quickly struck. “Fulgo!”
Rosier yelped when the small bolt of lightning hit him and raised his hands quickly, “I yield! I yield!”

“I accept your surrender,” Hermione replied easily. She was surprised at the speed that he capitulated, considering the stubbornness of every other Slytherin she’d faced. “Ah, I almost forgot. Rosier, please stand still.”

“Err, why?” He stood extremely still, like a small lizard hoping that you’d decide that the movements you’d seen were just the bush moving in the wind and not him.

“I’m going to run a quick medical check on you.” She answered. His relief was visible that Hermione couldn’t help her smile.

“Ah. Alright. Go ahead.”

Hermione was actually holding herself back from wincing. She had only remembered when they were done that a small lightning spell might not be among the list of acceptable spells to use when duelling in Hogwarts. Fortunately, it was as small as she’d thought it was. His reflexes seemed to be fine and after she cast two rejuvenating charms, Rosier insisted that he was fine and she should challenge the other Slytherins.

“Slytherins, really?” She raised her eyebrows at him. He scoffed.

“I might only be good at following, but I can see, Miss Curie. If Tom wishes to prove something, then the best we can do is to gather around and bear witness.” He winced slightly when Hermione poked at a bruise before healing it. “With our bodies too, if necessary.”

“There. I think that’s all.” She said with satisfaction.

“Thank you.”

“It’s no bother at all. Now, who else can I duel with…” Hermione mused.

“Challenge Rufus Carrow.” Rosier helpfully suggested with a gleam of cunning in his dark eyes, “and probably Robbe Rowle too.”

Hermione decided not to wonder at the possible in-group dynamics of the Knights.

“I’m afraid I don’t know either, though.”

“Oh, they’re easy to recognise if you know what to look for. Rufus is the wizard with the sour face over there that had finished pulverising that Gryffindor. Robbe is…there! Those broad shoulders and noticeable height is hard to miss.” He informed her all this with an open sort of glee.

“Any particular reason why you’re recommending the two of them?”

Rosier’s gaze drifted towards the ceiling as he mulled over her question. His eyes were sly when they met hers once more. “Well, supposing that my guess is true and that Tom is trying to teach a lesson? I can’t imagine anyone else needing more—other than the two slowpokes you’ve kindly educated before me, of course.”

Hermione’s lips curved upwards. “Well, thank you for the advice…Gallus, is it?”

“Yes, Miss Curie. Gallus Rosier, at your service.” He bowed, and there was no resentment in it. She made a snap judgement on the spot.
“Oh, just call me Hermione. All my friends do.”

It seemed that she made a good decision, because he seemed genuinely pleased when she said that.

“Of course, Hermione.”

That was when she saw Tom being rather ruthless in his fight against a Gryffindor and walked over in his direction. Who was that? Ah, it’s Rajesh. She really wasn’t surprised that the two wizards ended up fighting each other.

Hermione didn’t miss the involuntary grimace that flashed by Rufus Carrow’s face when he saw her standing right in front of him. Ah, probably one of the old-school, pureblood supremacists, then. Wonderful. He was a broad-shouldered wizard of an intimidating stature.

“Carrow.”

“Curie.”

“I’d like to challenge you to a duel.” She said.

“I’m afraid I’d have to decline.”

Well, that was unexpected, Hermione thought with some disappointment. Yet it seems it wasn’t quite done yet.

“Ha! Afraid, are you, Rufus? Suppose that’s reasonable, though. She’s really very good.” Gallus Rosier had followed her not too far behind. His steps were rather quiet that she didn’t immediately notice him in the hubbub that was the class. Hermione could see Carrow clenching his jaw.

“I’m not afraid, Gallus.”

“Poppycock,” Gallus said. He might be the thinner man of the two of them, and shorter by an inch or two, but right now, his gestures were relaxed and confident where Carrow was tense. No one would say that a fight between the two of them would easily go in Carrow’s favour.

“You’re not afraid? That’s the most senseless bluff I’ve heard. Tom fought her to a draw, Rufus. If you’re going to go ahead and say that you’re a better fighter than he is, well, I’ll go find a nice chair to sit down and have a long laugh.”

“I simply have better use of my time—”

“To dodge a possible loss! Come on, be a man, Rufus. Face her, lose, and learn from the lesson. I already know that there are things I’d change from my duelling style now. But you don’t even dare, do you?”

Hermione was alternately amused and fascinated at the ease Gallus was riling up his house mate.

“Well, if you’ve decided that way, I’m sure there are other people who…don’t mind fighting me.” She said with an innocent smile. Carrow narrowed his dark eyes at her. She knew his type. He probably thought she held back from saying that she knew he was afraid of her.

“No need, Curie. If Gallus must insist, I suppose I can fight you.” Carrow answered.

She vaguely noticed Gallus getting some other students to back away. Hermione realised that his
actions told her something important—Carrow wasn’t one to hold back on his spells or think much about bystanders. Where Parkinson and Mulciber was too limited in their spell knowledge to be able to deal damage, and Rosier still had some restraint, she was sure Carrow had none of their concerns.

Their bow to each other was just as shallow and quick, and the duel started the second it was done. He was fast and like Gallus, half of his spells were easily silent. She had to admire how his attacks didn’t slow down when he was down from the jelly-legs jinx, and the speed he neutralised it to get back up. She’d had a cutting spell to her leg and she had to tank two Confringo in a row, which was hard to do even if you could raise shields at her speed. The ends of her hair were probably singed and she could smell burned clothes. The smell was bringing back loose flashes of memories of fighting beside the Aurors because Harry or Ron asked for her cooperation.

Hermione didn’t hesitate to cast oil on the floor and burn it, forcing him to retreat and find a way out. She didn’t give him any; she cast Ventus quickly, and the gust of wind fanned the flames larger. It was only because there was a part of her that was desperately holding on to the present, reminding her that this was a class, that she stopped herself from going further.

“Give up, Carrow,” she said, through the fire and smoke separating them.

He sent several curses, half of them dark, as the answer. Hermione shook her head but didn’t relent. She could do this all day while he was going to get cornered as she’d backed him to the wall. The fire would only spread further.

It was a burst of ice at the fire that stopped them.

“You lost, Rufus,” Professor Merrythought’s voice was sterner than usual as she sent more ice over the oil, killing the flames. It was not actually easy to use ice—most people would not have the power required to generate much.

“The first principle of any duel or fight is to survive. What use is winning if you’re not going to live through it? You should have surrendered once Hermione has you cornered. You do not exactly have a way out, do you? Are you trying to get yourself killed?” She berated him. Rufus Carrow was tight-lipped, but he couldn’t really deny the professor’s words. The silver-haired professor turned to Hermione, who also set off to put the fire down once it was obvious that the duel was over.

“Hermione, do keep in mind that we’re indoors in a class.” Merrythought reminded her.

Hermione winced. She knew the professor was probably reminding her about the smoke the fire was putting out, other than the destruction of the top layer of the wooden panelling.

“He was good, Professor, so I had to step up my offence to get him. I might have gotten carried away a little.”

Merrythought raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment further.

“Well, continue, then, just be careful. I’ll just have a chat with Rufus here for a while.”

Hermione walked away with relief, glad to have avoided a possible lecture there. She was just trying to look around the room, aimlessly wandering, when Gallus somehow managed to catch up with her.

“So, Robbe Rowle is losing to Delagardie over there, though it was a rather close result.” Gallus said.
“You’re insistent, aren’t you?” Hermione asked, amused.

“Oh, not at all. Thought I’d just give you a helping hand. I’m sure you’re not looking for either Melchior or Abraxas. They don’t seem at all interested in duelling you—I wonder why,” his tone was dry. Hermione chuckled.

“Pendleton is a rather good fighter. He’s quiet and doesn’t talk much either,” Gallus added, pointing out a pale Slytherin—he had the same white-blond hair as he Malfoy, but he was even paler than Abraxas. She thought it must be some sort of record. If he had any less pigment, he’d be an albino.

“Pendleton?”

“Patroclus Pendleton.” Gallus answered her unsaid question. “Fifty-year, like most of us—he goes more often by his last name than his first, even among friends. He’s from an old family even though it’s not one of the 28. Not all the important families are in the group and you’d be limiting yourself if you only stick to it. He’s a dependable sort of fellow. Now, Tybalt Yaxley is…ah, making that poor Gryffindor cry.”

The Gryffindor wizard that Yaxley was facing wasn’t exactly crying, but he was certainly sweating a lot and pale.

“He could be rather vicious in his choice of spells as well as in the way he fights. His girlfriend is always younger than him by a year or two. I’m sure facing him wouldn’t be a problem for you, would it?”

“Not at all,” Hermione replied easily as she settled herself to at least one more duel.

Robbe Rowle was blatantly staring at her curves as she approached him. His smile at her was more than merely suggestive. Ginny would have said something about wanting to immediately take a bath to remove the feeling of slime. Hermione pulled on what she thought as her Unspeakable persona over herself like a mantle, settling herself to being what Luna and Malina called the Agent of the Weird. Her version was cool, distant and implacable.

“Ah, Miss Curie! Playing with the big boys now, are we?” He asked.

“I’m an equal opportunity duellist, actually.” She replied, ignoring his ogling.

“Well, I’m always available to give you a private lesson.”

Hermione’s smile was razor-thin. “I prefer public ones. It provides a clear example for others to follow.”

She could see his smile fading a little at the edges before a sly look appeared in his eyes.

“I’ve never been that much of an exhibitionist, but, if you insist…”

Hermione bared her teeth in a grin. “Oh, it’s really necessary. The same way that some things can only be taught under the whip of a taskmistress.”

“Ah, you have exotic tastes, I see.” He replied. “I’m sure I can fulfil that.”

“I challenge you to a duel, Robbe Rowle.”
“I accept, Hermione Curie.”

Hermione herself only managed to get in half a bow before she dodged immediately—her instinct wasn’t wrong. She’d just avoided a Reducto and she didn’t hesitate with the harsher cutting spells or jinxes that are as disgusting as vomiting slugs up along the standard ones that caused sardines squeezing out of your nose or Ginny’s distinct Bat-Bogey Hex. Some of Rowle’s strongest spells was a sandblasting one, capable of ripping patches out of her robes.

She didn’t blink as she cast Pythonis Ictus at him more than once (it wasn’t going to kill him, after all). He didn’t seem to have the habit of throwing large fire spells, but his preference was for scattered embers, ashes easily floating in the air and burning what they touch—she only got rid of them with a well-placed Ventus. When she conjured construct birds, she did not come up with a flock of small ones—she only made three vultures but ensured that they divebombed him ferociously.

The moment he was distracted, she blasted him with Aguamenti Maxima and froze all the water over him. He was now half-stuck in ice.

“I’m waiting for your surrender, Rowle,” Hermione calmly said, a good distance away from him with her wand still outstretched. There was no need to summon his wand—it was frozen stiff. He could not use it either.

He might still have a smile, but it wasn’t hard to see the bitterness in his eyes.

She did something she hadn’t before throughout the whole class; placed an invisible bubblehead charm over her head. Her left hand touched the bottle of isoflurane she’d saved from her previous fights and duels. If he made one wrong move, she was going to vaporise half the bottle in rough two-metre sphere around him.

“You have it, Curie.” He finally said and nodded as far as he was capable with all the ice.

She nodded. “I accept your surrender, Rowle.”

Hermione melted the water. Under her sleeves, she was still prepared to open the bottle.

“Well, then,” she said with a cool, impersonal smile. The brunette didn’t bother mentioning that he’d moved before the first bow was over. She’d expected it out of someone of his character. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Rowle still had the tendency to weasel with his words, but a straight loss was not something that could be denied. It came easily to him, perhaps because he’d known that she’d defeated Gallus and Carrow before him. Therefore, his situation was not unique. He can accept that it was no extraordinary thing to have been trounced by Hermione Curie.

She was rather annoyed at all the rips and tears on her uniform, though. His spells seemed to be heavier on the clothing than anything else. Hermione wasn’t really looking forward to purchasing more uniform if the damages turned out to be irreparable by magic, even of the house elf kind (she was pretty sure it was already beyond mundane efforts to save).

Oddly enough, Pendleton was the one to approach her and challenge her than the other way around. She wondered more than a little about his paleness and his risk of skin cancer from even half an hour of exposure to the sun (she could see the little blue veins on his neck—his skin was approaching transparent). She pulled herself back from that diversion and asked him back.
“Why do you ask? It’s not that I will decline you, you see. I just wish to know why, because it seemed I had been the one challenging all this time. Carrow even declined at first before he changed his mind.”

“I’m sure you’re challenging Slytherins because Tom asked you,” he said, without preamble. “If that is the case, then I might as well expedite the process.”

“Um, why?”

“Why what?”

“I mean, you’re not wondering why he’s doing this?”

“Clearly to show that you’re not weak.” He said, frankly. “If you can defeat me, Miss Curie, I will certainly accede to your right to stand beside him.”

“I’m not…”

Pendleton simply waited patiently for her to finish the sentence, unbothered by the silence that spread between them.

She wasn’t what, really? He didn’t even say anything about her beyond saying that he knew she was going to assist Tom. And what about it? The Slytherin was clearly not wrong. It was her plan. Well, her plan was closer to standing beside him so she could keep watch, but she thought there’s nothing wrong with assisting him if he’s going to do something more productive than destroying the world.

Hermione sighed. “Oh, alright. You have a point. I accept your challenge.”

Pendleton lasted the longest in a duel with her so far.

Not only he did not underestimate her, he seemed to be quite aware of his own limitations too. Frankly, his perseverance was rather annoying since she was the one who had to fight him. After the first few minutes, he closed in on her, never letting them to be farther than two spears’ lengths from each other. She couldn’t use her more destructive spells without risking her own skin inside its area of effect. He noticed the ranges of my spell effects too, she thought in a huff, just like Tom. The distance made dodging attacks virtually impossible, but Hermione wasn’t too worried about her shield skills.

He never overextended himself either, making it hard for her to find an opening against him, though his cautiousness meant she received relatively few hits that struck in. He used Aguamenti to spread puddles of water, though considering that she’d been wearing boots now (ha!) it wasn’t a very effective way of making her slip. He turned the water into mud sometime between their attacks and she barely faltered.

His careful distance gave her an idea. She took a page out of Tom’s playbook and rushed him, double shields at front. His eyes widened in surprise. One slashing spell of his went in while the ropes sent to tie her fell haplessly against the shield. She cast Reducto Maxima at near point-blank range.

His shield couldn’t withstand the blast, not even with the additional one he’d hastily erected. He was thrown back.
Hermione aimed the wand at his head when he was down, quirking an eyebrow in waiting. He smiled ruefully.

“I yield,” he stated.

“Thank you for the duel.” She said, formally.

“The same here.” The blond admitted as he stood up. “My speed could stand to improve.”

“Your speed is already fast, actually,” Hermione said. “It’s your shield spell that’s still in line with the casting speed of your other spells. But that just won’t do. Your shield spell needs to be among the fastest spell you have in your arsenal—if not the fastest—because it plays such a critical role. Melchior, for example, can put his up in a moment. He has very abbreviated wand movements.”

“Ah, I see,” he nodded in contemplation. “Thank you for the advice, then. I suppose you know this because you’ve duelled against each other.”

“We’ve fought, yes. You’re easily his level, though.”

“I’m glad that I’m a noticeable obstruction for you than a mere bump in the road, then,” came his wry, almost self-deprecating reply. Hermione couldn’t help but laugh, surprising herself that she’d found him without needless pride and straightforward for a Slytherin. It was almost inconceivable that in another life, he would have easily been a first-generation Death Eater.

“Why did you, hmm, become friends with Tom?” She finally asked.

The blond observed her quietly.

“Why not?” He asked back.

Why not indeed? Tom did not start out with any explicit agenda at the beginning, so pureblood supremacy might not even be what had attracted Pendleton to Tom’s charisma and cause.

“He’s competent,” Pendleton finally said after a while. “You know that he knows what he’s doing. If you’ve seen what some of our Ministers of Magic had been like, it’s reassuring.”

“…”

“You know, I heard you were in the infirmary, but I’m having doubts about that now.”

Hermione chuckled. “Why, hello to you too, Abraxas.”

There were already many people duelling to take up most of the space in the room—and the ADADA class was large, what with it currently being the size of three normal classes. As usual, the partitions were pulled down to give them enough space to practice in. Right now, it seemed that everyone was picking up their practice again after a short break. Hermione thought she’d kept up a good enough record so far and can take a break for a while to chat.

“Did you really fell down some stairs?” The blond Slytherin asked, blatantly checking her for bruises. Melchior came up next to him and snorted loudly.

“Why don’t you just ask her whether she and Tom skived the class in some broom closet, then?”

She saw Abraxas blush as he sputtered and shook his head. Hermione herself had to bit her lip to stop from laughing, even as she felt her cheeks warming slightly.
“That wasn’t what I was thinking at all! I thought maybe she’s just sick from coming to classes. It is Friday, you know? Everyone wants the weekend to just come over already.” Abraxas glared at Melchior, whose smile was a bit smug.

“What, Hermione? Someone who voluntarily took an insane class load? Perish the thought!” The dark-haired wizard turned to Hermione as he nodded to her in greeting. “That was a fine, solid duel with Pendleton. Also, good job on pinning Gallus down—even I can’t always manage that when I’m going against him.”

She beamed at him.

“Thank you. What, no comments on the rest?”

Melchior couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “It’s all-too-clear that you obliterated them with extreme prejudice. Come on, you’re good and some of them still had the gall to underestimate you. You don’t need to fish for compliments, Hermione.”

“So, what happened, anyway?” Abraxas asked again, his curiosity still undaunted.

“It’s just like I told Tom. I fell down some stairs.” Hermione shrugged.

The two Knights of Walpurgis stared at her in disbelief for three seconds before exchanging knowing looks with each other. A silent conclusion was soon reached. They both shook their heads.

“No.” Melchior promptly replied.

“Nah, that can’t be it.” Abraxas insisted.

“Someone has to be behind it,” Nott said again.

Hermione gave an exasperated sigh. “Why does someone have to be behind it? You’re both as bad as Tom.”

“Aha! Now, if Tom agrees with us, we know we’re on the right track,” the Malfoy heir replied with excitement.

“I might have just stepped on some loose bit of carpeting—or some forgotten piece of parchment.” She said.

“Were there?” Nott asked sceptically. “Were there any carpeting or loose parchment involved in your fall?”

“There might be,” she insisted. He smirked.

“And that’s our first confirmation that something is wrong. Well, it was nice talking to you, Hermione, but I’m afraid we’ll have to leave you for now.”

It confused her slightly. “Really? Why?”

“Tom would probably want to pull some of us together to go looking for the culprits.” Melchior said. Hermione was frustrated at their stubbornness that she cut in.

“You can’t do that! They’re mine! Tom promised.”

Abraxas whooped with glee. “Ha! It turns out that there are some people involved!”
Hermione merely folded her arms in front of her chest and stared them down. “They’re mine, alright? Hands off.”

Melchior sighed, not quite looking forward to losing a possible source of fun. “Ah, well. If you must insist…”

Hermione was trying to find Yaxley, or maybe some other Slytherin wizard that she hadn’t faced yet. The odds were good that whoever it was would also be one of Tom’s underlings. She was sure she can fit at least one other duel before Merrythought gathered them again and gave feedback as they cooled down. Unfortunately, these remaining few Slytherins seem to be rather scarce.

She saw Abraxas and Melchior, of course, but there was no need to challenge them again. She just waved at them as she passed and they waved back at her. Hermione was waylaid by Julia once who asked for some pointers and she did play observer for her duels in the next five or ten minutes, all while informing the other Ravenclaw of her weak points.

Adil Shafiq surprisingly also came over once and asked her if she had really recovered, concern written clearly on his face. The brunette assured him that she was pretty much fine. She could do a mean first aid and Maggie Edelstein was no slouch at healing standard bruises that come from handling a school full of accident-prone kids.

The one who found her next was Auguste Murat. He was looking as gallant as ever, with his hair not at all messed up. *Is this some sort of talent every politician-in-training have? Or do they have a set of killer grooming charms they always recast?* She noticed that Tom also had that skill of appearing sharp in all situations down pat.

“Hello, Hermione. I see you’ve been very productive today,” there was a wry lilt to his tone, and she realised that Auguste must have seen several of her duels. She laughed.

“Well, I was trying to get through a list,” she said.

“A list?”

“Tom recommended that I test the ability of his house mates.” She said, skipping a little over some inconvenient truths, such as ‘I need to show the Knights of Walpurgis that I can kick their arse to hell and back, and that the rumours that I suffered an accident does not affect that the slightest’.

His brows came down slightly. “Test?”

“Well, he recommended them based on their duelling skills. They might not reach his level, but I might need to warm myself up first a little after the accident.”

Auguste nodded knowingly. “Ah, yes. The accident. I heard from Professor Merrythought that you fell down a flight of stairs?”

“I did,” she said, leaping over even more truth after that. “Maggie Edelstein is very competent nurse, though. As you can see, I’m back in fighting shape.”

“So, how about a little warming up duel, then? Nothing serious.”

“Hmm. How serious is ‘not serious’?” Hermione was curious.

“Let’s challenge each other to either score a blatant hit or push each other down. The hard part is
that we have to stand in one place and not have moved from it.” He pulled a chalk out of his pocket
and made a small circle just slightly larger than his shoes on the floor. “Like that. The aim is to still
stand within the circle and to attack and defend from that position. If you stepped out, you lose. If
you get one full hit, you lose. If you fall down, you definitely lose.”

Hermione was grinning at his explanation. It did sound less strenuous than the duels she’d been
doing, while still somewhat challenging.

“That’s a great idea! Let’s settle on the distance first.”

“The custom in France is three metres.”

“Why, three metres it is, then.”

They set down two circles and set to duel. The first time around, Hermione lost because she side-
stepped by reflex. The second time, she also lost because the blow from Auguste’s *Reducto* pushed
her back even if it didn’t manage to penetrate her second layer of *Protego*. She also lost the third
and fourth mini-duel, but the sets were quick that she didn’t even think much of it, and more
importantly, she had fun. It challenged her to think of spell combinations that would force her rival
to dodge, or one that would render them harmless and easy to finish off with one final spell (the
easiest to push people with is undoubtedly *Reducto*, since its natural form was a blasting force
going in one direction).

Of course, if it hit directly, it would bruise people rather hard. Yet considering that neither of them
were weak or slow with their shield spells, she wasn’t concerned.

She’d only managed her first victory sometime after, but she was so excited that she jumped with
joy and whooped. Hermione might have even thanked him for his great idea with a playful punch
to his shoulder. Auguste’s smile was definitely approaching a grin. It certainly made him as
handsome as those medieval renderings of Percival the Grail Knight, distracting more than one
unfortunate witch (a blonde German witch she’d met at the Slytherin table with Tom went down
against a more disciplined Hufflepuff wizard, Hermione winced at her rather hard fall—even her
opponent was stunned).

That was when she noticed Evariste coming over. At first, she thought he was just going to chat
with the other French wizard. His expression, however, was distinctly stormy.

“’Ermione,” Evariste greeted warmly.

“Hello, Evariste.” She replied.

“Auguste Alexis,” Evariste said. Within his words was a politeness that created distance instead of
bridging them.

“Evariste Emmanuel,” Auguste replied with grace, without lessening the respect he accorded to his
compatriot. Yet the distance between them was still there, the formality in the way they stood.
Hermione was desperately trying to read for clues and coming up with nothing.

Evariste took deep breaths, trying to pull himself together. He looked less angelic-seeming now,
and more like the archangel statues that came in armour and a flaming sword.

“I would like to ’ear your explanation now.”

“I am not sure what you would wish explanation for.” Auguste replied.
But Hermione saw the utter calmness in his hazel eyes and knew that this couldn’t be true.

Anyone in his position who did not know why they were suddenly accosted for some unknown explanation would feel uncomfortable. They would fidget, their minds agitated as they try to come up with things they’ve done, with anything that could be the explanation. At the very least, Auguste already has suspicions of his own.

“You—you ‘ave asked to call upon Miss Curie, is this true?” Evariste asked.

Auguste nodded with ease. “Yes, I did.”

“Why?”

He said that one word with unexpected intensity. Hermione had the discomfiting sensation that maybe she wasn’t supposed to be present in this encounter. Yet neither of them had asked for privacy or seemed to mind her presence.

“Clearly, because I wish to know her better.” Auguste said, still as calm as he was before.

“It is not that. No. It’s…” he exhaled and turned around, walking several steps in thought before he walked back. When he spoke again, he was vehement. “It is not possible that you do not know my position at all.”

“What is your position, Evariste?”

He glared at Auguste and seemed to consider smiting him on the spot.

“Evariste?” Hermione spoke up. Evariste seemed surprised, as if he’d forgotten she was still there. Auguste, however, was not. “What’s the problem? You can tell me anything, you know?”

Now, he was conflicted. Auguste shook his head. “Whatever it is you’re considering or wish to do, do them. I doubt that I will mind. Truly, I have no wish to make an enemy needlessly, Evariste.”

“Yet you just did.”

“I have no idea what your issue with me is, and I will still have no idea if you don’t tell me.” Auguste said. For the first time, Hermione could hear impatience in his tone.

“You will not say that if you were serious in courting Miss Curie.”

Auguste huffed. His words were still even, but the speed in which he spoke made clear his annoyance, and his more noticeable accent. “Courting? Whoever said anything about courting? Melusine, Melior and Morgane! And ‘ere I thought it is the French who are passionate, but it seems that the British also sees love everywhere! That is what you ‘eard from the rumours, non?”

Evariste nodded, dumbfounded. Auguste gazed heavenward, as if asking for patience, before he took another breath or two. He looked as dignified as before.

“I’ve stated to Hermione exactly what I wish to do—I wish to know her as a person. That’s it. You are making mountains out of molehills. If you wish to call upon her, I am the last person in the world to stand in your way. I do consider you my friend and would heartily wish you any joy you may have from life.”

“But—”

“It’s true,” Hermione said, thinking of assisting Auguste. “We’re really just friends.”
“Ah…” Now, Evariste seemed slightly embarrassed.

“Go ahead. In fact, I’ll make myself scarce right now so you will have the privacy to do so.” Auguste said. With that declaration, he walked away from both of them, utterly unconcerned about any possible awkwardness left behind now that there was only Hermione and Evariste.

Hermione was filled with an unrecognisable trepidation. *Give me dragons to slay, give me giants to defeat. Give me a curse or corruption to cure, give me an anomaly to analyse,* she thought desperately, *but don’t give me someone interested in me.*

Even with her lack of memories, she was rather sure of the gut feeling that many of her dating attempts were lacklustre, the relationships that were not friendships disappointing. Most people would have been taken too easily by Hermione the Heroine, part of the Gryffindor Three that they did not quite manage to see the witch at the heart of it.

“’Ermione?’

“Yes, Evariste?”

“Would you allow me to call upon you?” Evariste asked.

Her smile was watery and undoubtedly awkward. Somehow, Evariste was not the slightest bit fazed. If she can easily say yes to Auguste, it wouldn’t be fair if she turned Evariste down. It didn’t matter that she felt she knew their personal feelings behind their requests to be very different. She decided to not be a coward and face this head on. It was fortunate that the words Daphne taught her stuck well. Otherwise, she’d be babbling who-knows-what.

“Of course, Evariste. I give you leave to call upon me.”

Chapter End Notes

I keep forgetting trying to clarify the wizarding curses I used because to me, the source was obvious.

There’s Merlin and Morgana from the Arthurian cycle. Melusine is one of the daughters of the water or river spirit Pressyna, whom the Elynas, the King of Albany (that’s Scotland to you now) met in the middle of a forest, falls in love with, and decides to marry. (Why one would marry a beautiful woman *who was walking around unharmed and without fear* in the middle of the forest *without* asking questions about her life and origins, I have no idea). Pressyna agrees with the requirement that he do not try to see her or her daughters in the bath. She has three daughters with him—Melusine, Melior and Palatyne. This being a fairy tale, you can guess what the king did later on, whether intentionally or by accident (depends on the version).

Since Pressyna is a water spirit, it’s a given that she’s good with magic, same with her daughters. Melusine has her own love story that follows more or less the same pattern as her mother’s. While her father could be said as careless (he rushed into his wife’s bath in some versions because she’d just given birth and he wanted to see his kids), Melusine’s husband could be an outright jerkass (calling her “serpent” in front of his
whole court? Freaking *really*?)

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**Additional Notes:**

All Knights of Walpurgis took Advanced Potions and Advanced DADA (heaven help you if you’re not up to Tom’s standard), while other classes may vary.

**Gallus Flint Rosier (OC):** Technically, he must exist in some form since there are descendants of the Rosier family in present-day canon. It’s certainly a Death-Eater leaning family name, hence his automatic presence in Slytherin. His first name, *Gallus*, is from Latin that meant Rooster.

He has a younger sister and a younger brother. His younger brother, Jonah Rosier, is mentioned in passing sometime earlier when Tom was giving Adrian Smith a first-year Slytherin contact for him. For anyone curious, Jonah actually means Dove. Yes, since JK Rowling seems to follow naming themes for her characters, I try to do that too.

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If I seem to be casting the Rowle as a family of lechers, that was completely by accident and unplanned. Every Slytherin that Hermione met in this chapter except for Pendleton was part of the Sacred 28.

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Chapter Summary

(See previous chapter’s summary for summary)

Chapter Notes

To anyone who might be worried about recent developments: Relax. Like I said, I have enough self-awareness to know that I suck at writing romance that I don't try. Hermione has more important things to deal with, like Grindelwald. Also, consider Hermione and Tom as rational agents and quite capable ones too for people their age (I would be banging my head on the desk at dramatic crap, much less be able to stand writing about them). Soap opera melodrama is a tad beneath them.

I find it fascinating that a few readers can still consider my interpretation of Tom Riddle as 'not evil' at this point just because he has better self control than your average, unimpressive, schoolyard bully. Well, this is Hermione's story, and as such, he would not come to the fore when there are still other things occurring in her life. Still, I'd be happy to prove you wrong once we get past the Hogsmeade weekend chapters... I'll try updating on a mostly weekly basis to get us all there faster, then.

Unrelated: England vs. Belgium. I don't have high hopes now, I just want to see them play well. They're disappointingly defanged when they were playing against Croatia.

33 Hunts II

Hermione was too glad that Evariste thought he’d been taking too much of her time, bowed, and had gone off to look for other people to practise with. Unfortunately, this meant that Julia was free to sidle to her side. Her long ponytail swished and swung as she reached Hermione’s side.

“Evariste, Hermione? Evariste de Breteuil?” She asked in disbelief.

“Yes, that is Evariste. I’m pretty certain he wasn’t a doppelganger.” Hermione said, ignoring Julia’s snort for her bad joke. The other brunette was still staring at her with something close to awe.

“This makes it three potential suitors, Hermione. Three. Within a week of you attending class.”

“In my defence, it has been a hell of a week. We had violent attacks by Grindelwald, I joined Madam Álava’s team to teach a bit at St. Mungo’s and provide some wound examples too since some newbs were being idiots. The muggleborn-pureblood tension is ratcheting up in Hogwarts, while I also have to help Tom run the Society meetings, persuade people, come up with a plan. I also have to already start tossing ideas for final projects for my classes—what else did I miss?” Hermione tallied what she thought had been the highlights with a flat and jaded tone.
Julia whistled. That was interesting—not that she cared, but because Hermione didn’t think it was considered a ladylike behaviour.

“You’re right. It feels more like a month than a week, doesn’t it?”

“Well, historical time is a fractal object. You know, the sequence of events happening in time, along with the strength of the reactions to those events? Yes, that’s the flow of history, and it’s a one-dimensional fractal object—it’s a line, or in this case, a timeline. It also happens to have the fractal character of being self-similar at different scales.” Hermione muttered in a daze of stress-induced migraine; she found a chair and sat down.

“A time interval with, for example, three major events placed at random inside it would look similar to another time interval with three major events similarly spaced, even if the second interval is only a tenth of the first in length. Just stretch it to be as long as the first, and you’ll see them being similar in character with each other.”

Julia gaped. Hermione continued.

“So, if we suppose that the current number of extraordinary events usually happen in the span of an average Hogwarts month instead of week, it is not a surprise that it even feels more like a month subjectively.” The brunette finished.

Her Ravenclaw classmate was still speechless. “That…I’m in Advanced Arithmancy II, Hermione. I don’t think I’ve heard of that.”

She laughed, a little too high and a little too thin.

“That’s… oh boy, I don’t even know where that’s supposed to be. It’s the stuff you read when you’re taking your Mastery in Arithmancy. I think Benoit Mandelbrot is already writing his papers on chaos theory and fractals now. Maybe I can get you some from the Interlibrary Loan. Who knows? I’m pretty sure that Hogwarts is somehow linked to the Bodleian Library at Oxford—the Occult Bodleian, at any rate.” She’d managed to borrow the weirdest tomes and books before.

Hermione shook her head, pulling herself together before she babbled even more.

“Look, I’m sorry, Julia. I’m rambling. I tend to ramble endlessly when I get stressed. Evariste just gave me another ball to juggle in the air while I already have so many balls to manage.” She said, trying to keep her tone even so she didn’t sound hysterical or pissed off. “I just…I’m sorry. I think I’m losing my verbal filter. Ignore me when I stop making sense.”

Julia patted her shoulder encouragingly. “It’s alright, Hermione. It’s fine to just rest and take a break for a while. I think you’ve gotten enough duels in, right? I don’t think Professor Merrythought is going to fault you if you decide to sit out from now on.”

“Yes, I suppose so. I’m sorry that I’m not fit for company, Julia.”

“Oh, it’s alright,” she said, waving it away easily. “I did hear about your accident. I suppose it’s only natural if you’re still feeling somewhat weak.”

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Hermione lifted her head from where she’d laid it on the table and saw Tom approaching.

Tom had to have at least one of his minions watching me at one time or another, she thought idly, otherwise, he couldn’t have made his way here so fast. Not when the ADADA class was spread
across three physical classes like now for practise. The other alternative was that he’d been skulking and following her all this time—yet as much as she knew of Tom’s potential for evil, he wasn’t pathetic. Being a stalker was just the desperate act of people who had no other important thing to do. Tom wanted to take over the world—he always had more things to do.

Stalking was frankly below him.

“Are you done with your duels?” He asked, pulling a random chair next to the table she’d claimed as her own.

“I’ve just…” she sighed. “I’ve duelled almost all of your male house mates, barring one or two—Yaxley has eluded me for a while. I’ve fought, let’s see…Abraxas’ two henchmen and Gallus Rosier. Gallus helpfully pointed me to Carrow and Rowle. Pendleton just weirdly asks me himself.” Hermione said.

“Well, that certainly sounds like Pendleton.” He remarked. She had no idea if he meant that Pendleton was always weird or if it was something else, but she moved on.

“I crushed all of them, by the way.” She said, as nonchalantly as she could.

Tom chuckled. He couldn’t have missed the pride she tried to repress, but it was clear that he didn’t mind it at all. His voice was low and unguarded.

“I have no doubts, Hermione. That was why I came up with it in the first place. You need to put them in their place or else they wouldn’t have learned of just how capable you are.”

“Mmm.” She placed her head over her arms on the table again. She was sure that he didn’t turn to her, but she could feel his fingers gently sinking into the curls. He was even absently scratching her scalp with a rhythm that made her want to keep lying down and purr.

She lifted her head again with some reluctance when she remembered that she hadn’t finished. He pulled his hand away and she regretted the loss instantly.

“Auguste came over and taught me an interesting game when I was thinking of just giving up on finding the last of your Slytherins. Evariste came after that. He misunderstands Auguste, and well… Basically, I had a headache for a bit.”

“How unfortunate.” He murmured.

“Yes.”

“What was their misunderstanding about, Hermione?” His tone was shrewd though his dark eyes were as calm as they ever were.

She sighed. “Nothing important. Believe me, I don’t consider it important at all. It’s just…argh. This social interaction…thing…is so complicated some times that I wish I don’t have to deal with it. But at least I’m much better now than I was before.”

He stared at her with that focused, unmoving way of his, the one that in a cobra would be the prelude to a strike. It was eerie to one not used to it, but somehow, she’d also began to see it as flattering. After all, it meant that there was nothing else in the universe right now that he’d rather obsessively study and catalogue than her.

“You’ve never struck me as socially awkward. You revel in your difference. You flaunt it to those too scared to even begin to know themselves, but you’ve never let anyone make you feel out of
place."

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, Tom. You should have seen the younger, bookworm me. She saw the world with a view that is more black and white. That social denseness I still have? I’ve just learned to live with it—the friends I had helped me handle it. I used to always feel bad about it and envy all the smoother people.”

“Is tiny Hermione socially awkward?” He asked, curious.

She couldn’t help her smile. “Tiny Hermione will quote Hogwarts: A History to your face and is bossy about all the spells she could already do. Merlin help you if you tell her you haven’t managed to cast something taught in class. She’d make sure you can do it even if she has to teach you herself for the next hour, even if her discipline is going to make you hate her.”

The next was slightly harder to tell, but she persevered. She didn’t want to hide who she was. “Tiny Hermione will have no friends even after her first three months in Hogwarts—why, let’s make that half a year, even. She’d probably be in the library, pretending she’s not lonely among the books. She will definitely be naïve enough to think that Dumbledore, apprentice of Flamel, discoverer of twelve uses of dragon blood, couldn’t possibly be wrong.”

It was not hard to see that he was trying to divine her past self as he gazed into her brown eyes, to see the girl she once was. She let him. After all, she had read his orphanage files in her own future, even if she couldn’t remember the contents word-for-word. It was only fair if he gets to see a glimpse of her childhood in turn.

“So, she’d hate me, then.” Tom casually stated.

Hermione shook her head. “She’d be suspicious at first but she won’t hate you. We’d be too similar for hate to ever be comfortable. But it would make her curious about younger you—she’d pay attention to a lot of things about him. I think if you can beat her in class every other time, she’d be annoyed at younger you but she won’t leave him alone. She simply wouldn’t stop hounding him about the class, trying to prove that she still knew the rest of the material better. You’d have a friend for life”

“Merlin, she’d be a menace,” he commented with a smirk he didn’t quite hide. “I think she’d drive younger me up a wall. There’s be endless arguments. I think my first-year self might even be frustrated enough to forget his manners and just yell.”

She nodded sagely at his reply. “Oh, yes. I have no doubts about the arguments. That’s practically given. She drives everyone not used to her up a wall. But if you don’t back down you’d have fast friends in her. She doesn’t abandon her friends once she has them—it’s probably just because she’d had too few of them. Like I said, I’m sure I’d still end up jinxing and cursing your other House members.”

The silence between them was heavy with the shadow of old loneliness that they’d had mostly forgot. It flared again with her stories. Hermione still remembered vividly how her early days at Hogwarts were like before Harry and Ron barged into her life. If Tom’s memory was anything like hers, she was sure he had a very good recollection from that period of his life as well. Tom picked up her hand on the table and easily intertwined his fingers with hers. The warmth was a slight surprise—perhaps it was his usually cool demeanour, but she sometimes forgot that he was as warm as her. She clasped his hand at the same time that he did, basking in the comfort of a simple touch.

He stared at their hands with some degree of puzzlement before pulling his arm away again.
As she met his gaze, she realised it wasn’t just about the forgotten loneliness anymore. There was this thread of understanding between them about their pasts. If she couldn’t help him back then, she certainly could aid him in the present—and indeed she would do that. She was almost sure that his intention to reach out to her was no longer restricted to the self that was in his present, but also to the one in her past. If he could’ve helped tiny Hermione, he would have too.

Neither of them was going to let the other face the slings and arrows that can be thrown by a capricious future alone. At some point in their acquaintance, they’ve become partners.

It was an odd thing to be comforted with, but she took solace in the knowledge.

“Hermione, did de Breteuil asked to be allowed to call upon you?” Tom asked.

She didn’t bother asking him how he knew. He had either seen the almost-argument Auguste and Evariste had, or someone had told him about it. Either way, he’d certainly kept track of their motivations for some time that it was not difficult for him to reach his current conclusion.

“Yes.” Her answer was matter-of-fact. “I already said yes when Auguste asked for the same in the name of friendship, just to allow him to know me better. It would be unfair if I said no to Evariste.”

“Ah, I see.”

Unfortunately, she was in direct opposite of where he was. She couldn’t quite see what he meant, as his eyes were as fathomless as the wine-dark sea. Any treasures of the mind were lost in their depths.

“Tom?” She asked. “What is it?”

“Oh, it’s nothing that’s very relevant to you, Hermione. It’s simply that one of the boards I’m facing has just changed. Social interactions are rather annoying to manage, aren’t they?” He shrugged. He didn’t even look the slightest bit concerned. Unfortunately, Hermione still hadn’t quite trusted in her ability to read all of Tom’s expressions. She worried she might still miss something.

“You know how it is. Plans will have to be thrown away or adjusted.” He added. “It’s a hassle, but not an emergency. Rather routine work, actually.”

Since he did not consider whatever it was as important, she chose to trust him and not worry about it. He wasn’t a fool, she reminded herself; he wasn’t someone who would take on too many things himself just because he ‘didn’t want to trouble her’. Hermione could easily imagine Tom scoffing at the sentimentality of that statement as well as the idiocy of the one who said it; this is because it meant that the idiot didn’t believe her to be competent enough to help. She nodded mentally to herself. Yes, that was Tom alright. She didn’t have to worry about it.

Hermione did manage to squeeze two more duels in the end. What she did was to just hail the next idle looking classmate she saw and ask them whether they wanted to duel her. It was a rather simple procedure. As she did so, she knew that Tom had stood up as well and did the same. They exchanged rueful glances with each other. There just wasn’t enough time for a proper fight between them.

It would have to be a fight rather than a duel. After all, she couldn’t imagine that she’d win against him easily without being able to resort to environmental elements. She had a feeling that his spell repertoire might even be larger than hers when it comes to combat spells. She was, after all, more
focused on research as an Unspeakable, and at most more of a sort-of field healer and transfigurator.

Of course, the last part of ADADA was always when Merrythought gathered everyone back to a single classroom and gave them feedback, as well as addressing the most common type of mistake she’d seen or the bad habits she kept seeing that many hadn’t broken off—the usual.

Once the class was over, Hermione couldn’t exactly turn down Tom’s polite insistence that he escort her all the way to the Ravenclaw Tower—not when she knew that for all his placid expression, he was still rather vigilant after the accident.

Even Abraxas who’d been saying that Hermione looked pretty well to Melchior knew enough to shut up around Tom. Melchior was of the opinion that Hermione’s whole presence in ADADA today was a calculated act to show people who might underestimate her (Slytherin House, the purebloods) that she wasn’t in the slightest bit weakened—she found it funny that he was overthinking her actions. Her first reason was her not wanting want to miss more class than necessary before Tom put forth the idea that she might as well establish her place in the Knights’ pecking order.

The pale Pendleton even paused (*hey, alliteration bonus*, Hermione thought) at their little group, in the hallway not far from the classroom’s door after their ADADA class was over.

“Curie had an accident, you say?” Pendleton asked.

“I’m fine, as everyone had seen today,” Hermione insisted. The blond nodded in agreement with her, but soon turned his attention back to Tom.

“It was the sort of accident that wasn’t exactly one.” Melchior clarified.

Pendleton nodded slowly after a few moments of thinking.

“I see.”

With a nod to everyone, he walked away again. Hermione shook her head. “What was that about?”

“That means he’s going to look into it as well,” Melchior said. She sent him a disbelieving look.

“You get that from just two words?”

“No, that’s just Pendleton being Pendleton,” Melchior said. Abraxas was nodding all the while, as if his answer had been very obvious while Nott also received a brief, absentminded nod from Tom with what was probably similar meaning. She shrugged it away. It was clear that the boys knew each other well enough from all the years of their acquaintance; she’d probably figure out what it was about sooner or later.

Gallus stopped by before he left too.

“Is there a meeting I didn’t know about?” He asked, worriedly.

“Oh, not at all,” Abraxas assured him. “Melchior and I just thought we’d catch up with Tom for a while before he goes to escort Hermione to the Ravenclaw Tower.”

“Ah, I see.” The wiry Slytherin nodded.

“He’s being thorough, because of Hermione’s accident, you see.” The blond said.
Apparently, Gallus didn’t realise the unusual circumstances of her arrival. He thought she’d just missed class for one reason or another (or taking some other class that her clashing schedule offered). Abraxas gladly told him what they know. At the rate the guys gossip, the Slytherin house might actually be more up-to-date on what happened to her than the Ravenclaws, she thought with a bizarre sense of humour.

Several other Slytherins passed by and paid their respects to Tom as well and to Hermione (whether grudgingly or not). From the nods that she saw Abraxas and Nott also received, she could easily guess that they were Tom’s lieutenants.

“So, who’s going to find out who did it?” Gallus asked.

“Why must there be someone who did it?” Hermione couldn’t help but ask. All Slytherin wizards turn to her at the same time with varying degrees of bafflement.

“You have made yourself some enemies. Ergo, someone is going to attack you sooner or later,” Gallus spoke first. “I don’t need to be an arithmancer to be able to predict that series of events happening.”

“Do we really have to go through this again?” Melchior asked her with a tired look.

“What they said,” Abraxas threw in lazily.

“The world doesn’t always have to be filled with hostile groups against you…” She started, before she saw the looks of blatant disbelief from all around her and she had to stop herself. “Oh, alright. That one was reaching. We do have Grindelwald out there. There are hostile forces against us.”

“Thank you for understanding.” Tom finally said.

“I’m just saying that this small event might actually be an accident.” She said,“Hermione,” Tom said with evident amusement. “You are the most intelligent witch in our year, and probably even the one above ours. You have experienced things many people twice our age hasn’t even lived through. With that said, I’m sorry, but you’re an awful liar. Please stop. It’s rather painful to listen to.”

She huffed and elbowed him for the cheery insult. It only grazed his side (of course), and he did that quick back-stepping move that ended with his left hand on her hip again. Damn his dodging speed, Hermione thought, but with a distinct lack of surprise. Being a good fighter meant his reflexes were fast. Of course, this only made them stand closer than before.

Gallus Rosier blinked slowly as he digested what he’d just seen.

“…right. Well, good luck, then! You know you can always contact me if you need anything. I’ll be heading to the quidditch pitch.” Gallus said.

“No need to take your leave from us. After all, we’re heading in the same direction,” Melchior dryly replied without wavering even the slightest. He gave an ironic bow to Tom and Hermione, which Tom received with a royal nod of the same degree of mock-seriousness. Abraxas, on the other hand, did a double take as he stared at either Hermione or Tom. He almost said something, but Nott had pulled him away and he bid his goodbye too while being dragged by his friend.

Lakshmi was once again at the door of the Ravenclaw Tower due to mysterious reasons. She
grinned when she saw the two of them arriving.

“Ah, Hermione, Riddle, welcome!”

“I have an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu seeing you here—as in, I’m almost sure your presence heralded the coming of chaos and annoyance for me,” Hermione commented, ignoring the annoyed look her dormmate shot her. “What brings you here now?”

“Oh, I thought I’d get some fresh air. The dorm is nice, but the air doesn’t circulate that much there, if you know what I mean.” Lakshmi said idly, observing her bright nails.

Hermione’s eyebrows just kept creeping towards her hairline.

“Right,” she drawled out, in that supremely sarcastic way that Draco had perfected for the first twenty years of his life. It was very satisfying to see Lakshmi deflate into a pout at that. The brunette turned back to Tom.

“Tom, thanks for escorting me. I’m sure I can climb up the stairs of my dorm without falling,” she said, and he chuckled. “I’m certain that you have other things to do as well, right?” Hermione asked.

“Alas, I’m afraid I merely have boring solo activities scheduled.” She would swear that he almost sighed.

“No other meetings?”

“Remember the Slytherin quidditch practice I told you about?” His expression was sardonic.

Hermione winced. “Ah, yes. Quidditch practise. The bane of the march of progress. If only people would not spend so much time on it, wizards might have landed on the moon already.”

“Indeed, you will find no arguments from me on that front. Speaking of your convenient presence here, Miss Chakravarty, would you mind terribly if I asked you for a favour?” Tom suddenly turned to her dormmate. Lakshmi was too interested to say no.

“Well, it certainly depends on the favour, Mr. Riddle,” she hedged.

“Please help Hermione look out for her enemies.” He ignored Hermione’s snort of incredulity. “Considering the accident that she experienced this afternoon, I find this very pertinent.”

Her amber eyes widened. “I knew something was up! I saw Hattie running towards the Slytherin table and Hermione of all people, not showing up at lunch. She was in the infirmary, wasn’t she?”

“She was, indeed.”

“She is right here,” Hermione reminded both of them.

“Well, I’ll suggest that you ask Hermione for the rest of the details then. She is, as she’d said, right there. If you doubt the severity of my request, you can ask Shafiq, as I’ve asked him for more or less the same thing.”

As Tom took his leave, Hermione realised that he’d gotten what he wanted from it in the first place; to get Lakshmi to know about the accident. She groaned. Lakshmi tailed her with all the bright-eyed curiosity of a cat, shining amber eyes included. Hermione walked into the common room and towards the stairs to their dorm with her friend following very closely behind.
“So! What on earth happened before lunch, Hermione?”

Lakshmi, frankly put, did not believe that Hermione simply fell down the stairs on her own either. It didn’t take too long, not even a quarter of an hour, but Hermione’s attempt at prevarication and dissembling didn’t work with her and simply fell apart.

“Hmm, so, do I know who these idiots are?” The other Ravenclaw asked. Hermione frowned.

“How must there really be some sort of shadowy culprit?”

“It’s more because of who you are, really. If it was someone else, I might still believe it. But you? You who are too damn smart and was crazy enough to take nine advanced classes?” Lakshmi scoffed.

“Ravenclaws are highly competitive in academics. You would not believe some of the sabotage efforts I’ve heard from the upper-years about what the top ten students in their year had experienced. I have no doubts that they sent some of those efforts against each other too.”

Hermione snorted. “Sabotage, really?”

“There have been ingenious attempts at swapping other people’s inks with vanishing ink, and that’s the mildest form.” Lakshmi pointed out. The brunette winced at the thought of having to redo several inches of essays.

“What’s the worst?”

“The one that I know? Which is basically only what people would admit knowing? Blackmail. A few years ago, I think there was one Ravenclaw pureblood that was nearly brought down by a witch about to claim that she was carrying his offspring to his family. He had to quickly find evidence to discredit her claim in case she went forward, but during that half a year or so, he couldn’t focus on his school work and his grades faltered as a result.”

The story sounded like something from a completely alien world to Hermione, as she simply listened with wide eyes. “That’s just…”

“Crazy, I know. But look at the risk on the witch’s side—it’s practically none. He’s not stupid enough to expose her when it would bring his family down on him as well, and other than him, no one knows about what she was saying to him. The benefits of it is clear; she gets him falling down the ranks off as a competitor.”

“The risk is always there that someone else might hear it and she’d also lose, though,” Hermione said.

Lakshmi nodded. “Oh yes. But there’s no chance to win big if you are not also prepared to bet big, right? This is just a rather extreme case of that.”

The dark-haired witch thought about it for a moment before she spoke up again.

“Thus, in the same way that no one in Slytherin would have believed Riddle to not be dangerous—he wouldn’t have survived, much less thrive there otherwise—no one in Ravenclaw would believe him to be naïve either. He’d been the number one academically for years. He wouldn’t have kept his position without being able to handle and outwit the saboteurs—both from his own House and from ours.”
“And I’m, what…?”

“You’re another player easily vying for the top spot as well. They’re probably disappointed that Riddle didn’t even seem to mind your presence—which any observer can take to mean that there were good odds that he wasn’t going to sabotage you. At worst, you’d get number two instead of number one. That still means there’s at least one person you’d kick out from the top ten, and eight others you’re kicking down the ranks.”

It was hard not to stare helplessly at Lakshmi, lounging on her own bed, snacking on pistachio nuts and looking for all the world like the perfect picture of decadence. It reminded her of something from one of Eugenie’s unexpected muggle movie posters she put up (the Delacours were cosmopolitan in their tastes), one of Errol Flynn’s swashbuckling adventures. In all the years at Hogwarts, Hermione had never really felt the cutthroat competition. She had her own suspicions.

“What happens when the people on the top ten ranks are Gryffindors or Hufflepuff?”

“That’s when they get lucky. The ‘Puffs never turn on each other. Never. They’d actually viciously take down anyone who ever did, and that’s when they’re really scary compared to the other houses —your life would literally be hell in the dorms for the determined time period of their punishment. No one wants to risk angering their whole House.”

Ah, so even the Hufflepuff has their teeth and claws. They just choose not to use them most of the time. She’d begun to consider them under a more wistful light recently, especially after the conversation she had with the Sorting Hat—they are too loyal to let you face the dangers alone, it had said.

“Gryffindors don’t really care much about academics as a principle, but sabotaging your own house mates is frowned upon, instead of it being a matter of course like in Slytherin or Ravenclaw. Their house members will also tend protect them from other houses. Not to mention that among them, they’re also more likely to band and study together.”

Alright, that really explained the relative peace she experienced as Hermione Granger. Even if she didn’t get study partners most of the time because she was too drawn into the complications of Harry’s life, at the very least, she did avoid the cutthroat competition that seemed prevalent in Ravenclaw and Slytherin.

“What would you do in my position?” Hermione asked out of curiosity.

“What, me? Drive them out of Hogwarts.” She scoffed. When she saw the stunned look on Hermione’s face, she clarified.

“Look, academic sabotage is one thing, but threats against your safety and your life? They’ve crossed the line. We have no way to know if they’d stop there or if they’d keep trying. You better start planning to take them out permanently.”

Hermione was troubled at the coldness in Lakshmi’s voice. Her friend had been laid back, casual, and mischievous, but she hadn’t seen her in a mood that was close to Tom’s ‘burn their fields and salt their earth’ level of cold fury.

“Drive them out of—”

“I’m going to find and even make enough blackmail material that if I choose to send it to their parents, they’re going to be married off quickly over the summer. It doesn’t help so much with wizards, yes, but I’m sure a rushed marriage like that would frazzle their nerves with preparation as
well as adapting to the in-laws that are practically strangers to them. That’s at least a whole year of disrupted concentration right there. As for the witches? Now, that would certainly pull them out of Hogwarts alright. Good luck at playing good housewife now! Ha! Good riddance for attempted murderers—at least I didn’t try to kill anyone.” Lakshmi cackled at the end, the very picture of the malicious witch in Macbeth.

It was even worse for witches than wizards because that was it. Their social life ended there. Their education also ended there. They were now shackled to the rest of their life to a stranger.

“That’s…”

Harsh? Oh, it undoubtedly was, but Hermione had no doubt that Lakshmi already knew that before she said it. But considering Hermione’s story, she was treating it as payback for someone trying to kill her friend.

It was definitely not nice, but Lakshmi had a point in that she was concerned that the attempts at bodily harm would not stop and were only just starting. In a way, it was also a preventative measure. And in the end Lakshmi did stop at outright murder. The dark-haired witch, like everyone else, was simply a product of her era.

“I think I have to think about all this first. It just…it’s never occurred to me before. My friends and I were always a closely-knit bunch.” Because of all those near-death experiences we survived together, Hermione thought.

“Oh, certainly—take all the time you need, though not so long that someone might already decide to try to off you again. The perfect plan for payback is never the first one that comes to mind. It’s usually one that you’ve thought over and refined over time.” Lakshmi answered.

She stared at Hermione thoughtfully, and the brunette could almost see her mind turning all the little bits and pieces of knowledge that she’d known before over and over in her head and then linking the connections together.

“I forget that you’re from one of those smaller private schools, aren’t you? Where everyone knew everyone else and even everyone else’s parents and families? Well, I suppose I can understand if you’re more used to a nice, familial atmosphere. It really is rather different in the big and famous schools like Hogwarts, darling. The politics and competition are very real and vicious here.”

“What’s wrong with just reporting it to the professors?” She couldn’t help asking.

Her friend actually laughed at that, and the look of pity she sent afterwards didn’t help either.

“It depends. What sort of evidence do you have? What sort of backing do they have? It almost always never works against people with parents on the Hogwarts’ Board of Governors. I mean, who are you, when compared to their pedigree and the size of their annual donation to the school? Really, when you’re good at planning, you’re almost always better off handling it on your own.”

Lakshmi didn’t pull her punches at all and let her knew all the forces she’d be going against if she decided to go forward through the official channels. Hermione had the bitter realisation that she’d glimpsed what school must have been like during the early years for Tom Riddle, the school’s charity orphan with the muggle last name.
**34 Histories Unexpected**

Chapter Summary

Some people are knocking on the Ravenclaw Tower. Documents and reports are delivered. Hermione meets Vespasian Starkey. In which Hermione unexpectedly finds out more about herself—and more than she bargained for. Pendleton and Starkey did a bit of genealogy.

Chapter Notes

I'm getting stuck in a chapter I'm currently writing (still significantly ahead of the next one), and life is currently throwing me more balls to juggle. (Need to pick up a new programming language and stuff). Between my review/comment replies slowing down and my update speed slowing down, I'm sure most readers would choose the first, so I'll just give this public service announcement here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Hermione was asked to come down from her dorm by a first-year that Daedalus Bones randomly picked out of the common room crowd. She didn’t expect to be asked to come down for ‘Something a bit important, Mr. Bones said. Don’t know what. He tells me nothing.’ Or so the petulant young witch passed the message to her before flouncing down the stairs again. It was unusual enough to pique Hermione’s curiosity.

Sure enough, Daedalus was leaning against the wall next to the stairs as if he had nowhere else he’d rather relax at. The seventh-year pulled himself up to his impressive height as he noticed her arrival, some of his dirty-blond hair falling in front of his eyes. He made no move to shake it aside.

“Oh. Good to see you’re down quick. Eugenie won’t even let me interfere,” he said this with the mildness of someone who wasn’t the least bit surprised. “Even if it would’ve been faster if I was the one to give them the boot.”

“Oh?”

“Well, one of them is a pain. Pendleton’s a nice chap.” Daedalus corrected himself.

She would’ve been as relaxed as he was if her ears hadn’t picked up the argument.

“…well, lookit ‘ere, there’s a puzzle on the wall and I solves it. Then the wall isn’t there anymore. So, that just means I gets to walk in, yeah?” A baritone voice said.

“You don’t just barge into someone else’s common room! You’re no better than a-a-a burglar!” Eugenie berated. Even from this position, Hermione could see her standing straight and confident,
long golden hair cascading down her back as she barred whoever it was at the door from proceeding further. Add some sword and mail, and she could pass for a Valkyrie.

The unseen wizard sounded exasperated. “What do your place ‘ave that we don’t, anyway? Nothin’. Just walkin’ in here ain’t that grand a prize, luv.”

“So, it isn’t, is it?” Hermione almost winced at the frostiness in her tone. “Please walk away, then. Apparently, there is nothing to lose for you for doing that, is there?”

“Now, now, I can’t do that. Got a message to pass on—”

“I can pass it on for you—”

“Ah, ah, no. Not even someone as sweet as you is going to distract me—”

She heard frustrated curse from… Eugenie? Really? Alright, it was French, but still…

“Curie. I apologise for disturbing you this afternoon, but we really do have something to pass on.” Hermione had only noticed Pendleton when he stepped into her view (and where had he been just before that, really?) He sent one sardonic glance towards the doorway before continuing with the same even tone he’d used before.

“I was thinking that we could impose on the hospitality of the Ravens for a while before leaving promptly like all sensible people. Unfortunately, the wizard entrusted to write the report is…” The blond Slytherin paused, thinking.

“An idiot,” Daedalus casually supplied the answer.

Pendleton had the faintest of smiles. “I’m afraid that would not be correct. An idiot, after all, is unaware of what he is doing wrong and cannot make a well-reasoned argument. While Starkey, on the other hand, is just reckless instincts given human form.”

Hermione was interested as to what made him more talkative than he’d been in ADADA class.

“Oy, Pendleton! You’ve been talking to the Lady for a while now without tellin’ me! That’s not exactly Queensberry of you!” the other Slytherin sounded indignant.

“Stay right there,” Eugenie snapped. The wizard, Hermione noticed, had a newsboy cap on his head, his dark hair a contrast to Pendleton’s pale one. He walked with the fluid swagger of someone who wasn’t afraid to get into fisticuffs—and indeed, perhaps he’d even started a few himself. He didn’t get far with Eugenie moving quickly, this time actually with her wand out. This was when the brunette realised that Eugenie was chosen to be a prefect for a good reason, regardless of her mostly-harmless appearance—she wasn’t the slightest bit intimidated and was dedicated to keeping order.

“I am sorry, but I’m afraid Starkey was raised by wolves.” Pendleton said dryly.

“Hey! My mother was a nice lady! Take that back!” Starkey seemed genuinely mad at it.

“Watch it,” Eugenie warned Starkey when he moved.

“Oh, yes, indeed.” Pendleton replied with a knowing expression. “That’s why I didn’t say you gained your manners from her. That would be an insult to her good name.”

“Oh well, carry on, then.” Starkey visibly relaxed, both of his hands casually stuffed into the
pockets of his trousers again as he leaned back on his feet.

Hermione snorted her laughter while Daedalus just made one of those long, tired sighs.

“Eugenie, please calm down. Starkey isn’t going anywhere now that we’re all here,” Daedalus said. “Hermione, this is Vespasian Starkey, who usually goes by Ves to his friends. He’s…”

“Slytherin’s thug,” Eugenie added sweetly with a smile. Starkey snorted.

“Now that’s exaggerating. We already have Mulciber for Merlin’s sake.”

“He’s special,” Daedalus finally decided. “Very special. He’s like the lovechild between the hottest of Fiendfyres and a parliament full of gunpowder.”

Hermione bit the inside of her cheeks and held her breath. She was sure she heard Eugenie fake several coughs at that, and she saw Starkey’s complicated expression as he tried to decide whether he was insulted or not. She didn’t know how Pendleton kept his neutral expression when she saw a glimmer of something in his pale eyes.

Vespasian narrowed his eyes at Daedalus. “Isn’t that what almost happened in the fifth of November? Wot with Guy Fawkes trying to blow up the parliament?”

She was impressed that he knew some non-magical history. Of course, she’d only realised then that the gunpowder plot happened before the wizarding world’s seclusion from the muggle one. She mentally facepalmed. That only happened in the reign of William and Mary, Hermione, remember?

“I meant to illustrate a revolution, Vespasian. You do feel like you could be a one-man revolution if necessary, aren’t you? All fire and vim? And lots and lots of explosions?” Daedalus shrewdly asked. His eyes weren’t always visible under his blond bangs.

Starkey was not entirely sure, “Well, yes…”

“Then it’s settled. You’re special.” The Ravenclaw prefect promptly replied.

Hermione heard Pendleton taking a sharp breath while Eugenie was fake-coughing again. She herself was biting her lower lip rather hard.

“Vespasian,” Daedalus turned, ignoring the Slytherin’s protest at the use of his entire first name, and how it reminded him too much of formal dinners and his grandmother, “this is Hermione Curie, Ravenclaw’s most recent transfer and House member. She’s a very accomplished young lady whose near-impossible class load I’m sure you’ve already heard. I thought they might even give her a time-turner for her almost complete doubling of the feasible class load, but I was overly optimistic and I lost that bet. Never mind, it was long odds anyway. Still would be nice if I get all the galleons of a longshot bet, though.”

Ah, so she wasn’t the only one to think that handing a time machine to student so casually was weird.

“You might have also heard her latest title as Nightingale of Hogwarts. Everyone I met from ADADA class has assured me that she deserved that title when she helps with the post-duel healing.”

Hermione sniffed. “It was only minor healing, really—”
Daedalus patiently turned to her, his voice still determinedly friendly. “Hermione, can you please accept the compliment gracefully and not make us feel more useless that our healing skills are pathetic, inexcusable and we should be very sorry about ourselves for not being up to your level?”

“Oh!” Her hands flew to her mouth. “I’m sorry. Yes, thank you for the appreciation, though I still think the praise is a tad excessive.”

The seventh-year clapped his hands. His grin was a little too wide.

“Great! Where were we? Ah, introductions. Yes, I’ve covered most of the grounds. I’m sure you would have no trouble filling in the rest of the details. One final warning to Vespasian, though—don’t try to walk into the Ravenclaw common room on your own again even if you can answer the puzzles. You would not want to find out what happens when we turn on the second layer of defence.” His smile was still nice, if you didn’t look too closely at his eyes.

‘There’s a second layer of defence?’ Eugenie murmured to herself, in disbelief.

“So, Eugenie, I heard that you were going to your potions study group in the library? I’m sure you don’t want to be late. Hermione, Pendleton, Vespasian. I’m sure you can all talk about the report the two of you carried in one of the study carrells in the library or the Hogwarts grounds by the lake. It’s easy to see that the weather is still lovely this time of the year.” Daedalus took a deep breath.

“Now, please get out of my peaceful common room.”

He didn’t even raise his voice, but none of them dallied for long before they were metaphorically turfed out of the Ravenclaw common room. Eugenie had picked up her bag before she accepted the situation and walked out, presumably to the library. The blonde was satisfied enough that Starkey wasn’t going a step further into the Tower. The two Slytherins waited outside while Hermione assured Daedalus that yes, she’d be out as soon as possible—she just needed to retrieve her bag.

“Right,” Hermione muttered as they stood outside the Ravenclaw tower. She had decided to start walking in the general direction of the library and exit to Hogwarts ground than to loiter around. Pendleton kept pace with her to her right and Starkey walked at her left.

Hermione turned to her right. “What’s the explanation this time? Pendleton?”

“I was supposed to deliver some files for you.”

“One of which is a report written by me.” Starkey insisted. “Well, a big chunk of it, at least.”

“Starkey,” Pendleton patiently began. “Were you the one entrusted to inform Curie about it?”

He didn’t say anything else, only waited for the other wizard to answer. His pale grey eyes were truly mirrorlike—the silver surface told nothing of what was behind it and merely reflected the observer’s gaze back. Starkey huffed and grumbled from Hermione’s other side but conceded his point.

“Oh, alright. I’ll shut up right now. Go and be officious about it, you lumberjack.”

“Are we truly heading to the library or to the grounds?” The pale Slytherin asked Hermione.

“The grounds, I think. Much more conducive to talk at.” She said. He nodded.

“Well, then let us hurry there. I do not exactly trust myself to speak without adequate privacy.”
On their way there, Pendleton did not exactly stop talking and freeze her out in awkwardness. He was solicitous enough to find a different topic. He actually started talking about their ADADA class and going through the steps of their last duel, which made apparently made Starkey green with envy.

“I should’ve been there and duellin’ you too!”

She frowned in thought. “Where were you, by the way? I didn’t think I saw you at all.”

“He was banned for one practice day for using a spell he didn’t quite have good control over on Thursday. Hence why he’s not duelling in class today.” Pendleton calmly answered. She vaguely remembered some commotion at the other end of the class on Thursday, back when she was only starting to lightly duel people.

“’Twas workin’ fine.” He insisted.

“Yes, but friendly duels aren’t supposed to send two of your opponents to the infirmary. This was before we figured out that you don’t mind healing people in class, Curie, so the professor came over and wasn’t well pleased at what happened.”

“The spell worked exactly as it should.” Starkey defended himself.

“You couldn’t control the power.” Pendleton stated. Hermione couldn’t help asking.

“What spell was it?”

“Apis,” Starkey answered. “Bees. You can dodge one bee, but you can’t dodge a whole swarm. It’s hard to make a full swarm, though, you have to be able to focus on all of them somehow.”

She grimaced. Bee stings weren’t pleasant, even if they were of the magical kind. It took a while to get the swelling down. It might sound rather trivial, but one needed a rather strong potion for it.

“They’re constructs?” Hermione asked.

“Considerin’ that it was based on Avis, of course they’re constructs.” He answered.

“It began as a mispronunciation, wasn’t it?” Hermione pointedly asked.

There was a two-second pause before Starkey’s shoulder drooped slightly. “That’s how I discovered it. The wand movements aren’t actually that identical, though. Had to look it up.”

“Which is why it’s a wonder you’ve managed to accidentally cast it the first time around, isn’t it? That was sometime last month.” Pendleton asked.

“Sheer willpower under duress can collect a surprising amount of magic to perform any spell.” He replied quickly.

“Or, the first time you made the construct, they were some Frankenstein hybrid of birds and bees.” Hermione commented as she tried to reconstruct the event in her mind. The way he didn’t answer her immediately was already an answer. When he did reply, it was unspecific.

“They were bees. Just, large bees.”

“Large bees?” She asked.

“Technically, a bee’s body is covered in very fine ‘airs. They’re just not obvious when they’re small, so you might think it’s a mite strange to see ‘airs on a larger bee, but they’re completely natural.”

That was when she noticed that Starkey’s rougher accent got smoother around the edges as he got carried away explaining. Not exactly as vulgar as he presents himself, Hermione mused. Interesting.

Of course, the fact that he was one of the students that Tom entrusted to do the research and come up with something coherent in a few days was probably clue enough.

“Do bees also have tiny, unseen claws at the end of their three pairs of feet? Claws that becomes obvious when they’re larger?” Pendleton asked with a deadpan voice.

“Oh, like you know what they’re supposed to look like. Never looked at them that closely before then either, did you?” He defended himself.

“Back when it happened, I noticed that the people screaming in class weren’t just witches.” Pendleton casually informed Hermione.

“It must have been interesting,” Hermione mused aloud, thinking about the classes that already took place before she joined them. The blond nodded sagely.

“Oh yes. Five people were stung or pecked and one of them ended up in the infirmary. That was why Professor Merrythought asked Starkey not to use it again until he’d had better control of it.”

“I did. At least until Delagardie sent a small dust storm to my face.” Starkey explained. “Not exactly unexpected if I lose control then, eh? All’s fair in love and war.”

The pale Slytherin looked entirely unconvinced by the explanation. He turned to Hermione.

“As you can see, Miss Curie, Starkey is…very special.”

“Screw you and the horse you rode in on, Pendleton.”

They were not far from the lake and the wind was cool on her face.

The sky was slightly overcast, but there were still the echoes of warmth from before. Hermione dropped herself on the grass without warning and she watched as Starkey made himself at home on the ground not far from her. He would’ve straight out laid himself down, probably with his head pillowed on his arms. But his friend was staring at him with an unreadable look that carried a hundred and one meanings. Pendleton watched the two of them in confusion, with just a dash of consternation.

“Well? No one is clearly close enough to eavesdrop here. I think this is just as good a spot as any.” Hermione said.

The pale Slytherin did sit down at the end, though with far more care than his two companions had shown before. He retrieved two scrolls and handed them to Hermione, of which one was noticeably thicker than the other.
“It would be more helpful to open the thinner one first. That is a copy of your official records that
managed to reach Hogwarts. As you’ll see, there are some water damage, but it’s not enough to
make it unreadable.”

She raised her eyebrows. “And the reason I need this is…?”

“The other report would’ve made more sense.” This time, it was Starkey that answered. “Pardon
our snooping, but I was thinkin’ that it’s going to be necessary sooner or later, anyway.”

“Yet considering that Walburga Black have been in touch with her cousin Lucretia for a while…”
Pendleton started.

“Then, this needs to be done fast.” Starkey tapped at the thicker scroll. “Tom made a good point
and I’m certainly not arguin’ with him on that. Even if it did take up a few nights.”

still arrived at your dorm sometime around twelve.”

“Well, dodging the caretaker from the library ain’t my idea of a fun night, Pendleton. You just ‘ave
to put a few snoopin’ in and your work is done.” He groused.

“Yet I ended up doing the majority of the writing.” The blond said without losing a beat, “and
having to make sense of the chicken scratch you call handwriting.”

“Your report.” Hermione said.

“Yes.” Starkey nodded for both of them, “the family report.”

Hermione stared at the two of them quizzically. She could keep asking them, but it would probably
be faster if she just sat down and read it. It wasn’t as if they wouldn’t be here when she finished.
Starkey had decided that this meant he could simply lay down and start cloud-gazing. Pendleton
carried some reading material of his own—he was reading a different scroll.

The thin scroll was actually made of several layers. Unbinding it loosened them. The first page was
her OWL-equivalent test results. At first, she was wondering whether she’d be able to read all of
the subject names, considering that she couldn’t actually read Bokmål. Fortunately, it was done in
both Norwegian and English, probably because they were aware that she needed it to transfer to
Hogwarts.

Her family name, as Dippet had made it clear at the beginning was unreadable on that page.
Echoes of water stains dribbled through the names of several subjects, but it wasn’t hard to guess
the subjects involved—the copying charm was faithful to the accuracy of the document, including
the damages.

Test taken in Lillehammer, Proctors... she skipped over that part since she didn’t exactly recognise
the names. Half of them were noticeably English in their names, though. Subjects tested: Ancient
Runes, Arithmancy, Astronomy, Care of Magical Creatures, Charms, Defence Against the Dark
Arts, Herbology, History of Magic, Potions, Transfigurations, she read to herself. Ten OWLs. It
would be an outstanding achievement for a fifth-year to have achieved all that (with all
Outstandings, no less), but it only brought an ironic smile on her face. After all, she wasn’t exactly
a regular fifth-year, was she?

On the other hand, it did answer the question as to whether she was here by accident or not. If there
were documents made for her to enter Hogwarts, it spoke of planning.
Who planned it? Herself? Why didn’t she have any memory of it? Oh, never mind, she thought again. Even if I did, I’d have no way to know—it’s probably a lost memory. Amnesia has never worked the way it conveniently did in soap operas. It’s not an all-or-nothing switch that, after it’s switched off and you forget all of your personal knowledge, it can easily be switched on again later on by a convenient bump to the head or something similar. It was possible to lose only parts of your memory.

It was also common not to have them back at all if they hadn’t returned within the first month. Most patients simply had to deal with it and moved on with their life. C’est la vie.

Why am I here?

Well, at the very least, I can share that anxiety with millions of other human beings asking the exact same question about their existence at around this same time, she thought with an absurd sense of humour.

She could continue being torn up about it or she could just pick the pieces of her life that she still had and move on. It wasn’t as if her documents didn’t conveniently carve out a spot for her in Hogwarts. It wasn’t as if she was lacking in her post-Hogwarts skills (though if she’d actually lost most of it, it’s not as if she’d even notice). She was even granted youth once more. She was a talented witch who still had her whole (second) life ahead of her.

(It did make her wonder whether Malina had actually succeeded with her potion of youth project. It would still be something significant, even if it had limitations. Perhaps its toxicity meant no one can drink it more than once, or that its ingredients were very rare and/or expensive. She hoped her housemate and fellow Unspeakable had, though she felt sad that she forgot the celebration party that would ensue if that was true).

Hermione set the copy of the Norwegian equivalent of OWL tests aside to read the next document. These pages, it would seem, were tied together by one red ribbon across its middle. Affixed to it was a note saying that they all came two weeks after she’d arrived, unlike her OWL tests.

The first was a copy of the birth certificate of Hermione Sophia Curie, born to Martin Curie and Bridget Curie in 1926. If there was anything that could bring home the reality of her current life, it would be her being a few years older than her own grandmother. The last name clearly printed her was also another shock.

Curie.

What began as a guess and improvisation turned out to be the truth. The odds of that being a coincidence was so small that it did not bear mentioning.

I must have planned this somehow, she thought desperately.

It was too uncanny otherwise. Besides, who else but her would’ve chosen Curie as a last name? She supposed Harry knew about it, as did a few other friends, but not many. Not to mention that even her middle name here meant something. Sophia was…Sophia was a grandaunt of hers who’d served in the war as a mathematician of some sorts (she had wryly said that she was a human computer).

There was a…copy of her parents’ marriage certificate. Why was this here?

It was the copy of the certificate of one Martin Lansdowne Curie and Bridget Jane Granger.

Lansdowne, Lansdowne…where have I heard it before?
It took her a while, trying to follow the immediate image of her taking a meal with her parents to find where the familiarity came from. During that time, Starkey had picked himself up and started collecting smooth stones from around them. His friend watched him for some time before he finally said something.

“What are you doing with those?” Pendleton asked.

“To skip them across the lake. ‘Tis too obvious, Pendleton.” His tone was a mix of disbelief and condescension.

Pendleton didn’t bother to dignify that with a reply.

Hermione could vaguely recall the memory of seeing the name Lansdowne before on the family tree her father found in her grandparents’ attic. There was something unsettling about the level of detail in these papers. Sure, she might have given ‘Granger’ as a surname for her mother’s in fake records if she has to come up with a different name for herself, just for sentimental reasons. Yet she didn’t think she’d come up with Lansdowne as her father’s middle name because it really wasn’t the sort of thing that would easily come to mind. It was too obscure even for her.

“Curie?”

Pendleton’s voice pulled her out of her thoughts. “You’ve been staring at that page for ten minutes.”

“Just thinking,” she said vaguely, lacking a better answer herself. “Go on?”

“I hope I can expedite some of that process for you, then. Starkey’s report mostly tried to trace either the Curie, Lansdowne or Granger families for squibs.”

“Squibs?”

“Your parents name came up in the Hogwarts Registry, but it’s clear they were from non-magical families from what we can glean from the yearbooks bound at their graduation years. If you’d allow me…” she handed the papers she was holding to his outstretched hand and he flipped through them quickly. Hogwarts Registry? Wasn’t that the great book running on ancient magics writing down the names of magical children as they were born in Britain?

“Here, I managed to copy these pages from the Registry for reference—”

“—while I played distraction,” Starkey cut in, tossing the pebbles in his hands.

“While Starkey played distraction.” Pendleton easily agreed. “The few pages behind that was were copies from different pages even further back, in an effort in tracking people with the same family name. And these are everything else after that. We can’t exactly go beyond the 1700s, though, since that meant going through the old and retired Registry ledgers. To do that would require checking the dusty corners of the stored archives and getting access to that may take a week or two while Tom asked us to have the preliminary report by this weekend.”

In the first two pages he handed over, there were two names, underlined separately.

Martin Lansdowne Curie, born, 1899.

Bridget Jane Granger, born, 1901.

Her parents here were not merely names on papers, fakes created there to provide an imitation of
life. They were people. Flesh and blood people who had lived, and she assumed, loved and died. Her throat closed up as the thought brought a fresh shard of pain through her.

She skimmed the papers, saw the copies of the pages from the yearbooks, and saw Martin Curie with a Ravenclaw tie and a prefect badge in one picture, next to a softly smiling Bridget with her Gryffindor tie. There were the activities both of them did, the student societies they were involved in—I didn’t even know that Hogwarts had societies. Had they turned extinct over time? With a pang, she realised that yes, her first time going through Hogwarts seemed to have less students in the castle than Hogwarts had in her current now. The Hogwarts of 1940s was filled to the brim with laughter and raucous activity, with less dusty corridors or unused classes.

The conclusion she could take from it was too painful to take that she pushed it away from her mind.

*(The rise of Voldemort was truly a civil war in the extent and reach of the damages.)*

She didn’t really read much on the notes other than the final point: *Observe that they did not have many known pureblood associates. The probability that either of them is of English pureblood descent is very slim.*

Her eyes were drawn to the pictures immediately once she noticed them.

Bridget could have been her mother’s twin, a dead ringer to Jean Alexandra Granger, the only notable difference between them was in eye colour. Hermione rubbed her eyes with her hands, taking careful breaths. Martin Curie was less similar to her father, but they could easily be cousins or brothers. He had the same thick head of curly brown hair, his goofy smile was practically the same expression she’d seen often enough on her father’s, on James Granger’s face.

When she didn’t find anything else that was interesting, she opened Starkey and Pendleton’s report.

...Another Lansdowne is found in the Registry, born in 1753 and another in 1825. The latter Lansdowne, which was Jasper Lansdowne, was presumed to have left England because none with his family name showed up in the Registry until Martin Curie. Since Lansdowne is not an old wizarding name, any efforts to track possible genealogy on his mother’s side may require finding muggle records. This is near impossible.

...There are no traces for the name Curie in the Registry. I encountered Auguste Murat at the library and he has observed that it is a French surname. The lack of records in Britain, then, should not be a surprise. Odds are, one would need to look at Beauxbatons records for more. On this side of the Channel, the track has run cold.

...The Grangers is the lead that has been the most fruitful. The Dagworth-Grangers are a renowned family among potion circles. Before the Grangers married into the Dagworths, there have been several recorded squibs in their family tree, and presumably there might even be more that had gone unrecorded. A hypothetical family tree can be constructed, the first of the few of them has been detailed here...

Hermione almost dropped the report.

This was…it couldn’t possibly be.

This wasn’t merely her, thrown or sent back in time with papers to forge her way into the current wizarding world. This was...this Hermione had a family, though she doubted whether they were living considering that no one had tried to contact her since her arrival at Hogwarts. She had to take
deep careful breaths as she tried not to crease the parchment or let it slip from her hands.

Who was she?

Was she Hermione Granger or Hermione Curie?

*Or both? And how?*

“I’m bored. This is boring.” Starkey moaned.

Starkey had rolled over some distance on the grass, his newsboy cap having fallen off his head. He’d complained of boredom a few times now, which was ignored by a too-focused Hermione and a placidly uninterested Pendleton who merely kept reading and annotating whatever it was the scroll was about. His dark curls were dotted with grass. He was trying to juggle the stones he had collected and failing.

“Someone, say something,” Starkey said.

“*Something*,” Pendleton absently replied.

Then, he went on to ignore any further complaints from his belligerent housemate.

Hermione was still lost in thought. Was she really someone who’d come from the future? What do her memories represent, then? But Hermione *remembered* her childhood in the 80s, her time in Hogwarts in the 90s, compared to the absolute *nothing* of any memory from the 30s. There was no way a memory can be scoured that perfectly short of a very strong Obliviation Charm (or one that exploded horribly, as Lockhart experienced firsthand).

Yet even the use of an Obliviation Charm was very specific. The best obliviators usually have some skills as a legilimens, and it is in knowing how minds work that they know how memories are usually stored and connected to other memories. Most wizards and witches, she had noticed, tend to obliviate memory of specific events, but was not always thorough about the events leading up to that event. Or of checking whether there are any objects that can function as reminders left in the target’s home. This was fine for routine obliviation of accidental sightings of magic, but not so much when one is trying to erase the evidence of a crime.

(Cases like these merely get the Aurors assigned to the case very, very pissed off at the criminal—as they’d still find out in the end, only with at least twice as much legwork to be done. The magical legal counsel taking the position as the crown prosecutor would make sure they’d pay an arm and a leg for it).

“Is this going to take long? I’m getting hungry.” Starkey complained.

Pendleton took one long look at his housemate before he opened his bag and passed on a brown paper bag that was apparently filled with sandwiches.

“Thanks!”

He merely shrugged, but there was a distinct air of forbearance about him.

“This is why you’re a great chum, Pendleton. Always thoughtful. Can’t really rely that level of thinking from the likes of Parkinson the Younger.” Starkey commented.

“I simply prefer to be prepared.”
“You’d be a good caretaker, Pendleton,” he said again with a laugh. “Whichever witch you marry is going to be able to be the next Minister for Magic. She wouldn’t have to worry about domestic tasks at all with you around!”

The blond shook his head. “I don’t know about that. What I do know is that you can’t walk a dog without carrying a doggie bag with you.”

“Oy!”

It got him a swarm of swallows sent in his direction. Pendleton ducked that well and raised his shields promptly before calling his own flock of birds—crows, in his case. He stood up with an air of studied casualness, one hand in his pocket. And was that humming? Oh, he was, he was humming. It was a song she’d gotten familiar with because she’d heard Maggie singing it in the infirmary, Vera Lynn’s *When They Sound the Last All Clear*.

All this only riled Starkey as he leapt up, wand at hand. Hermione wasn’t paying much attention to the two Slytherin wizards even as they started an impromptu fight.

That song was the perfect example of another type of blow to the obliviation theory.

She absently shook her head. *No. No part of me, of my memories, is Hermione Curie.*

Even if her memories of her life in the 1930s was erased somehow, by someone, they’d usually leave everything else behind—the mundane details of life. She would’ve recognised the songs on the radio that had been playing a while. When she’d read the muggle newspaper Maggie Edelstein occasionally follows, she wouldn’t be surprised to see Winston Churchill as Prime Minister instead of always expecting to see the lacklustre John Major instead. She would’ve at least recognised Haakon VII, the King of Norway currently exiled in London—his face would have come up in publications in Norway and no obliviator from this time would even care about erasing such mundane detail.

But there was just…nothing.

If there had been various odds and ends she could recall from the 90s and 00s, the crumbs of the life of one Hermione Granger, there wasn’t any from the 30s. For example, she couldn’t begin to imagine the public transport she’d have to take to get around in London right now, other than the London Underground that was guaranteed to have remained mostly the same. Even then, she couldn’t start guessing which lines have yet to be built. But buses? She had no idea.

She was completely, had been entirely, Hermione Jean Granger, best friend of Harry Potter and Unspeakable. None of her fragments of memories was of a child from this century. She knew no popular songs from the 1930s or 1940s—other than the ones she’d began to listen to from the times Maggie played the wizarding wireless when she woke up in the Hogwarts infirmary for the first time.

It was not hard to conclude that she had never been Hermione Sophia Curie until that fateful day she first woke up in the Forbidden Forest in 1942.

There was barely any doubt about who she was. Perhaps it was more of a question of what.

*What am I?*

Why was she an actual *person* here instead of someone who came out of thin air, in 1942?

Why was she a real person with her own history and family; real parents who were real Hogwarts
alumni? How did she become a person that she was sure had not actually attended Hogwarts in her future’s history? Again, she could not imagine Dumbledore would fail to see the similarities between the two students who were both named Hermione if he did, he would’ve mentioned it to her or leave some special message if he suspected that she would one day time travel. This was all very convenient for her current presence in 1942, yes, but it raised ten times the number of new questions for each one that was answered.

Compared to the questions the copies of her legal documents triggered, Starkey and Pendleton’s intricate hypothesis of her descent from a squib line of the Grangers of Cumbria (a hypothesis that even had a mild possibility of being true, perhaps around 2.5%), was barely shocking.

_How does this relate to Everett’s interpretation of quantum mechanics?_ The arithmancer part of her seriously reminded herself that she needed to get charting and checking the contours of space-time’s currents that she’s presently in.

_Does it matter? Do you have to know about it immediately?_ She asked herself. _You don’t have enough memory about the sort of future you left behind—is it a hell hole? Is the world falling down? It’s certainly not a good idea to attempt to leap forward alone. You already know you’re more-or-less stuck here—and by staying here, you might even have a chance to improve the future._

**Odds are, this is your life now. Any further knowledge from this point on is just a bonus to help with your rationalisation but not exactly necessary.**

Hermione rolled up the scrolls with a sigh, sealing them with a tap of her wand. Then, she accepted the probability that she would have to separate the two wizards, either by simply calling them out or using her magic.

’-

“What’s this worry about Walburga Black being in close contact with Lucretia?” Hermione asked as the three of them were walking by Hogwarts’ lake.

“Clearly, she will be immensely curious about your genealogy.” Pendleton replied.

“The information we passed on would’ve been useful to stave ‘er off.” Starkey said. “And once you staved ‘er off, other purebloods got less excuses to complain about, y’see? Her Royal Gossipiness is still the fount of self-important news for more than half of Hogwarts nosey parkers.”

That was when she realised what the weirdness that had been bothering her from the beginning was about. Pendleton had been nothing but helpful and Starkey was also eager to help, even if he was more of a bull in a china shop in his approach. She took turns to glance at both of them.

“You’re both aware that I’m muggleborn, right?” Her parents here might have been a wizard and a witch, but they were clearly muggleborn. By default, it made her one too.

“Shhh! Don’t say that loudly in Hogwarts!” Starkey shushed her with a concerned expression.

Pendleton nodded. “It is no surprise that we know—even if we hadn’t, we would have found out all the same once we were trying to find out your forefathers further.”

Hermione was sceptical. “And what, you’re _fine_ with it?”

The pale blond to her right sent a glance to Starkey. The other wizard nodded before turning to her.

“You’re a witch, right? What’s so bad, about it? You can do magic and from what I heard, yer
bloody good at it. You’ve got a right to be damned proud of that. If the purebloods and halfbloods make trouble for you, then I say they should be ashamed. They should be trying to show they’re really better! Not bellyachin’ just because you beat them. That just shows how weak they are, innit?”

“Huh. Really?” She asked, surprised.

Starkey snorted. “My family don’t sit and whinge all day. We’ve got potioneers and stargazers up and down the family line, what with us being very talented and actually working at it. We’re not dying out in mediocrity.”

“And if there’s a muggleborn you can’t defeat, you get them to join you,” Pendleton perceptively added. It piqued Hermione’s curiosity.

“Join?”

“Ah, well, talented apprentices have been marrying their teacher’s sons or daughters from ancient times. Nothing new there,” Starkey shrugged it away without a concern.

That took Hermione by surprise. She’d thought that the pureblood agenda was a rather universal one among Tom’s Knights. It turned out that there were differences of opinion among them too.

“Even if they’re muggleborn?” She asked.

Starkey lowered his voice after he glanced around a little. “Well, it’s not somethin’ anyone says aloud these days, innit? But why would a Potions Master or a Master Astronomer care about where their apprentices came from as long as they’re brilliant?”

“Hence the decision to exclude the Starkeys from the Sacred 28, or whatever number it would have been if all the other old families were in it.” Pendleton clarified. Starkey frowned, “Not like you can jabber on about that either Pendleton. That prat what made the list didn’t much care for the Pendletons already practicin’ magic in the English royal court for the House of Wessex, did ‘e? That was, what, at least a century afore the Malfoys came o’er with William o’ Normandy?” Starkey asked.

“Technically, two centuries before William the Bastard landed,” Pendleton said. “While your family fort had been in the family even through two name changes, wasn’t it? The truly old families aren’t so blind to only rely on that list.”

“It was name modifications. And name shifts happened all the time before the high middle ages because the spelling isn’t standardised. We only really changed once.” Starkey insisted.

“So, you don’t really have a problem with muggleborns and muggles?” Hermione asked. She was getting a better idea as to why Tom had entrusted the two of them with the task of chasing down her ancestry and constructing a respectable, quasi family tree for her on a short notice.

Starkey snorted, still walking with the same confident swagger as he did before.

“Wizards and witches are only different based on our abilities. Cream rises to the top! That’s bleeding obvious. Now, muggles, on the other hand, is a different thing. We’re talking of judging people based on their abilities, yeah? Now, if there’s a whole people who can’t even do magic, how capable can you expect them to be? Not much. And that didn’t even stop them from being warlike! They’d probably be better off if we were to rule over them.”
Hermione sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. *Hello, colonialism 2.0. I didn’t expect to see you here at all. I absolutely didn’t miss your death and disappearance in the 21st century.*

Her gaze met Pendleton’s by accident, and he gave her a knowing smile as Starkey was continuing his rant on muggles.

“You do know that he’s far from the worst in Hogwarts, don’t you?” Pendleton asked in a soft voice.

Hermione winced and nodded. “Oh, I’m quite aware, Pendleton. Please, don’t remind me.”

Hogwarts and the wizarding world of this era had a long, long way to go.

Chapter End Notes

So, this is the first and last time I'll address the question of Hermione's past and identity in a long while. Why? Because it's not immediately relevant in just getting through the day-to-day life in Hogwarts and going through her current life. I don't know whether I'll even have time to get back to it when I'm just focusing on finishing their current academic year. That's all I have to say for now.

The Malfoys can’t have arrived in England earlier than William of Normandy—their last name is French for goodness’ sakes, instead of having a Germanic root. At the oldest, it’s French Norman.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Queensberry, Queensberry Rules:** (History, Boxing) Generally accepted rules in boxing (the sport), written by a Welshman named John Graham Chambers and endorsed by John Douglas, 9th Marquess of Queensberry (we can see here that celebrity endorsement has a long history of effectiveness). The code that modern boxing is based is developed from Queensberry Rules. It has also become a term in which one refers to fairness or sportsmanlike behaviour.

**William of Normandy, William the Bastard:** (History) Norman King of England of House Normandy. More famously known as *William the Conqueror*, he ruled from 1066 to his death in 1087. He became the contender to the throne of England when the then-king, Edward the Confessor of House Wessex, died without issue. As William was a cousin of Edward, he certainly could use his claim. The current royal family of Britain (House of Windsor, or House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, if you want to be pedantic) traces their lineage up to him.

As the tongue of his court is Norman French, he carried it over to England as well, alongside his court. He’s one of the major contributing factor to the evolution of Middle English, as Old English absorbed a lot of vocabulary from the Romance languages and ended up diverging farther from their Germanic brethren.
**Additional Notes:**

John Major is indeed the Prime Minister that would have been in office when Hermione was in canon fifth year. I’d know—I was still living in the UK back then.

**Vespasian Starkey (OC):** Ves Starkey is a fifth-year Slytherin and member of the Knights of Walpurgis. He came from an old family that’s not part of the Sacred 28. He shares classes A. Potions, ADADA and A. Astronomy with Tom Riddle. Ves is the oldest grandchild of the Starkey family and heir. A curly-haired wizard with an easy grin, he can banter easily with his House members that he’s considered ‘a swell guy’ and someone other people enjoy hanging out with. His first name ‘Vespasian’, came from the Roman cognomen derived from ‘vesper’, which meant ‘west’ or ‘evening’.

His name is actually thematically in line with Hesper Starkey (canon character, the witch who found out about the effect of the phases of the moon on potions). Here, she is his grandmother and current matriarch of the Starkey clan. She didn’t marry into the Starkey family, as it was hers in the first place.

**Some Notes on Wizarding Culture:** As for readers wondering how Hesper Starkey, a female, can keep and maintain the family name, I'll refer back to the fact I've raised before in Ch 16's end notes that we have clear evidence that the wizarding world is less sexist than the non-magical one. Also, Salic inheritance laws is developed in France in the latter middle ages, while I'm rooting the current magical society to be continuous from even before the arrival of William the Conqueror, and Custumal of Kent (that records events from pre-Norman invasion times) has examples of daughters inheriting and dividing the estate in the absence of male heirs. It must also be noted that a ‘custumal’ is a written record of customs, meaning that there was more flexibility back then than there would be with outright laws.
Chapter Summary

At the Ravenclaw common room with A. Transfiguration homework. Tea with the Ravenclaw witches. Hermione receives a message.

Chapter Notes

A bit delayed from my usual update hour because one of my maternal younger cousins is getting married and the extended family gets pulled into helping him iron out the kinks of the ceremony/reception. Which meant meetings (over meals, thankfully). Which dragged for a bit. Which meant I am seriously considering ditching the entire ceremony if I ever tied the knot and just sign some papers for the civil registry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

35 Tea and Precocity

“You’re doing your homework,” Lakshmi commented as she’d walked down from their dorm to the common room.

“Yes,” Hermione said.

The brunette was leaning on one of the couches, sitting on one of the large floor pillows they apparently have. The Persian rugs were apparently not just decorations, as more than one furnishing actually had the same theme. It was a nice accent. Next to her was Julia, who was doing the same thing that Hermione was doing (an Advanced Transfigurations essay), and one of Julia’s sixth-year friends from the same class.

“On Friday afternoon,” the dark-haired witch said in disbelief.

“Would you rather I be doing this on Saturday or Sunday?” Hermione asked.

“No really.”

“Come on, Chakravarty, she’s not going to spend hours doing this. She’s already really good at it,” Julia pointed out. “And I’m really doing this much faster with Hermione’s assistance than alone.”

“Yes, Chakravarty, please have pity on us,” said Julia’s friend. Her high ponytail was drooping a bit after one hour of studying and doing her homework. Hermione was desperately trying to remember her name. Sarah? Cynthia? Sally? Celia?

Lakshmi stared at them before nodding. “You have a point, there. Anyway, what are you all doing for Hogsmeade weekend?”

“Restock my parchments, ink and quills. I’d like to check out new books at the bookstore. What?
Hey, you asked, and for your information we are in Ravenclaw House.” Julia said, commenting on Lakshmi’s unamused expression.

“Yes, but surely there are many forms of knowledge than that bound in books? There are more things in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in your philosophy?”


Lakshmi rolled her eyes. “I remembered it better because I’ve watched the play more than once.”

“Whatever else is there, I’m quite certain that you won’t find a theatre at Hogsmeade,” Julia said.

“Checking out the bookstore doesn’t sound like such a bad idea,” Hermione mused. “Considering the size of Hogsmeade, I know it’s going be small, though. So, is it worth it?”

“Well, they manage it by rotating the books quickly—they really only stock the newest books, unless you specifically order something from them. But it’s certainly better than settling for months without new books.” Julia answered.

“Oh, Kali. I can’t believe we’re back to that small book store again.” Lakshmi complained as she dropped herself on the couch behind them, an arm laid over her forehead. “Come on, isn’t anyone about to try something else?”

Julia was the picture of contentment with her selection. She merely seemed amused at Lakshmi’s insistence. Julia’s friend seemed more willing to find something else but was equally stumped.

“Well. Hogsmeade simply isn’t that big…”

“It actually is, Sykes,” Lakshmi disagreed as she turned to the other witch. “You just have to venture a little farther from the usual spots visited by Hogwarts students.”

That made Sykes (whatever her first name is) looked a little glum and the quiet was a bit awkward. Hermione, for one, would rather just get back to her Transfiguration essay, but reluctantly accepted that it wouldn’t be happening anytime soon.

“Well, apparently there’s this nice restaurant, there?” She hazarded.

“It’s not the Maid in the Moat, is it?” Lakshmi asked warily. “Which is nice if you like the meaty English fare, but not if it doesn’t fit your taste. People usually floo-in from, I don’t know, Manchester or something. People who’d worked hard the whole day and wanted a hearty meal that reminds them of home.”

“No, it’s The Hare and the Fowl?” Hermione’s answer ended up sounding more like a question than a statement in her own doubt.

“Is it nice?” Julia’s friend had perked up.

“Well, I heard it’s nice. I’ve never been there myself, hence why I’m going to try tomorrow.”

“Oh, really?” Julia asked. “Wow, now you’ve interested me in trying it out! What do you think Celeste?”

Celeste smiled. “It does sound interesting, doesn’t it?”

Oh, so that’s her name, Hermione thought. On the other hand, she was now placed in the awkward position of having to clarify that she wasn’t trying to invite everyone else to go out with her at all.
But that meant mentioning Tom. And her date.

*Well.*

Inwardly, she sighed. And she’d been doing so well at not saying anything too…

“Well! Good luck to you all if you wish to go out and try it,” Hermione said, smiling a tad too wide.

Celeste, Julia’s sporty friend—Hermione remembered that the sixth-year was a Ravenclaw chaser—turned to her with a confused look. “You’re not coming with us at all? I thought you said you were interested in trying it out?”

The brunette bit her lip.

“I can go with you next time, Celeste, Julia?” She offered. “The thing is, I was going to try to visit it this weekend with Tom.”

*Right. I didn’t say the D-word.* Hermione assured herself. From the wide-eyed, startled deer expression they had, it didn’t seem to make much of a difference.

“Merlin’s balls!” Celeste spluttered.

“Celeste!” Julia elbowed her still flabbergasted friend. Not that her shocked expression was any better.

“Morgana’s tits,” Lakshmi dryly added.

“You’re not helping, Chakravarty!”

Julia’s friend had eyes as wide as saucers. “Sorry! I mean. You—how—I thought—”

“Don’t say anything, take a deep slow breath and count to five. Are you doing that? Good. Now, slowly exhale at the same speed. Repeat until you feel better.” Lakshmi ordered, before she moved in front of Hermione. “You’re not going to tell that to anyone outside us and the girls of your dorms, Hermione. Promise me.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s just going to be—”

“There’s no just about it,” unexpectedly, it was Julia who hissed in a low voice at her. They had all moved closer now, sudden co-conspirators in a secret cabal. “Who would be the Head Boy from your year is already obvious even from now. Do you know how many witches have tried to set their cap at Tom Riddle? Do you?”

“I…no?” The brunette wavered. The glint in Julia’s green eyes burned like St. Elmo’s fire, and it made Hermione uncertain about what her answer would mean.

“There was even one I would not name who tried to follow him into the prefect bathroom. I won’t name names since I believe that we’ve all done foolish things from time to time, and even a silly chit such as her doesn’t deserve to be ruined over it.”

She heard Lakshmi’s snort along with a muttered, *someone that stupid does.*

“No,” she disagreed. “She hasn’t done anything harmful to anyone yet so I feel I can be merciful so far,” Julia said without looking away from Hermione.
“Others have sat so close to him they’re practically draping themselves in his lap. He barely even reacted, simply removing them from his person when he left with the ease that I’d remove a recalcitrant feral cat.”

“Ha! That analogy is priceless,” her dormmate said.

“It was true, though,” Celeste commented. “I was at that quidditch match. I couldn’t believe the audacity of that bint either. Was rather ticked off myself, but seems like one of the Slytherin chasers was thinking exactly the same thing that we just glanced at each other and shared our pain—well, it was embarrassed pain for me and a lot of piss and vinegar on her side. Probably because someone from her House was humiliating themselves and making her look like the fool—you know how those people from old families are.”

The Chaser snapped her fingers. “Ah! I remember! It was Beatrix von Blankenstein. Not just a useless nob, that one. It was also after we’d just finished a match with each Slytherin! So, imagine the size of our irritation for that to have happened.”

“The boys are ruining your vocabulary,” Julia said with a sigh.

“Basically, Hermione, it can easily get life-threatening. You can’t underestimate the idiocy that people devolve into when they let their passions overrule their good sense, do you hear me?” Lakshmi insisted. Considering that Hermione can personally attest to that when she found herself shoved down some stairs, she agreed.

“Oh, alright, then.”

“Thank goodness,” Lakshmi murmured with relief.

“So…” Julia continued, “what dress are you wearing?”

Hermione couldn’t quite understand all the attention on her. She felt like a blood sample slid under a microscope.

“I think I have a nice one I bought along with everything else when Professor Merrythought helped me shop in Diagon Alley.” She said.

Lakshmi groaned. Celeste seemed to still be too surprised to say much as Julia turned to Hermione’s dormmate. “Is she always this bad?”

“Yes.”

“It was a nice dress!” Hermione insisted.

“But we don’t want nice,” Julia explained. “We’re looking for elegant, for something sophisticated that nonetheless doesn’t look like it’s trying too hard. Something that can channel effortless grace.”

Hermione was sceptical. “Are you looking for a dress or a miracle?”

“It can be done. Come on. Goldstein, Sykes, we’ve got to get together in this. You can finish your transfiguration homework and who knows what else in the next half hour or so. After that we’ll have tea. I’ll be going through my wardrobe for anything that I think can fit Hermione, both in style and in size, and I’m sure I can trust you to do the same? I’ll try to reach Eugenie and Lucretia too.” Lakshmi determined all this with the gimlet eye of a general giving her troops their marching orders.
Julia firmly nodded.

“Certainly. You can rely on us.”

“Guys, it’s just eating out at Hogsmeade.”

“Hermione,” Celeste asked her seriously. “You do want to look nice, don’t you? Or would you prefer to just pick the first dress that you find in your wardrobe?”

“Well, I do want to look nice, but—”

“Then why don’t you trust us and let us do this for you?” The Chaser asked.

“Um, well. Isn’t this a little too much? I’m sure you guys have other things you want to do on a Friday afternoon, right?”

The three witches shared a look.

“No, Hermione. This is definitely not too much.” Julia assured her. “Besides, I’m not delusional enough to think I’d ever end up with Tom—not that I personally like him or anything, but he is very pretty. It’s hard not to stare, you know? Anyway, we get to live vicariously through you!”

“Yes. Very easy on the eyes, that man,” Lakshmi observed dispassionately.

Celeste nodded. “Trust me, we’re enjoying this a lot.”

She’d finished her transfiguration essay (and helped Julia and Celeste), and was making the first draft of her arithmancy one. That made Julia remember her arithmancy homework and she tried to do that at the same time as Hermione so she could discuss some topics she wasn’t quite clear on. She was still amazed at Hermione’s grasp of some of the concepts. Celeste had moved on to her Charms homework instead.

“Hermione, you should’ve just taken Advanced Arithmancy II. I’m quite certain that you’d be able to keep up,” Julia said. Hermione shook her head.

“I don’t think they’d allow that. I mean, I’ve taken the tests equivalent to OWLs, but my class records certainly don’t say anything about my already taking the advanced classes. That would be like skipping a class, right?”

“But you could just show them what you know!” She insisted.

“And if the class gets too challenging, I’d be hard-pressed to juggle it along with the eight other classes I’m also taking. So, no. I’ll just take that next year, like I’m supposed to.”

Julia sighed. “Oh, fine. You really do have to join our study groups sometime, though.”

She mused about it for a while before giving an answer. “Ask me when my schedule happens to be free and I’ll take you up on it. Just don’t try it on a Sunday, because I’m certainly a lot more reluctant to do anything too strenuous then.”

And they went back to their respective homework.

They spent longer than half an hour at it, though it wasn’t quite to a whole hour either when they decided to just wrap it up and call it a day. Julia was a lot more excited at the idea of having tea at
Lucretia’s dorm than Hermione was, and Celeste was also thrumming with anticipation as they ascended the stairs.

Hermione wasn’t sure whether she was supposed to be flattered or weirded out that when they reached her dorm, Lucretia and Eugenie was there, instead of being away and socialising with their other friends.


Julia smoothly replied and her friend followed not long after. More greetings were exchanged and introductions were made where it was necessary (Julia and Eugenie already knew each other as they were both prefects, but Celeste didn’t know the fifth-year). They all sat down at the table in the middle and it turned out that the tea service was already prepared. Lucretia played hostess, asking for Julia and Celeste’s preferences as she poured tea for everyone. The cake was taken out and Hermione had to facepalm at Lakshmi’s insistence on telling everyone that Tom brought it yesterday for Hermione.

The dark-haired witch was the one who promptly opened up the topic and explained to them why she said the tea time was ‘urgent’. Hermione had to hold back the urge to cringe as Eugenie turned her stunned face to her while Lucretia was more…impressed? She had to focus back on that point again.

Wait, why was she impressed?

“How…how did it happen?” Eugenie was the first one to speak up.

“How what happened?” Hermione replied.

“How you ended up going out with Tom tomorrow?” the blonde clarified.

“Well, we were just talking and he thought there was this nice restaurant we can try out.” She said.

It was Eugenie’s turn to stare at her in disbelief. “I thought it would be more, I don’t know, romantic?”

“I think his suggestion that we can drop in at Honeydukes on the way was nice,” Hermione insisted. “He told me they have an actual chocolatier there. And the I certainly appreciate the little bits of Honeydukes history that he’d somehow found out. Like, do you know that they actually have a Royal Charter? It was given to them by Elizabeth the First.”

She was mildly disappointed that her friends were not more interested in the historical trivia.

“Merde.” Eugenie covered her face with her hands.

“I think even Tom Riddle can get cold feet in the face of Hermione,” Lakshmi replied dryly.

Hermione huffed. “You’re the one who’s trying to make this out to be more than it could be. Really, this is just eating out between good friends…” the other witches’ faces were an interesting array of disbelief, denial, annoyance and resignation. They could easily make a set titled ‘the five stages of grief’, or in this case, ‘the five stages of accepting the Hermione Curie experience’.

“Oh, alright. We’re a bit more than friends. But it’s just a wee bit more! Really!” The brunette insisted.

Celeste put her cup down.
“I’d never thought I’d say this, but you know what? I’m pitying Riddle right now. I mean, sure, he’s talented, highly intelligent, good-looking, charming…”

“And yet, he can’t bring himself to directly ask her out,” Eugenie noted, her soft voice belying the tone of her observation. “I mean, Hermione, I know you simply prefer not to think too much on these things, but I’m sure Riddle himself isn’t that blind. Auguste didn’t make it a secret that he’d call upon you, he must have known about it already.”

“Neither did Evariste hide his intentions,” Julia added. Eugenie turned to the other prefect with wide eyes.

“What?”

“Yes. Saw him almost coming to blows with Murat over it until Murat told him to go ahead, that he didn’t mind the competition and presumably said something about ‘may the best man win’”

“He didn’t say that! That’s far too dramatic than what actually happened.” Hermione said with exasperation. “Auguste is just a friend!”

“Notice that she didn’t say anything about Evariste,” Lakshmi murmured to Celeste.

“Evariste is also just a friend,” she insisted.

Julia shrugged unapologetically. “Well, I was seeing it from some distance away. I had to give my best guess at their lines, right?”

“So, um, that actually happened?” Celeste asked with the honest interest of someone who’d never thought school could be this riven with drama. She was staring at Hermione with the star-struck awe of people who recognised an actress on the streets. “Is Riddle really feeling the pressure?”

Hermione scoffed. “Pressure? Oh, I doubt it. I’m sure he has a plan for every contingency that nothing worries him. You do realise that he’s just that good a politician that no one notices that he’s two-faced, right? Though in his case, I think he has more than just two. There’s got to be at least ten. His ambition is less of a drive and more of an all-consuming obsession. If he’s not careful, it’s going to kill him.” She observed.

The Ravenclaw chaser was too surprised to say anything. “I—what? He’s what? But-but he’s just so nice and helpful.”

Lucretia sighed as she met Hermione’s gaze. “He’s one of the best Slytherins, dear. They all suffer from chronic ambition and there’s no cure for that. They just learn to manage it.”

Julia had a baffled expression on her face. “I don’t know. I’m aware that he’s Slytherin, and it’s not possible to be that high-achieving without ambition and frightening levels of perfectionism. Still, I don’t think he’s that bad…”

Eugenie nodded. “Even at the Hogwarts express, at the prefects’ roll call? He was more prepared than some of the sixth-year prefects! And I didn’t have much of an idea of what being a prefect is about at that time, while he could already pass suggestions to others based on what he’d gathered from previous prefects. I think all the fifth-year prefects owe him then. He’s really nice and helpful.”

Hermione harrumphed in frustration.
“His ambition, as you call it, is what I’d put at pathological levels if I was a psych—a mind healer.”

Lakshmi was the only one among them grinning, and she was grinning widely.

“And yet for all those things you’ve managed to notice about him, he doesn’t scare you off. You’re not instantly taken in by all his accomplishments either but you’re still around him instead of getting out of his sphere of influence. Now, what does that tell us about you?”

“That you can’t intimidate me?” Hermione raised a challenging eyebrow back.

“That you still find him interesting on some level.” Lakshmi answered.

Hermione shrugged. “Look, he is interesting. Find me a person in Hogwarts who is aware of him and doesn’t think that he’s his own mystery.”

“So, it turns out that you do like riddles after all,” Eugenie said in deadpan.

Lakshmi laughed at the spot-on zinger and Julia snorted, while Hermione groaned at the awful pun. Lucretia only afforded them a small smile.

“I think he’s on every witches’ list,” Celeste finally said as the laughter and sniggers died down.

“What list?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, you know, ‘The Ten’? The wizards are usually asked by their friends about the ten most interesting witches of Hogwarts. The witches did the same. Sure, the higher years don’t look far to the younger years while the opposite is true, but I think even fifth years had started to consider him when we’re in our fourth years.” Celeste said, before shrugging. “Of course, the same probably happened with Murat or von Moritz. Or Abbott or the Prewett twins back when they were in their fourth years. Just name any other interesting guys.”

Hermione’s mind, on the other hand, was following a different track.

“But when did it start?” She asked.

“Um, what?” Julia was the first one to reply.

“Making the lists. I’m sure that no one in their first or second year would do that. Yet it seemed to have started earlier than I expected.” She was pretty sure that the median age of puberty was fifteen.

“Third year, of course,” Celeste replied with the easy certainty of one who’d heard it all. She did pause and look around to get some sort of consensus. Eugenie was biting her lip in thought while Lakshmi nodded easily with the same sort of certainty. Lucretia’s delicate shrug could mean anything while Julia also nodded.

“That was still a bit of a joke between ourselves. It’s more of a ‘which of the wizards are nice’ than anything. I’m sure the wizards’ side isn’t that much different. At the second half of the third year, everyone starts treating it more seriously because, well, you’re also changing by then. When fourth year started, everyone’s in it. It’s really in full swing.” Celeste finished.

Hermione froze in her seat. Everyone was already hormonal when fourth year begins? She wasn’t following the conversation anymore as other chimed in about their own experience, or who in the upper years they found interesting.
She had wondered more than once whether the use of magic and thus the presence of magic in the body affected human physiological development. Now, it seemed, she had her first lead.

Were wizards and witches naturally more precocious than the non-magicals? Perhaps the greater their magic potential and the more frequently they practised magic, the faster it boosted their growth? After all, she’d been wondering why the heck Tom Riddle seemed mature for his age. And it wasn’t just him, for that matter, as she’d interacted with other people in her year.

If her theory was proven, it would explain the relative stability and survival rate of marriages occurring at young adulthood among the Hogwarts set as she’d noticed that many, if not most, married right out of school. Yet they all fared well years later when compared to the survival rate of such marriages in the non-magical community. Alright, it was still a non-randomised survey of the people around her, but she wasn’t just counting the ones who were married but miserable—even if they weren’t the most romantic couples, they were genuinely in a stable marriage.

“Miss Black, who did you put on your list?” Julia asked.

Lucretia’s smile was on the inscrutable side. “I’m sure a good many of them have already graduated Hogwarts. I am a seventh-year, you know.”

“You mean, you’ve never updated them after you first made it?” Lakshmi asked sceptically, amber eyes half-lidded. “Come on, Lucretia. I know you’re not blind. We were admiring von Moritz’s seat on his broom in the Slytherin-versus-Hufflepuff final of last year’s quidditch cup.”

“He has a very good seat. Very fluid riding posture. I’m sure he’s just as experienced with horses.” Lucretia replied with the same smile, her voice soft.

“And he’s a sixth year. Are you saying you haven’t modified your list of ‘The Ten’ to include him?” Lakshmi retorted. The sixth-years were judiciously keeping quiet in order not to miss any word.

Lucretia shrugged demurely. “I might have.”

“Aww, that’s not an answer!”

Hermione’s mind, on the other hand, was still somewhere else.

Maybe I could…oh, I can compare the semi-annual height and weight statistic of Hogwarts’ students with a non-magical cohort! She decided. She knew Hogwarts did it as part of a routine general check-up, and she knew that the Head Nurse had access to years and decades of such data. She probably would need to invent some sort of MRI spell to be able to see the difference in the brain activity and networks and see how mature the connections in a magical individual compared to the nonmagical one. It couldn’t be impossible—the wizarding world did invent the magical version of photograph paper not long after the muggle world invented photography. They developed it faster than the non-magical world developed photography too; clearly, she’d manage to create that spell faster than the time needed to develop the MRI machine.

Of course, that was before she realised there was a larger impediment in place.

Wait, even the technology for MRI hasn’t been developed yet in the 40s, right? After all, nuclear physics had only just got started now. Damn. Alright, that idea is shelved for now. It would probably be faster if she tried to find healers who are researchers and are probably already working in that direction than trying to invent it from scratch, and without even having a working machine to base it on!
“I’m afraid I can’t be very specific,” Lucretia said again, her expression apologetic. “As the daughter of the main Black family, I can’t take the risk of raising unwarranted expectation in any wizard. But I’m sure it’s not difficult to guess who would be on my list than not. It’s not exactly that different from the average witch.”

Lakshmi raised an eyebrow at the seventh-year. “’Average’ is the last word I’d use to describe you, dearest. So, clearly von Moritz made the cut. Who else? Murat? De Breteuil? The Prewetts? Our knight-in-shining-armour of a Head Boy?”

“Oh, yes, Abbott. How did he balance between being the Hufflepuff captain and the Head Boy, by the way?” Celeste wondered out loud.

“I swear, Andrew and Agatha are still peachy keen in evening prefect meetings. I have no idea how they manage that. Perhaps it’s in the Abbott blood to be naturally energetic,” Julia mused aloud.

Eugenie nodded in agreement. “Andrew is nice. He’s a gentleman.”

“Ah ha, I know that smile, Lucretia. You were staring too! Alright, so I know that Abbott is definitely on your list.”

Back to the population comparisons of prepubescent and pubescent children for now, then, Hermione mused, the rest of the conversation barely registering in her conscious thought. Where would she get the data for non-magical children, though? She wondered if St. Bart’s at London has a comprehensive enough record of children growing up through several years. It didn’t have to be St. Bart’s—after all, some large hospital right in the middle of London’s population must have archived something like that, right?

She could get the data by getting some sort of liaison going between the Ministry of Magic and Ministry of Health. If the DMLE could join Her Majesty’s Government in the 21st century, she was sure that she can get the Department of Magical Medicine to work with their non-magical cohort at a limited level, with top secret clearance layers put in place and everything.

This is doable. Yes.

If her hypothesis is right, there should be a statistically significant difference between the growth rate of the two populations. No one has tried comparing them before, right?

“Hermione?”

Eugenie carefully waved a hand in front of Hermione’s face. The brunette hadn’t noticed, much
less reacted, to the ongoing conversation around her.

“I think I have a promising idea for a paper. And some bureaucratic reform to plan, but I think that’s just a side effect of getting the data for the paper.”

Celeste stared at her, still with the wide-eyed disbelief of a tourist suddenly stranded in the middle of the wrong side of town. Julia yelped from Hermione suddenly standing up next to her, half in a daze.

“What the…” Lakshmi stared.

Eugenie was faster. She stood up at the same time and managed to tap Hermione’s forearm to catch her attention before her friend marched away.

“Hermione. Hermione. Where are you going?”

She blinked and stared at her blonde friend, trying to remember what she was doing before she was thinking of the precocity of wizards and witches along with MRI spells.

“I was thinking of getting my bags and maybe going to the library? Because of the preliminary research I wanted to do?” Hermione said. “Um, yes, I know. You don’t need to look at me like that. It sounded less strange in my head. But I just came up with an interesting avenue to investigate. I don’t want to forget it…”

“Slow down, Hermione. Let’s start from the beginning. What was your idea about?” Lucretia asked. Her voice was steady and calming. “I saw you getting distracted after Sykes’ explanation. Perhaps if we can start from that point?”

“Oh! Right. Celeste, you were telling me about how everyone makes their list of ‘The Ten’, right?” the brunette checked. “Well, it got me thinking…”

Her friends helped her talk through her idea. It did end up showing Hermione that no, she wasn’t going to forget it any time soon. The possibility that magic may possibly cause wizards and witches mature faster was something that the other Ravenclaws agreed as an interesting hypothesis to check. They also agree that the variables Hermione chose to use to measure maturity were good enough, at least in their non-expert opinion.

Lakshmi had set off to find some parchment and quill from somewhere to hand to Hermione to just ‘jot the outline down and get back here’, preventing Hermione from suddenly deciding to bury in the library or infirmary records for several hours. Or perhaps even pull an impromptu overnighter. This, they assured her, wasn’t really going to take that long. Really. All she had to do was try out several dresses and pick one from among them.

_Really, yes, it’s that simple, Hermione. Don’t worry, you’ll have the rest of the evening to spend in the library_, Lucretia assured her.

‘-

Hermione was in the library, deciding that she’d been social enough for the day and now deserved hours upon hours of being a hermit.

The Ravenclaw witches were actually very good at guessing which of their dresses were to Hermione’s taste and preferences, to her chagrin. Lakshmi’s wardrobe didn’t have much for her, unfortunately, simply due to the sheer size of the other witch’s bust. Anything of Lucretia’s tend to have hems and sleeves that fall lower on her, since the Black heiress was tall, but not all of them
actually look bad on her even with the difference in length. The last two dresses came down to something of Julia’s and Eugenie’s. Eugenie’s Peter Pan collar dress won, but by a slim margin.

For some reason, Julia was pumped that she’d only narrowly lost, and made Hermione promised that the next time she’s out, she’d borrow hers. It wasn’t a difficult promise to make. Merlin knows she still hadn’t had the time to shop, and she hadn’t check how much ease in pocket money that she had from the Hogwarts’ orphan funds.

Once that was done, Hermione made her escape, bag at hand. It was already prepped and waiting for her by the door from when she picked it up to go on a jaunt with Pendleton and Starkey.

The library was nicely peaceful. She spent a productive half an hour continuing her arithmancy essay. The next half an hour was her slowing down as she ran out of ideas and had to go back to reading through several books. It was during this time that the patter of small feet caught her ears. She looked up, pose still casual, but her wand had slid down from the holster to her hand.

“Finally! Your friends said you were in the library, but they didn’t tell me which part. It took me ages.” Hattie complained in a low tone.

Hermione grinned. “Well, now you know. Next time, you’d be faster.”

The first-year was still pouting, but she didn’t say anything much. Her wavy hair was loose down her back, but this time, it was less messy than what Hermione expected from a little witch that had been running around.

“So, that hair-brushing charm worked rather well, I see,” she commented.

Hattie beamed, green eyes shining. “Yes! It’s not falling into my face or anything, see?”

“Good for you,” Hermione answered in good humour.

“Oh, you’re making me forget what I was doing. There’s this Slytherin first-year who asked me to pass a message from Tom to you. I’ve seen him before in my classes. He’s…Rosier? Yes, Rosier, I think.”

“Jonah Rosier?”

“Yes. That’s him.”

The first-year had scrambled up to the seat next to Hermione’s while she patted her pockets at the same time.

“Here.”

Hermione patted her own pockets before sighing. She took the envelope with a regretful expression. “I’m sorry. I thought I still have come candy on me, but it turns out that I don’t.”

“Oh, it’s alright! Though I’d be happy if you have some. Rosier shared some of his candy with me. So, it’s fine.”

“Thanks all the same, though.”

“You’re welcome!”

And with that, Hattie dashed away again, hair flying behind her. Hermione had to admire the amount of energy she had because she had a hard time remembering whether she was that
unstoppable when she was a first-year.

Tom’s message was brief. He didn’t even bother signing it or specifically addressing it to her, but she could recognise his handwriting easily that it wasn’t an issue. She did wonder if he was a tad paranoid about the message not reaching her that he’d removed the most common identifying features. Even the message was brief:

*Room found to use as base for search. Pendleton would be waiting at Rowle’s statue to take you there.*

Hermione could ignore it for another half an hour. Merlin knows that Tom wouldn’t even know when she finally received her message or if she was easy to find for Hattie. On the other hand, she was also just as certain that Pendleton would be waiting for hours if need be. Yet she didn’t have any beef with him to want to torture him with boredom—and she preferred to only trouble people she actively disliked. The pale blond was alright for a Knight of Walpurgis.

*Oh well, I was slowing down on the essay front, anyway.*

She started rolling up her parchments as well as securing her quills and inkpots. She may not dally, but she didn’t move in a rush either, merely keeping a slow and steady pace. Her curiosity was tickled enough to wish to see what Tom had found, but she would certainly have no concerns about simply leaving again if it was still in the setting up stage and there was nothing interesting that she could do yet.

Chapter End Notes

**List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:**

**MRI, Magnetic Resonance Imaging:** (Medicine, Medical Technology) A medical imaging technique used in radiology to form pictures of the anatomy and the body’s physiological processes. MRI scanners use strong magnetic field, radio waves and field gradients to generate images of organs in the body. MRI’s basic scientific principles are based on nuclear magnetic resonance, in which atomic nuclei* in a magnetic field absorb and then re-emit electromagnetic radiation. So, the picture is the result of the electromagnetic radiation those nuclei sent out as they return to their ground state once more. (Credit mostly to Wikipedia, again. I can’t possibly remember all the terms at the top of my head. I’m definitely not in biomedical engineering).

The word ‘nuclear’ was dropped from MRI’s name because people had become leery of anything with it on the name after the nuclear bomb. This is why the technology was first developed at the time nuclear physics was experiencing a boom in the 1940s. Hence why it’s still in its infancy right now.

*you know, the core of an atom that the electrons orbit around?*

Additional Notes:
...she’d noticed that many, if not most, married right out of school. Yet they all fared well years later when compared to the survival rate of such marriages in the non-magical community. This seems like a well-known and uncontroversial result of many studies in sociology, but I did try to find the exact sources to reference instead of just relying on my gut feeling/vague memory. The ones I did read are: a) the book by Holman et al, Premarital Prediction of Marital Quality and Breakup from 2002 (I skimmed the methodology and went straight to the divorce section to be sure), b) the rather well-known Booth and Edwards 1985 study ("Age at Marriage and Marital Instability") that involved 1,715 people from all across the US. Both are pretty readable, and both also provide a list of related previous studies inside them, so you can dig deeper in that particular topic at your own time if you wish.

Why I even made an endnote about all the happily married couples right out of school is because I think JK Rowling overreached a bit in adding too many details to the epilogue when she doesn't have the space to expand them to actual stories with depth and complexity instead of mere summary. It sounds too perfect to be true partly because of the blankness of brevity. (Often enough, people do need time and distance to grow into a better version of themselves - sometimes you don't even know who you really are to be able to say with certainty that you know what/who you want). A subtler ending where we see their kids meeting up again at the Hogwarts Express with hints of who their parents are (as well as their last names), to use one example, would've worked just as fine.
36 Shifting Priorities and Relations

Chapter Summary

Meeting Tom who is watching people setting up the base. Not number one in my life and fine with it. An engaging conversation. Hermione drops in at the infirmary and chats with Maggie Edelstein.

Chapter Notes

You're in luck. I don't feel as if there's something subtly wrong about the chapter that I just have to keep editing/hacking at it. Not sure it's great or anything, but I suppose it would do (if I did stubbornly kept at it, I would've only updated next week). Final edit brought to you by repeated plays of L'Arc~en~Ciel's The Fourth Avenue Cafe and Queen's Don't Stop Me Now.

Thanks for all the reviews and thoughtful words. Sorry if I still can't reply to many of the recent ones. Life is still a bit hectic so I'm just dropping a chapter and running off yet again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

36 Shifting Priorities and Relations

“Who was in charge of this project, Pendleton?” Hermione asked as they walked together.

“The preparation for the headquarters for The Society? The one I’ve seen so far is Melchior.” He replied. “There was a fourth-year earlier who seemed to be in close discussion with Melchior, before he left not long after I came in—Orion lent him, I think. Otherwise, it comes down to Melchior and I.”

Hmm, one of the Knights of Walpurgis? Interesting.

“Not one of the Slytherin prefects?” Hermione asked.

“It’s actually a courtesy not to ask them for it,” the wizard answered.

“Really? Why is that?”

“Because as prefects, they’re required to be responsible and uphold the rules. There’s no rule against using an empty and unused class for your own purpose. Yet considering the history of Hogwarts and the number of rules that must have accumulated since then…”

She understood. “There’s no guarantee that there’s no obscure rule somewhere that hasn’t been in use in the last, oh, two centuries that might obstruct this use.”

Unsaid but implied was how the situation of having broken a rule without knowing it (or only
knowing it later) could become a weak point for said prefect if anyone found out.

“Exactly.”

He stopped at a door to his right, opened the door, and gestured for Hermione to enter first. She obliged.

The room that Tom’s minion had found had high ceilings, like many classes in Hogwarts, with an abundance of tall windows that let the light in. Hermione sometimes wondered where all these windows open to, because not all of them were obvious from the outside of Hogwarts. She put thoughts of investigating Hogwarts’ non-Euclidean geometry for another day.

One of the walls was almost completely covered by a gigantic map of Europe. Three house elfs were holding it up at different points on top of a worrying stack of tables, while Melchior was on a different stack of tables, a third of the way along the wall from the windows, casting something at a part of the map’s top edge.

“Is he casting sticking charms?” Hermione asked Tom, who was leaning back on a spare table as she approached him.

“Oh, not at all. A simple finite would have taken it all down. No, he’d been applying resin to the back of the map before sticking it on the wall.”

“What’s the wand for, then?”

“Heat, of course. If we use simple glue, all the house elfs would get stuck to the back of the map. Perhaps even some of the other wizards here earlier would have managed to glue themselves to the map too.” He shook his head. Tom had the fatalistic air of one who already had to idiot-proof too many things in his life for his liking. “No, it’s safer to use heat-treated adhesive. Besides, the resin is stronger than most glue.”

Oddly enough, the pragmatism in his voice reminded her of her most unflappable primary school teachers, the ones that didn’t blink at a roomful of screaming children and can create order in the most chaotic classrooms within ten minutes.

Pendleton had easily moved a stack of tables towards the corner wall opposite of the windows and climbed up. From how he had his wand out and pointed it at different points at the top of the map, it seemed that he’d be assisting Melchior from the other end.

“Those tables look hazardous, though.” She wouldn’t deny that she was worried.

“Sticking charms.” He promptly replied.

“Hmm. Alright.” Hermione leaned back on the table next to him. “So, about tomorrow…”

Tom glanced at her once before returning his attention to the work again. She took in the room. It was…it was enough for their needs, actually. It wasn’t as if they needed much to begin with. She’d want to tweak the map, of course, but that can always be done later.

There was something she had forgotten to mention and she didn’t quite know how to bring up.

“We’re going out for lunch, right? Because I don’t like the idea of getting back too late. Look at this room; the map is going to be done soon enough, the filing cabinets are already in place and there are already enough shelves here.
What’s left? Some basic security wards? Something that’s simple and non-violent that it wouldn’t conflict with Hogwarts’ own wards? I can make a mock-up for one in half an hour. We can troubleshoot it for, say the next half an hour. Give me three people who knows how to raise wards and it would be finished in another half an hour—alright, it would probably be after supper, but it would be done today.”

Hermione took a deep breath and forced herself to get to the point.

“We can hold our first meeting by tomorrow evening.”

The Ravenclaw turned to him. “You’re not going to, well, push it back from tomorrow just because we were having dinner at Hogsmeade, right? Tom? When it comes to trying to get Grindelwald, I think faster is always better.”

She didn’t have time to dawdle for an entire day when she had things to do. Not even for a date.

To her surprise, he laughed.

It wasn’t a chuckle that she’d heard more often in class or in discussions—it was an easy, unrestrained laughter. She could even see at the corner of her eyes Melchior stopping his work to turn around, staring blankly with an uncertain expression. Pendleton, on the other hand, seemed to only glance in their direction for a moment before resuming his task with the same aplomb he’d demonstrated.

“You’re correct, I never intended to spend suppertime at Hogsmeade.” Tom said. His hand on the table was right next to hers, their fingers touching slightly. “But it had only occurred to me that you might not think the same way.”

Her lips twitched at the corners. “And you were wondering how to break the news.”

“Just so.”

“Well, that’s one thing that I’m rather predictable about.” Hermione said, with a self-deprecating smile. “Saving the world tends to come first before my social life. I’m sorry, but honestly, you’re not number one in my life.”

It had led to some prolonged discussions (and arguments) with Ron before, but even now, she wasn’t someone who would blame their ex for all the cracks in the relationship. Ron also deserved a girlfriend that wasn’t a workaholic. Yes, some of her research in medical spells saved more lives the faster she’d finished them, but something certainly could be said about work-life balance. Only much later it occurred to her after some thought that she could’ve tried pushing harder for assistants when budget review came, for one.

Tom didn’t look the slightest bit offended.

“Well, if we’re being honest about that right now, then I’ll admit that you’re not number one in my life either.” He replied. She could see from the way he leaned back that he was still completely relaxed. She shifted closer and leaned slightly towards him to speak in a lowered tone. If she dropped her chin, it would rest right over his shoulder.

“I presume the number one would be taking over the world, then?” Hermione asked.

His smirk already told her the answer before he said anything. “If that’s how you’d put it, then yes.”
“How *would* you put it, by the way?”

“I’m optimising.”

She raised her eyebrows in disbelief, staring him in the eye. “You’re out *optimising* the world?”

Tom nodded. “Why yes. I’m confident that the wizarding world will just bumble along without a clear purpose for decades otherwise. The average wizard and witch would mostly be reacting according to whatever the Prophet whipped up instead of for the long-term interests of the wizarding world. Who, among those leading the wizarding world right now, actually has a vision, Hermione?”

“Dumbledore,” she answered without doubt.

The way his gaze cooled immediately demonstrated that it clearly wasn’t what he took as a favourable answer, but he didn’t take it personally.

“*Dumbledore* is hiding inside the walls of this castle instead of going out there and changing the world. What good is his power and knowledge if he simply chose to live out his life in an ivory tower? *Utterly useless.* He is as useful as Hogwarts’ squib caretaker that way.”

Hermione shelved his prejudice against squibs for discussion material for yet another day. *One prejudice at a time, Hermione.* She was already working on his muggle one, after all.

His indignation at what he’d seen as Dumbledore wasting his own talents was actually one that Hermione could understand. Later on, she’d often wondered why Dumbledore didn’t take it upon himself to simply track Voldemort down and kill him. Post-Quirrell and as a ghost, he couldn’t have been that strong, and Dumbledore was certainly no wizard anyone would underestimate. Even if he didn’t know where the horcruxes were, it only meant that he’d have to find and kill a weakened Voldemort some six more times, assuming that he’s saving Harry for the final fight.

The brunette sighed. “I know what you mean. I don’t agree with his approach either.”

Tom paused and glanced at her quizzically. “You don’t?”

Hermione huffed. “He’s a great wizard, yes, but he’s not a saint. I’m quite aware of his flaws now, don’t worry. Obviously, we wouldn’t even have to organise all this if he was out there himself, looking for Grindelwald.”

“Now you’re overestimating him. As great a wizard as he is, it wouldn’t be much easier for him to search half a continent for one wizard. One powerful wizard with not a small number of followers, but he would still need to cover Western Europe and a bit more besides. I was thinking of him using his influence in terms of the Ministry or the Wizengamot.” He answered while shaking his head.

She couldn’t help the small smile on her face. Most people really have no idea about how well Dumbledore knew Grindelwald, do they?

“Hermione?” He was observing her carefully. “You know something, don’t you?”

She waved her hand to dismiss it. “Oh, I don’t know, Tom. I just have a good feeling about it. I think Dumbledore might surprise you. He’s still Flamel’s apprentice.”

“It’s not as if he manages to create a philosopher’s stone of his own.”
She shrugged. “the philosopher’s stone is overrated.”

Hermione ignored his disbelieving stare and quirked a smile back at him.

“Oh, it’s good, yes, but changing base metal into gold? Please, flooding the market with too much gold in the short run will only depress its value. I’m sure there’s also a limit to how much you can transform in, say, a month. Enough to live comfortably, sure, but it’s not much if you really need a large amount of money to, say, invest. There are materials that are easier to do, transfigurations-wise, but is no less expensive. After all, wasn’t aluminium once more expensive than gold even if it’s more abundant, simply because it was harder to purify?”

“Napoleon did have a dining set made out of aluminium. I’ve heard Bernadotte talking about it once, as he enjoyed a disbelieving audience. All I could think of at the time was why on earth would anyone choose aluminium instead of gold?” He mused. She could almost see the gears turning in his head, for she couldn’t see the blue in his eyes anymore and only endless darkness.

She leaned back next to him against the same desk.

“Well, it would be hardly valuable now, and only for its historical value. But back then…”

Tom tilted his head in thought as she glanced back towards Hermione.

“Speaking of hard-to-create items made of common elements, diamonds are made of mere carbon. If we can apply pressures that intense to a block of graphite—the easiest to find will be pencil leads—we would have a block of diamond.”

He snapped his fingers. “Just like that. No philosopher stone is necessary and it would probably fetch a comparably high price. That was the point you were trying to make, wasn’t it?”

His gaze did not waver from hers and she couldn’t help her sharp intake of breath.

Hermione did not have an answer ready, simply because it wasn’t one she’d expected. She had half-expected him to be as tied up as the rest of the wizarding world with the idea that wealth meant the amount of gold (the element) that you have. It was a strong and inert element valuable to create artefacts and certain potion equipment, yet creating wealth was actually more flexible than only relying on gold. It was merely about providing value to the economy that people are willing to pay for.

Where that value came from was limited only by the imagination.

Once she showed that an alternative path was possible, he abandoned the old idea as easily as a snake shedding its old skin.

“I’m not sure it’s as easy as that in practice. There might not be any spells that can provide pressure that huge.” Hermione murmured as she broke their gaze, the inexplicable gravitational pull between them distracting. “The pressure is higher than even the deepest point of the ocean.”

“Would you let that stop you?” There was a hint of challenge there.

“Not really. It’s not as if it would stop you either, would it?” She asked back.

He shrugged. “It’s bound to be easier to figure out than how to create the philosopher’s stone, isn’t it?”

The carelessness in his words belied the spark in his eyes. She nodded with the same apparent
nonchalance, their shoulders bumping against each other on occasion.

“Oh, definitely.”

“Yet that does not cover the stone’s ability to provide the Elixir of Life.” Tom pointed out.

“Of course. It’s as they say; there are many roads that leads to Rome. There are many possible paths to study eternal life or longevity enhancement without resorting to the philosopher’s stone.”

“Really?” He glanced sideways towards her. She turned towards him as the urge to share bubbled up from within.

“Yes, really! There are many species on earth that doesn’t age the same way we do. Some of the flatworms, the planarians, can regenerate their entire self no matter what organ loss they suffer or how much of their body is cut off. A human’s wound and limb loss results in scars and permanent loss of limb! The fact that they can do this indefinitely, without having their telomeres worn down by all the cell division and regeneration is astonishing! They might actually be functionally immortals.”

“Immortal worms…” She couldn’t quite read his expression right now, but if it was disbelief, she was determined to address it.

“I know they don’t sound like much, but they’re significant since their telomere endings are made of the exact same DNA sequence like ours. Yet where human cells kept losing theirs with every stage of division as well as when we grow older, this doesn’t happen for many species of planarians. If we can figure out how they do it and find the analogous mechanism in human cells, we’ll make strides in human longevity.”

“Perhaps, in the end, it would even lead clues to our species’ immortality.”

Tom had held her hand in his and started walking out of the room. There was something deep and unreadable in his mien, but it scarcely concerned her. Hermione was only following out of reflex, she was still too busy sharing what she knew.

“There are also other species that doesn’t seem to go through conventional aging the way we do. There’s the ever-youthful axolotl—also with an uncanny ability to not just regrow lost limbs but also reconnect broken spine. Senescence—growing old—is not biologically inevitable, you know? We just happen to be one of the unlucky species on that front—”

The hallway was clear.

That was when Tom tugged her into an out of the way nook and suddenly kissed the breath out of her. All the words that had nicely lined up in her mind evaporated as they were overrun with bliss. Her hands went up without thinking, of which one was snug under his blazer. The speed with which her own ardour flared up in response to his was beyond her expectation. They had fitted against each other perfectly this time, instinct given fluency by their previous experience. Two swans curling their necks around each other could not have been more entwined than they. Even the lightest touch of a fingertip on her earlobe was sending shivers all over.

“Tom?” She asked.

“It was either this or kissing you in full view of everyone else in class,” he answered.

His voice was low, far from the even, measured tone she was used to hearing. She had caused that—made him lose his vaunted control. Hermione could feel heat flooding her cheeks and was damn
sure she was blushing. She was about to cover her face with her hand when he took her fingers in his grasp and pulled it away, his gaze dark. The kiss that came next didn’t exactly surprise her, but her reaction to it did. She reached out to him without the hesitation she thought she’d have and the fire burning between them was just as intense as before.

Where their encounter after the Defence class was the product of their competitive edge, mutual attraction and excess adrenaline, their current closeness was wrapped with an intimacy that was yet unfamiliar and at the same time exhilarating. The sense of wonder she could feel in his meticulous exploration was another step towards her falling for him. She might as well walk away now if she wished to stop the slow dance towards the inevitable conclusion of a partnership such as theirs.

(How many people can Hermione Granger, Curie, talk about everything and nothing with? She knew too many things, loved too many of them to wish to always pretend that they are not part of her. How many people can Tom Riddle speak without holding back the breadth of his intelligence and without any of his masks? For surely, even one as accomplished as he must find pretending to be completely human all the time to be tiring).

Yet now, she didn’t want to walk away. That was another thing that had started changing, had changed. She no longer wanted to simply walk away from him, from Hogwarts, from this mess of an unknown past world.

“What brought this about?” Her voice was barely above a whisper, “not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

He nipped lightly on her earlobe and she shifted her hands that were in his trouser pocket strategically. She took the strained groan as a victory on her side.

“You were being you,” he murmured.

Her brows creased. “Are we using zen koans now? That’s not an—ah!”

His tongue was on a particular spot below her ear that was her absolute weak point and he was giving a particularly intense open-mouthed kiss to her neck there. She grabbed his hips to stop from sliding down the wall, but the side effect of that was to grind them against each other. She wasn’t the only one who was losing control of their breathing at that point, or who was reflexively moving against each other. She was sure that neither of them was fit to return to the classroom right now.

“You have such interesting insights,” he said this to her clavicle. Hermione had stopped noticing how many buttons he’d skimmed open after the first two. “It occurred to me, that it would take a lifetime to hear of all the things you’ve known and seen in your future sight. Even then, it still might not be enough. Yet I still want them.”

“I want them all. I want all your years, Hermione—give them to me. In lieu of a payment, I’ll share all the wonders I’ll find. You can have your pick of the territories, objects, I’ll discover and win.”

His voice was charismatic and commanding.

She was holding her breath without knowing. Hermione carefully cradled his face, tilting it up because of the sudden need to see his eyes. It was the full darkness of a moonless night and at the same time the stars of his mind shone unhindered in their brilliance. For it was impossible to see the thousand unusual facets of Tom Riddle when he is presenting the serene full moon of normalcy to the world.
“All my years, Tom?”

“Of course. Why ever not?” He replied. For Tom, that was almost carefree.

*He was simply saying the first thing that came to his mind,* she thought with a strange sort of surprise.

The oddest sort of relief flowing through her. It was the realisation that she had begun hoping and that it was only now that she felt she could *allow* herself to let that hope be—to not let herself be constantly overruled by fear.

When she kissed him again, she was high on giddiness—free from her worries and too eager to share it. He accepted her joy gleefully, with the frank appreciation of one who was unapologetic in his greed. For someone who always had a number of plans in play at any time, she knew that when he was with her, beyond their discussions, he had nothing else in mind but to lose himself in her.

Tom followed the lines of her shoulder carefully, alternating between kisses and nips. He was determined in his attention to her reactions; how she clutched him harder, or pulled him back up cover his mouth with hers, or retaliated at a different spot she’d found on him. That one time when his roaming hands managed to make them both *move* to hit a particularly sweet friction, she was sure she bit his shoulder hard. Yet beyond his initial shortness of breath, what she noticed about his following chuckle was how satisfied he was for pulling the response from her as he searched for more. There was something flattering about his singlemindedness.

Hermione knew there were still challenges ahead. Grindelwald was still *out there,* but for now it felt manageable. While she was ambivalent about the relentless draw she felt to him, she’d only understood now that on his side, he never did much care to split hairs over whatever it was that he felt (morbid curiosity? An intense need to avoid his death? To gain yet another competent player to his side? An acceptable target for his hormones?) For all the complexity of his mind, his principle in life was actually rather straightforward—if he wanted something, he’d take it.

When she drew back, doing her best to regulate her breathing, his hand was right below the curve of her breast while she had just left scratches down his back under his shirt. He didn’t even seem to notice that last detail.

“You know that you’re doing this out of order, right?” She finally managed to say. “I think there needs to be at least a few dates in before you jump a girl with a proposal.”

She was only half-joking when she said it, as her curiosity drove her to provoke him and see how he would react.

Tom seemed to find her statement slightly unexpected, but he didn’t seem to consider her conclusion as strange. That he could just back away from it did not seem to even be in his mind.

“Tradition tends to be inefficient, even when the solution seems bloody obvious,” He remarked, but he hadn’t stopped running his hands up and down her side. It was nice, though at the same time it made thinking difficult.

“That’s your primary *reason* for spontaneously offering to tie our lives together? Because it’s more efficient?” She asked in mock outrage.

He shrugged, lips rising on one side. “Well, it *is* a good reason.”

That was when Hermione noticed that her shirt was open all the way, and even if they were in a nook, it still opened to the hallway. She sighed and started buttoning it up again.
“Well, I really can’t think anything too complicated right now when you’re doing that.” He smirked, but didn’t stop, only moving his hands outside her shirt. “What I do know, is that we’re not going back to meet Melchior or Pendleton right now. There’s just no way we can walk back in and look innocent and I’m not in the mood to face anyone’s nosiness. What we’re going to do, is find an empty classroom, lock it and snog as much as we want.”

“You really enjoy ordering people around, don’t you?” He asked, amused.

“It’s not a real order if I’m just saying what people want. You can always disagree if you don’t want to.” She pointed out. As if anyone ever managed to make Tom Riddle do anything he didn’t want—she had no doubt that anyone who did manage would find reasons to regret it sooner or later.

He slipped his hand in hers and started striding away with her in tow. As she’d expected, she had read him well enough to know his answer before she made her suggestion.

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When Hermione had gone with Professor Merrythought to Diagon Alley to get her basic school supplies, one of the extra things she picked up were two or three cheap necklaces.

Some had a copper pendant, others pewter. She didn’t actually pay much attention to their details, as the main reason she picked them was because she wanted a practical wearable to anchor a charm into that a Finite or two wouldn’t take it down.

Oh, sure, considering how small they are and how ordinary the metals were, the charms would probably only last a day at most before dissipating on their own. Even if a Finite didn’t take it down, four of them might. If she were a bit more skilled in fitting the charm to the trinket, it could take ten Finite. But she wasn’t trying to make a proper enchanted object of any sort. What she needed was a convenient placeholder for a charm, so that she’d get a sturdier charm than usual.

Hermione was wearing the copper four-leaf clover one right now. She thought the first charm she’d plant on one of the trinkets was an invisible bubble-head charm (perhaps as a preparation for serious duel, maybe to run through a burning building—who knows?) The last thing she expected was the charm to hide hickeys of all things—the first time she did that was when she went back to her dorm after her fight with Tom at ADADA class.

Tom gave a look of recognition the first time he saw the visible marks on her skin disappeared when she wore it.

“Ah, so that’s what it’s for.” He’d mused.

“Well, how did you do it?” She asked.

Hermione was pretty sure she left a mark or two on his neck too before now and she hadn’t seen it when he was still fully dressed. Strands of his black hair fell over his forehead and Hermione felt the weird satisfaction of a job well done at that—she’d been running her hands through his hair and she was pretty sure she’d tugged more than once too.

“I cast it on my tie, of course.”

“But—it isn’t even metal.” Hermione disagreed. On the other hand, she might just be jealous that she didn’t think of using something that was already part of her uniform—but no, it wouldn’t work with fabric. They don’t retain or bind magic easily on them.
"Not the tie itself precisely, but the tie pin is. That’s the locus. The bound charm does treat them as one unit, and as such it does not take effect until I tie it."

Tom was wearing his shirt unbuttoned and had draped his tie casually over his shoulders to demonstrate that no, the charm didn’t take effect. She could still see the reddened marks on the left side of his neck, or that vague smudge over his right shoulder (a bite). Her fingers were twitching for an entirely different reason. Mostly because she was holding back the urge to slide her hands underneath his shirt.

"No wonder your tie is always impeccable,” she muttered. He smirked.

She decided that she was going to wipe that smug look from his face. As his expression lit up when she stalked towards him, it was clear that he wasn’t going to gainsay her on her methods.

They did find an abandoned classroom not far from the one the Search was going to be headquartered at. It wasn’t as if the whole wing wasn’t practically filled with classrooms. The door was hit with something like five locking charms between the two of them in less than ten seconds (no mere Alohomora was going to take that down), before they quickly resumed where they left off.

The other thing she found out was that there were apparently upsides to being a teenager again. If the new extremes of her moods were something she found annoying and had to adjust to, the same cocktail of hormones rich in her blood made experimentations such as these a heady experience. Every touch somehow felt more vivid. She suspected that it was akin to the experience of using microscopically small doses of mind-altering substances beforehand (psilocybin in hallucinogenic mushrooms, maybe?) Except this one doesn’t even have damaging long-term effects!

Well, the main effects of going through puberty was adulthood, but she was sure that the common unpleasant side effects of that were well known already (a life of quiet desperation, anyone?)

They did actually end up doing more than snog, though not the horizontal tango itself. It was more than Hermione had planned for. Yet even as she thought back to it now, it hadn’t been entirely unexpected for both of them. She couldn’t find it in her to regret it either. She didn’t know whether the hormones also meant she was more reckless than she would be if she was still her old self (if anyone asked her about her mental age right now, her answer would be a straight out ‘I have no idea’).

But she wasn’t exactly the same person as that Hermione anymore either, was she?

The Sorting Hat had pointed out that not remembering the latter years (a decade? More?) of her life was a blessing in disguise. A fresh start was certainly easier when she did not have to carry the weight of years and years’ worth of sorrow. She still felt the loss of her memories, but she couldn’t argue with the Sorting Hat’s reasoning.

Her current life inexplicably included Tom Riddle in it, and now their belligerent friendship was evolving into something else. Yet seriously, was the world going to be destroyed if she didn’t stay away from him? No. Would people end up dead or dying? A solid no on that front as well. Was she still going to fight anyone trying to become a dark lord in Britain? Whoever it was, even Tom? Hell yes. There was no change in her determination there either. Regardless of what the Daily Prophet used to think before she was thrown here, her private life is thus no one else’s business.

What Hermione found to be rather inconvenient right now was the shift that happened yet again between them, forcing her to knock all her assumptions off their shelves and start to restack them one by one again in a new order.
She hadn’t, after all, expected Tom to be completely unconcerned that he found her far more interesting than anyone else he’d known. Neither did she expected him to consider keeping her close as a wholly reasonable decision in that light. Who cares about what other people think? He’d said. Puppets that exist simply to populate the world don’t get a say in his life, he’d stated to her surprise. It wasn’t as if he needed to be concerned that people would threaten her life more than he’d be concerned for his own; she could take care of herself just fine. He didn’t seem to care much that her principles could easily be opposite his for some things either.

Considering they had consciously and intentionally spent an hour together in an empty classroom in activities that Lakshmi had laconically described as ‘clothing optional’, saying that they’re merely ‘good friends’ sounded like a bad excuse even in her head. Add the time after the ADADA fight as well as tomorrow’s planned date, and the explanation was as flimsy as damp tissue. Hermione resigned herself to not being able to use her old and nicely convenient answer without outright lying. And she’d already promised she wouldn’t lie to herself for a myriad of very good reasons.

She sighed, running a hand through her thick curls.

_Dammit. Adjustment time it is, then._

So, should she go back to the Ravenclaw Tower and do other things while she waited for dinner time to roll over? _No, I swear Lakshmi has a sixth sense for gossip._ That particular dormmate of hers would keep poking and picking until Hermione blurted something. Nope. She decided that she might as well drop in at the infirmary and see Nurse Edelstein. Maybe Maggie had some interesting news to share about St. Mungo’s. Who knows? She certainly wanted to know.

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The long slanting rays of the sun lit up the infirmary’s hall and added touches of gold to the white linens of the beds. No lanterns have yet been lit at the moment. Maggie Edelstein’s copper hair blazed under the favourable light, granting her a crown that seemed to be made of flickering flame. With her confident stride, she truly was a queen of her realm.

“Maggie!”

“Hermione, what brings you here?”

“Why the long face?” Hermione halted before she was too close.

The head nurse rolled her eyes. “Every time you came here, you’re either wounded or someone else has been wounded. Or, in the case of the Ministry Massacre, _a tragedy_ just took place. You’re asking me why I tensed the moment I saw you?”

“It’s a social visit!” Hermione insisted, and a smile grew on Nurse Edelstein’s face.

“Oh, fine. Come over. No one is having accidents on quidditch practice. No blown up or melted cauldrons among the first and second year potions class these last few days, thank goodness, so I suppose I _am_ quite free right now.”

“Great. I just thought I’d drop by.”

“Really?”

Hermione could hear the scepticism even if she couldn’t see Maggie’s face right now. They were walking side-by-side towards the infirmary office.
“Well, I was wondering how the project at St. Mungo’s went. Did the classes held on wound inflicted by muggle weapons make a difference? Was there a difference on whether it was the newer and more junior medical personnel or if it was the more experienced nurses and healers that took the class?”

“Are you always this impatient?” Maggie asked with a side glance, amused.

“I’m not impatient. I just want to know.”

“You do know that it’s only been half a week, right? It takes time to see the effects. We probably wouldn’t be able to see a noticeable difference or lack of it until the end of the month, when the progress of the current patients had been checked, tallied, written up in reports. Then, some of those reports would also have been collected and consolidated in a month and then we can read and compare them.”

The brunette sighed. It wasn’t as if she didn’t know that it was a long shot, but she still wanted to try.

Oh, alright. She certainly wanted to dodge Lakshmi until her own head was less muddled and confused in the first place. But it wasn’t the only reason, honest. Nurse Edelstein opened the door to the infirmary’s office and Hermione followed behind her before closing it. The sun washed the entire wall opposite of the window in a warm yellow glow.

“Actually, I was thinking about something else as well. I was having tea with the girls today when the talk got around to ‘The List’. Apparently, making the list of the ten most interesting people of the opposite gender is a thing in Hogwarts. What struck me is how early the attraction and interest began.”

Maggie took one of the seats in front of the desk instead of the one behind it and Hermione took the other one.

“It’s hard not to wonder—is magic making wizards and witches more precocious than non-magical people? Why don’t we compare their growth rates? Does this explain the relative stability of young marriages in the wizarding world?” Hermione mused out loud.

“Young marriages?”

The brunette nodded. “Yes. I’ve noticed that many, if not most, marriages in the wizarding world occurs just shortly after school age. The people involved are generally late teens or early twenties. Yet the survival rate of these marriages is quite good, regardless of whether they’re mostly arranged or not, or whether they started with a sizeable wedding in the community or a smaller and quieter one.”

“Wait, why should it matter?” The nurse asked curiously. It was a good question.

“Well, the more the family and the community came together for the wedding, it also meant that the more people feel invested in the marriage. That the whole two families are invested in a more-arranged marriage is obvious, but the community is also drawn in when they hold a large wedding for a couple. Thus, all these people support the couple more actively, providing support and helping them get through rough patches. Certainly, the marriage has a better survival rate in general than couples that have less explicit assistance from their family or whose marriage is not that well-known and well-publicised in the community.”

Maggie was leaning forward and tapping the side of her nose in thought. “This is really interesting,
but I don’t think I’ve heard about it before.”

Inwardly, the Ravenclaw cringed. ‘I read it in future papers’ wasn’t actually something that would fly as an excuse. But wait, maybe she could mention the other one.

“It was a muggle study.” Hermione said, though the interested look in Maggie’s face hinted that she wasn’t completely out of the woods yet. I might end up being the one making that study in the first place—sorry, original authors, whoever you are! On the other hand, there might be a couple older, precursor works to that one already available in libraries. Hmm…

“So, what’s your plan for testing your hypothesis?” Maggie asked.

“I was thinking that we might work on a paper together, you see…” Hermione laid out her thoughts and explanations that she’d given earlier to her House mates. Maggie nodded along, agreeing easily with her about her proposed dataset. It was the matter of getting the Ministry of Magic to coordinate with the Ministry of Health, or at the very least, a public hospital in London that earned her a frown.

“There is the Statute of Secrecy in place.” She said.

“I know,” Hermione huffed. “But obviously, there are official channels that are open. The Ministry of Magic is under the Prime Minister of Britain for goodness’ sakes. Him and the people in his office certainly know the existence of the wizarding world without having magical relatives or even married to one. And the arrangement has been working fine for a few centuries now, hasn’t it?”

There was still a frown sticking to Nurse Edelstein’s forehead, but for all her heavy expression, she couldn’t easily find an argument to counter Hermione’s.

“Why can’t that channel be improved upon? You’ve heard of Minister Spencer-Moon’s attempts at reform. I think medical collaboration and saving people’s lives would probably go down better among the public than overhauling the Ministry of Magic’s selection tests.”

“It seems you’ve heard about it too,” The nurse commented.

“I know why it happened. People are scared, the threat is new and they don’t know whether they’d be able to overcome it. They’re just looking for someone to blame. I already know all this.” She insisted. “It doesn’t make it less annoying. But if I can start reducing that no matter how little, it’s a start. So, what do you think?”

Maggie sighed. “The last time I checked, I was only supposed to be the Head Nurse in Hogwarts infirmary.”

Hermione almost deflated, but the nurse raised her hand as she continued to talk. “But then I found out that for all my title, I didn’t even have any other nurses under my command! Head Nurse is an empty title here, and the responsibilities are also less than I expected.”

“How did you not know?” Hermione asked curiously. She raised one vivid eyebrow.
“I went to Beauxbatons, dear. My father’s French.”

“Ah. Alright.”

“Beauxbatons has at least three nurses at any given time. Just so you know. So, I’ve accepted that it was just one of the peculiarities of Hogwarts. Considering that I’m rather free at the moment, I might be able to check with my colleagues at St. Mungo’s. Again. I think I might know someone interested in this particular field of study.”

“Thank you!”

The nurse shook her head. “Don’t thank me yet. It might take a week or two or it might take a month. Anyway, what are you going to do about the muggle-side of the study and the cooperation and Statute-of-Secrecy wrangling that would be needed for this? The data from the muggle hospital that you need doesn’t seem easy to get otherwise.”

Hermione leaned back, thinking.

“What do you think if I write a letter to Madam Álava to explain about my idea and why I’d need to cooperate with a muggle hospital?” She asked.

Maggie’s grin was a little unsettling. It was even more so because Hermione didn’t even have any idea as to its cause.

“Oh, go right ahead, dear. In fact, I’ll even mail it myself.”

Chapter End Notes

**List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:**

**Axolotl:** (Biology) The salamander species *Ambystoma mexicanum*. Its regenerative ability is as phenomenal as described, of which I’ll refer you to the paper titled “Salamander spinal cord regeneration: The ultimate positive control in vertebrate spinal cord regeneration” for more details.

They’re easily bred in captivity, as they are highly-studied for their miraculous healing abilities. Yet their numbers steadily declining in the wild as Lake Xochimilco gets polluted. Poor critters. (No, breeding them in the wild is not a solution, since the lab population is genetically too uniform compared to the robust and diverse genetic material of the original populations)

**Planaria:** (Biology) a member of the family *Planariidae* of freshwater planarians (non-parasitic flatworms). The flatworms in general has the amazing ability to regenerate into a whole individual planaria after any part of it is cut off—and the cut off part will also regenerate into an entire worm. It can do this indefinitely, or at least until the end of the experiments ran by various people (no one has encountered its ceiling). And yes, it does exhibit the ability to preserve its telomere length, unlike humans…
**Telomere:** (Biology) A repetitive, non-coding section of DNA at the ends of a chromosome. It can be used as an indicator of cellular age because the more times a cell has divided, the shorter its telomere becomes. This is mainly because the DNA duplication enzyme, *DNA polymerase*, cannot copy the last set of nucleotides of a DNA. As such, the telomeres are buffers to prevent important coding parts of the DNA to be chopped off/left uncopied by the enzyme—it chops the ends of the repeating telomeres instead. This is not the only mechanism that chops off telomere length.

In vertebrates, the DNA code for telomere is TTAGGG, which means that its complement is AATCCC. So, when a human is born, our chromosomes have thousands of repeated TTAGG at their ends.

The older you are, the shorter the telomeres in your cells. When telomeres get too short, it also acts as a signal to the cell to restrict further cell division, as well as senescence (aging) and apoptosis (cell death), depending on the length.

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**Additional Notes:**

*...the experience of using microscopically small doses of mind-altering substances beforehand:* this is known as *microdosing* and is a practice of using very tiny amounts of a substance (say, LSD). This is definitely not enough to create anything resembling an actual high. It is done more for the purpose of altering the way your brain works slightly. Small amounts of LSD over a few weeks can improve creativity (this is based on a small survey of people who’d documented their results at creativity tests before and after), and at a level slightly higher than that, others have reported an easing of their depressive symptoms.

Don’t try without medical advice and supervision. Frankly, I’d rather wait until some clinical trials are out and they’ve figured out the dose range and adjustments required for a wider range of people. Then, the recommended time period of usage also needs to be determined, as well as the time you’d need to go off it before you can try again. (What I’ve read about most so far is usually LSD or cannabis for the less severe depressions and Adderall for increasing focus). Wired has an interesting write-up on this.

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Chapter Summary

In which we follow Tom’s perspective for a while. Friday afternoon at the library, eavesdropping. Tom meets the Wizarding Society for Better Governance again. A conversation between three purebloods of the Sacred 28. Tom experiments and sends the result to Hermione.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is actually written when I was several chapters ahead...and my sister said at one point that she didn't understand Tom's motivations. I do my best to not use his perspective unless necessary, but I suppose this is necessary (or I'm not a good enough writer to be able to manage it without his direct viewpoint yet). So, I went back and wrote this.

On a personal note, my stomach decided to disagree with me vehemently sometime earlier this week. It rebelled and got the intestines and colon in on the case as well. I'm non-functional and can barely get out of the house for around three days. Again, odds are any reviews are going to get replied a bit late—thanks for the reviews! Especially amemerson and TheWeather who wrote comprehensive ones. I'll write something thoughtful once I'm not flopping like a stranded fish in bed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

37 The Dark Side of the Moon

The Hogwarts library is not actually as quiet as people think.

Oh, talking loudly is not advised between the bookshelves, that is true. The individual study tables also value quietness. Yet for the corner area cordoned off from the rest as the group study tables, discussion was a regular feature. Even arguments were not uncommon. After all, the advanced classes are noticeably smaller than usual ones. Sooner or later, people in them would end up partnered with someone from a different house and doing homework in the common room becomes a less plausible action.

This is where the library’s common study group area come in.

The area was bounded by a rather subtle noise-reduction ward, carved on the stone floor (not that many was aware of it, as it was mostly covered by the carpet). A step away from the area and the noise went down as if the distance was five times that. Two steps away, and the noise sounded as far off as if the area was twenty-five steps away.

Technically, there was no need for the Advanced Potions study group to meet there, as the Slytherin members (which was most of them) could easily gather in their own common room. Yet
Tom had chosen the library. Since everyone was mostly relying on him to help get them through the class, no one took the risk of annoying him by disagreeing. So, the library it is.

To most people, it would seem that he was working on his own homework when he wasn’t tutoring them. Yet when he returned to his seat at the head of the table and spread his parchment, what he was doing was actually sharpening his hearing slightly and focused on one of the other tables.

One of the other tables held the Potions Class study group; it had Caspar Zabini and Auguste Murat.

“Did you truly decide to call on Curie?” Caspar asked after they’d gone over the particulars of a potions recipe.

“I didn’t know that Hogwarts’ grapevine is as efficient as Beauxbatons.” Auguste’s reply sounded amused.

“Apart from death and the destruction of a house, no other personal news travel as fast as anything pertaining to courtship. This is especially true when you declare it in a place as public as your House table at dinner.”

There was a momentary pause, and the mumblings from his own table became more noticeable. Tom carefully made himself focus back on the other table and tune the Slytherins out again.

“She was in Advanced Arithmancy class with me. I remember this one problem that took me two pages to finish—oh, I’m sorry, you use the imperial measure, don’t you? Thirty inches of parchment, then. Mind you, I’ve seen people finish it using twice as much space.”

“Now, Hermione? I saw her turn in six lines. It was correct too, of course.”

Caspar took his conclusion with an even tone. “She is a genius of an arithmancer, then.”

Auguste chuckled. “Please, Zabini. If my family, a mere stranger on these lands, already have our own connections in St. Mungo’s, I’m sure the Zabinis are far better served than I am. Even if someone pushed that article about her on the Daily Prophet, you know as well as I do that Madame Álava is far too ornery to allow anyone to buy her favour. Hermione’s abilities are no exaggeration. If she were to step out of Hogwarts today, she would be in an apprenticeship with Esmeralda Álava the next.”

“To say that she’s a mere arithmancer is to damn her with faint praise.” The Ravenclaw concluded.

“And thus, you consider her a worthy contender to the title of Mrs. Murat?”

“Really, we’ve just become friends,” the French wizard’s answer was too light, too innocent for anyone who can think to accept it at face value. “But who knows what the future might bring? In any case, she’s truly a wonderful friend to have.”

“Just friends, you say?” Caspar’s voice was soft, almost hard to catch.

“Yes.”

“Then, you wouldn’t mind if I ask to call upon her myself?”

“Ahh, then you do consider her a worthy candidate for Mrs. Zabini yourself. You’re a sly one, Zabini, asking me about my impressions when it turned out that you have your own agenda.”
Auguste’s tone was still jovial, the very picture of friendliness.

“Well, if you say no, I’d withdraw out of respect our friendship.”

“Not at all. I’ve given Evariste the freedom to follow his own heart. It would be unfair for me to ask you otherwise, as I do not value your friendship any less.”

A pause.

“You are truly the epitome of generosity, then, to invite competitors so readily.” Caspar observed.

“None at all. I’m already in the same House. I believe I have undue advantage. Besides, it is not me you’d have to worry at all, no? Your strongest rival is a wizard of noticeable standing in your own House, Tom Riddle. What would the Slytherins say of you putting yourself as his rival?”

“I hear that Riddle’s rivals do not have a history of a smooth and easy life,” for a fleeting moment, there was an impression of dark amusement in Auguste’s tone. “You are a braver man than I thought.”

“Ah, I’m afraid boldness and courage is not really a becoming trait on me.” Caspar replied.

“Really? How do you explain your current plan, then?”

“It is my family’s policy not to interfere in anyone else’s ascent or descent in power. I have no quarrel with Tom and I will not bar his way.”

“Yet you plan on being very good acquaintance with Hermione.” Murat astutely noted.

“It is as you say, a friendship with her will be very enlightening that one must be ignorant to wilfully let the opportunity pass. Besides, I am still a gentleman, Murat. In the end, it all comes down to the lady’s wishes, isn’t it? Whatever her choice will be, I’ll respect it.”

“And if her choice is you?”

There was more than a moment’s stillness.

“Then it’s a good thing that the Zabinis’ ancestral home is actually in Lombardy and not Britain, isn’t it? To repair to the old country, to remove myself entirely from Britain’s politics is still a plausible option for me.”

“Which is not a bad idea to do if you’ve just recently married and wished to settle down.”

“While that possibility may also exist,” Caspar said, “who among us know precisely what the future brings? I don’t make a habit of excessively imagining things too distant from the present, Murat.”

There was a light warning in his tone.

“Very well, then. I’ll refrain from speculating.”

“Thank you.”

Tom casually plucked his quill from where it was sticking up from the parchment, turned it into a steel quill with several movements of his hand and threw it back at the parchment. It transformed back into a normal quill once it was embedded on the parchment and the table. He picked it up again and repeated it. There was a line of such holes on the top of his parchment. Abraxas was
looking at him worriedly.

“Um, Tom? Are you…busy?”

“What is it, Abraxas?” His voice was still even and unaffected.

“My essay’s done, but—”

“It’s alright. Pass it to me.” He passed his (now steel) quill to his left hand and stretched his right, palm up, towards the blond. The other Slytherin dutifully handed his essay over.

“You know, you don’t have to do this now…” Abraxas began.

“What’s with the sudden concern?”

“Gallus hasn’t written anything for fear of putting his hands on the table. Your…quill, has struck farther than many expected more than once.”

Tom scanned the surface of the table and noticed more than one new holes. “Robbe was about to filch Rufus’ ink again. Tybalt should also know better than to try copying someone else’s work for his essay. It wasn’t you, Gallus.”

Tybalt was to Gallus’ left.

Gallus Rosier, seated at Tom’s left, was still pale. He even had a tinge of green on his face. The wizard pointed to the hole what was practically next to his wrist—if he had laid them on the table just now. A whisper to the left and Tom would have stabbed a vein open.

“Ah, that one.” Tom nodded with realisation. He knew when he made that shot. It was when Caspar asked Murat.

Then, you wouldn’t mind if I ask to call upon her myself?

“Um, what about that one?” Abraxas prompted.

“My apologies, Gallus, my hand slipped.” He replied cheerfully.

Both Gallus and Abraxas stared at him, both at varying degrees of disbelief. The difference between them being that the blond was still stuck at trying to understand what happened while Gallus had made his exit plan and was now executing it. He pushed his chair back and stood up.

“It’s alright, Tom, but you wouldn't mind if I change places with Pierce, do you?”

Pierce Parkinson. Not exactly the most engaging conversationalist, but Tom wasn’t exactly in a chatty mood either.

“Not at all, Gallus.”

“Thanks.”

Tom had leaned back on his seat and started reading Abraxas’ essay, and as such he missed the Malfoy’s heir expression. It was not often that Abraxas regretted having the high position of being Tom Riddle’s right hand, but as Gallus walked away, he sent a longing glance at his friend’s retreating back.
“That was wandless magic.” Brutus Mulciber murmured from next to him. Abraxas shook his head.

“No, it wasn’t.”

“He changed the quill without drawing a wand, Abraxas.”

“That’s what you think. Now, where was Tom’s wand?”

“Sheathed by his waist?” The blond stared at his companion in with scepticism. “No? Oh, I got this. It’s in the wand holster at the arm, right?”

“Yes. Now, you see how he still moved his arm before the quill changes?”

“Oh, yes. There’s lots of arm movements.”

“Those are really similar to the wand movements required for the transfiguration,” Abraxas pointed out. Add the fact that his wand was right at his arm, it was obvious that he still moved it, albeit a bit subtler than before. “He casted it silently, sure, but it’s not exactly wandless.”

Brutus stared at him from three seconds.

“So, he still needs the movements…” he started. Abraxas nodded encouragingly. “But it’s still wandless because he’s not holding his wand.”

The blond wizard groaned. “Merlin, he didn’t have to hold it to still use his wand!”

“So…he could use his wand even if he left it at the table? But that’s still wandless if he's not holding it, isn’t it?” Brutus asked.

He gave an anguished moan and simply gave up. Tom had started throwing his (steel) quill yet again and it was not making him feel any better.

What sort of minister would stop being at his king’s side? Even if he was probably risking his fingers right now, as Tom was in one of his mysterious moods that also happened to be rather hazardous to the people around him, it just wasn’t done for him to move away. The fact that Tom was still smiling simply worried the Malfoy heir more—Abraxas noticed that Tom wasn’t always aware that something had vexed him.

Acceptance is the first key to facing the problem, he thought. He didn’t think saying that would go over well with Tom, though. Maybe Tom was just too used to keeping his steadfast persona as their leader because he didn’t want to worry them. Maybe the Knights should give him more time to himself so he can relax? That didn’t sound like such a bad idea to Abraxas.

He wished that Melchior didn’t have to insist that he had his Advanced Charm study group to go to today. He’d have felt less alone or baffled.

If the library’s common group study area was known to all and accessed by students from all years, the upper-years group study room were furnished less like a school and more like the common room of an exclusive gentleman’s club (minus the lingering scent of smoke or the puff of pipes or cigarettes).

The floor was richly carpeted that no one’s steps made a sound. The patterned vines were the finest
work of Persian wizards and witches and they gently swayed and shifted with every step taken over them, as if the walker was truly stepping over a bed of flowers or plants. Still life oil paintings of fruits and flowers hung on the walls, the stalks sometimes swaying to an unseen breeze or the occasional fruit on a table or picnic spread rolled a little, but other than that, it was peaceful. The windows faced Hogwarts’ farther side—the Forbidden Forest.

What differentiated it from the library’s main group study area was that it was only accessible by fifth-years and above (studious four years might gain access early if they were given the required permit by a Hogwarts professor). There were also the bookshelves placed at regular intervals on the wall, filled with identical books. Unlike the library in general, the books here cannot be brought out of the area—if they did, they’d only show up as books with blank pages and blank covers. Yet if the people at the nearest table had agreed on a topic to study, each bookshelf will automatically be filled with copies of books in the library that fit one of the topics chosen. No need to scour the bookshelves manually. It was all very convenient.

This is why it’s not a surprise to know that the tables have a waiting list by the hour. A booking system is in place—the ledger by the front door recorded who reserved which table and for how long (two slots were the maximum, with the length of each slot being one hour). Usually, you have to reserve ahead by at least two days to get a table.

(It explained why Tom’s impromptu location change for the Advanced Potions group made them end up in the library’s general group study area—they hadn’t the time to book a table properly.)

Some groups convened so regularly that they’ve made a habit of vigilantly preserving their table at the same time and for the same day(s). Like this table that Tom was currently approaching.

“Tom! It’s good to see you here.” Oswin said.

The usually staid seventh-year was exuberant in his greeting that he was practically gushing. It was no surprise; it wasn’t as if Tom had the habit of visiting the Wizarding Society for Better Governance—or the Aspiring Career Bureaucrats, as he marked them in his head.

“Oswin, Emma. Ah, Mordred is not with you right now?” It was noteworthy since he was too used to seeing Montmorency with the two of them that his absence was noted.

“Advanced Charm practice. His study group was determined to read Flitwick’s list of recommended spells and see how many they can master in a week.” Emma explained. Her dark hair was neatly kept in a braid, always as neat as a pin, and she was never without her glasses.

Tom nodded. He’d just remembered that it was the same as Melchior’s study group. This was the main reason why the Nott heir didn’t join them to do his Advanced Potions essay earlier.

“What brings you here?” Emma asked. She missed Oswin’s slight wince at her frank question.

“I thought I’d just check on your progress with the suggestions for the Ministry.” Tom took a seat to Oswin’s left—the one that was usually Mordred’s. It placed him right across Emma. “The one about figuring out the best suggestions for civilians when they’re confronted with a muggle shooter? And then turning that series of best actions into a drill?”

“My father and some of his cousins certainly consider it as a good idea. It takes time to spread it through the ranks, though, and solicit feedback as well as listen to what doubts remain” he noted. “The idea of training Aurors in muggle weaponry went down surprisingly well among the Aurors. The Minister certainly looks favourably on any Ministry cooperation with the muggles, so we’ll have no worries on getting the needed support to push that through.”
“Curie’s suggestions on how to best avoid damage from muggle weapons is certainly good feedback to provide to the DMLE.” Emma added.

“It would have been more useful once we can actually test it against real weapons.” Another voice added with a tad more interest than expected.

It was a witch with a Hufflepuff tie. He was sure she wasn’t among the Aspiring Career Bureaucrats there before, because he would have remembered—Amelia Bones was the female Hufflepuff prefect from fifth year and younger sister to Daedalus Bones. Compared to her more laid-back older brother, she had a more focused air around her, a stronger drive towards some purpose.

“Ah, fancy meeting you here, Bones.” Tom greeted.

“Riddle,” she nodded briskly. “I don’t have much interest in the Ministry in general, but I hear that there’s some suggestions for law enforcement too.”

“We were broadening our interests,” Emma replied.

Her single glance at Tom as she said this easily gave clue to anyone paying close attention as to where the source of adjustments on their interests came from. Bones had additional questions on that front and some other Ravenclaw—Thompson Ackers, started answering, as they’ve gone over it before. Tom simply kept his silence and that simple act allowed him to slowly drift into the background once more.

Which was what he’d intended in the first place, because one table away behind him were two seventh-years. Torquil Travers of Slytherin and Sidney Selwyn from Ravenclaw, cousin to the Selwyn heiress. They’d been talking about the eligible females near their age. The ones from the older, more archaic pureblooded families have been talked about and finished quickly—their families knew each other’s well as they moved in more-or-less the same circles that there was not much mystery to be had. The one from the more relaxed old families or those from foreign wizarding families were another matter.

(“Amelia Bones?”
“From the way she cuts through useless chatter, you know she has a slow-burn fire inside.”
“Yes, fascinating, but she’s too strong for myself.” Selwyn answered. “If you’re a rather placid wizard, she’d have run all over you.”
“No, Sidney, that would’ve been Augusta Delagardie. Amelia seems like someone who would just cut loose the relationship.”
“How about Chakravarty?” The Ravenclaw asked.
“I’m tempted,” Travers mused. “Just watching her walk is…”
“Yes, quite distracting,” Selwyn agreed readily. “But? I’m sensing that you have second thoughts, Torquil.”
“But I’m worried about the possible competition—I haven’t really done a proper check. For someone as attractive as her with an excellent, if foreign, pedigree, that’s practically a requirement. I’d rather not step on any too-powerful toes, you know?”)

It was not long before their topic turned to one of Tom’s interest. This time, one Tancred Macmillan, Hufflepuff sixth-year, had joined them and a chorus of polite greetings went up as the other wizard found a seat with them.

“Did you read Daily Prophet’s feature on Wednesday?” Selwyn threw out a general question.

“The more appropriate question would be, who didn’t?” Tancred said rhetorically.
Selwyn gave a vague hum. “A rather talented witch, isn’t she? It’s too bad that I know my uncle would prefer me to marry advantageously if I want to have the best odds at being chosen to be his heir.”

“Ah, the Welsh Selwyns still has no sons.” Travers remembered.

“I thought that shouldn’t matter?” Tancred asked straight out. “It’s not as if the estate is entailed away, or if the inheritance has to go down strictly through the male line.”

Selwyn didn’t seem to mind the probing questions about his family.

“Yes. And as we’re one of the truly old families almost rivalling the Blacks in terms of age. There’s no such thing as the line automatically shifting to the nearest male relative or entailment. It’s all up to the discretion of the current lord or lady.”

“Pendleton’s line is still older.”

Selwyn snorted. “Pendleton? His father succumbed to battle madness—wasn’t he one of the wizards who helped bring the old man in St. Mungo’s mental ward?”

“There are many brilliant wizards and witches in his line too.” Tancred replied.

“And there are just as many as those that were stark raving mad. No thank you, I’ll just stick with my family. Fortunately for Pendleton, that’s probably as good an excuse as any to keep marrying out.” Selwyn answered with a sigh. “Anyway, the current Lord Selwyn still hasn’t chosen his heir. I was just lucky that dear Stephanie’s a rather frivolous young lady. Otherwise, he’d have chosen her to continue the line.”

“And where would you be if that was the case?” Travers noted with open glee.

“I’d rather not consider that, thank you. Thank goodness my family’s not like the Starkeys.”

“Intelligent witches everywhere?” Torquil Travers made a sharp observation.

“Yes. What’s a poor male cousin to do in that case?”

“Enter a profession.” Travers mockingly replied. The quiet that followed showed how uncomfortable the idea was to Selwyn.

“Come on, it’s not that bad,” Tancred added.

“Oh, you’re a Hufflepuff. You’re used to the idea of hard work.” Travers said.

“While you would rather be an outright leech and useless layabout,” Tancred replied just as jovially, which earned him some mutterings from Travers. Just because he was a Hufflepuff did not mean people should make the mistake of thinking him as mostly harmless.

“Anyway, that takes me out from even being able to consider Hermione Curie. What about either of you? Torquil? Macmillan?” Selwyn asked.

There was the long pause of weighted consideration. In the quiet, the discussion on the table about just how relevant knowing muggle weaponry would be for wizards and witches were going on in full swing. Amelia Bones was vehement in preparing for all possibilities. Tom listened long enough to keep up with the discussion’s thread before he focused back on the conversation two tables down behind him.
“Too bad she’s a halfblood,” Travers noted. “My pater’s not keen on diluting the blood either.”

Tancred was muttering something about ‘this old hogwash again.’

“Macmillan, this old hogwash is what many of the current paterfamilias and materfamilias are holding on to. Not exactly going out of style soon, is it?” Selwyn pointedly asked. “Anyway, isn’t Curie a muggleborn?”

Travers scoffed. “Anyone that talented couldn’t have been a mere muggleborn. She’d have some of the old families’ blood in her line somewhere. It would just take some investigation to dig out.”

A loud snort followed that. It was most probably Tancred again.

“So, you’re not even going to try to see if you could match, Torquil?” Selwyn asked.

“It is what it is.” His answer was brusque.

“Well, I think Curie would be happy that you’ve voluntarily cut yourself out. It’s not as if she’d be interested in dead wood like you, Travers.” Tancred continued with the same annoying cheer. “What did I hear about that summer home that was due to be repaired five years ago? Not exactly flush in funds, are you?”

“Please, she’d be lucky to have married into the Sacred 28,” Travers sharply replied.

“Or she doesn’t even need to think about it when she can easily join Les Lys Dorés—” The Hufflepuff was interrupted by sounds of exclamation from the other two wizards. He waited for them to express their incredulity for another moment before continuing with the same degree of aplomb. “Yes, you heard that right—The Gilded Lilies. You missed out what happened in Advanced Defence today.”

“What happened in Advanced Defence?” Travers’ impatience was obvious in his voice. The man would never make a good politician.

“Ah, I remember that you were only taking it this year than last year.” Selwyn noted.

“Yes, and that turned out to be one of the best choices I could make.”

“Macmillan,” Travers interrupted.

“Well, I saw the altercation from a distance, so I certainly did not hear anything for certain. Yet I did ask Julia about what went on—that’s Goldstein, Ravenclaw prefect from my year, in case you don’t know—we share the same Advanced Arithmancy class. Julia is apparently already rather close to Curie and she’d been in closer proximity to the event than I was when it happened.”

“And?”

“Evariste de Breteuil and Auguste Murat nearly came to a duel over Curie. It was fortunate that Murat was level-headed as he managed to head it off. It certainly had something to do with how Murat had already asked to call on Curie when Evariste hasn’t had the opportunity to do so while he had even stronger interest.”

“How did it end?” Selwyn’s tone was morbidly curious.

“It would seem that Murat actually urged Evariste to go forth with his intention. His opinion was, ‘may the best wizard win.’”
“You just have to tell us that now, don’t you?” Selwyn asked in a peeved tone. “Just when I’ve thought that I probably shouldn’t if I don’t want to jeopardise my current good standing with my uncle, you bring us this interesting news. Now, my infernal curiosity is acting up and I can’t help but wonder what she’s like and wish to get to know her!”

His complaint and his foppish appearance (hair was not meant to hold that much brilliantine, in Tom’s opinion), and Selwyn simply rubbed Tom Riddle the wrong way.

“You could just befriend her,” the Slytherin among them answered, though he didn’t sound as if he even believed his own opinion.

“Well, would it really matter in the end? You do know that Riddle has been unusually close, don’t you? I hear that most of their insane class schedules match. She might not even choose either of the French wizards.” Tancred replied. He seemed oddly determined to lift their moods, considering that he was the one who brought it down in the first place. Perhaps it was merely an odd Hufflepuff quirk of staunchly supporting his friends.

“Riddle’s ambitious alright,” Travers commented.

It was actually a rather anodyne opinion to give on a fellow House member, especially since ambition was a rather widespread affliction in Slytherin. It was rather like remarking on the prevalence of dysentery in a medieval army camp—it goes without saying.

“Yes, but Riddle’s still a bit of a gamble, isn’t it?” Selwyn asked. “I might not be the most sensitive chap, but I do talk to Stephanie, as well as the other ladies from our circle. I’m speaking about the more reasonable among them, with average pureblood families as opposed to really old and strong ones that could take the risk of an unknown as a son-in-law. Yet as interested as they are, they wouldn’t dare to commit until he has truly shown his worth. That’s still until after graduation, see how Riddle’s career develops.”

“I mean, let’s think about it. On paper, he’s still an orphan of untraced parentage. On the other hand, we have Auguste Murat, son of France’s current Minister of Magic—”

“In exile,” Travers cut in.

The Ravenclaw seventh-year waved it away. “Technicalities, gentlemen. Mere technicalities that will be corrected once the war is over. We have Murat, who can easily be a Minister in France sooner or later, and from an established family too, even if not so old. Then, we have Evariste de Breteuil, who can trace his lineage farther back than France can boast of being a unified kingdom. Now, Hermione Curie is a witch par excellence, but if she truly wanted to be able to have power, actual power, she’d have to marry well.”

“Obviously that would be to the heirs of an established family. Whether it is one on the continent or in Britain, it doesn’t really matter.”

There was a quiet moment as the three of them digested that.

“I feel sorry for Riddle, honestly. Yet if put that way, it’s not really a competition, is it?” Selwyn said. The fact that none of the others refuted him spoke of the cold truth in his insight.

The silence continued for a while before Travers’ voice broke it, still with a slight disbelief.

“She can’t be all that, can she? To have drawn such attention?”

“What I can safely say, is that Madame Álava does not give praise lightly. If she thinks Curie is a
solid and dependable beginner healer, then her healing skills are really that good for anyone not yet in Healer Academy.” Tancred added. “And she’s taken ten OWLs with Outstanding results at the end of her fourth year.”

“Ten. Outstanding. OWLs. Now, you tell me if that’s a mere exaggeration of her skills.” The Hufflepuff finished with a flourish.

“I wonder how her bedside manner is like,” Travers slightly vacant tone implied that his thoughts had gone beyond just considering bedside manners.

“Merlin, Torquil, I thought you’d just said that your pater wasn’t keen on you ‘diluting your blood’!” Exasperation was clear in Selwyn’s voice.

“It doesn’t mean I wouldn’t be having some regrets. Or are you saying that you’ve never really thought of approaching Chakravarty, regardless of the number of people from old families that you’d suddenly find yourself rivals to? Or that Delacour witch?” The Slytherin replied defensively.

Tom pulled himself back to the discussion, abruptly losing interest in the further chatter of the three upper-years from the Sacred 28 families. The discussion of the Aspiring Ministry Bureaucrats, on the other hand, seemed to be going back to an issue they’re tread over before.

“Why are we taking issue with the Statute of Secrecy yet again?” Tom finally asked.

“It would be a concern if we’re to get muggles to train Aurors in their weapons.” It was another Ravenclaw who spoke up.

“The muggle Prime Minister and his staff knows about the wizarding world and they had no magical family members, do they?” Tom replied. “I’m sure someone on their end can find some discreet members of their law enforcement. It’s not as if we can’t settle a loose end ourselves if the person proved to be untrustworthy. There’s also no need to practise on an actual magical location—they can find some neutral ground to use temporarily.”

“B-But-but, the Statute—”

“If you’d rather rigorously enforce the Statute over the survival of the wizarding world, please, be my guest.” This time, he did not bother holding back his pointed retort. It might be why more than one person was taken aback (of course, none of them were Slytherins). Bones was not one of them as she looked vindicated instead.

“Thank you, Riddle. I’ve been trying to say that all this time.” Amelia Bones said as she stopped gritting her teeth.

“Good luck to you, then, Amelia. If you’re all still about to go in circles for a while, then I’m afraid I’ll have to take my leave for now. Ladies, Gentlemen.” With a sharp nod in a general direction, Tom stood up and walked away. He could hear the previous Ravenclaw asking someone else on the table.

“Have you ever seen Riddle that impatient?”

Amelia scoffed loudly. “Please. He only had to listen. I had to defend a perfectly reasonable proposition all this time. What do you think I’m feeling right now?”

‘-

Keep a rough and uncut diamond as it is, and the ignorant cannot see it beyond a piece of rock.
Tom did not expect the purebloods prattling about their inane social life would ever be relevant enough to irritate him. He knew Hermione and they didn’t. He was fully aware that their blather scarcely mattered in the grand scheme of things.

Yet knowing did not alleviate his testiness much.

All that she’d seen in his future never caused her to fear him—a reaction that almost no other wizards or witches would make. Oh, as someone who’d grown to command some combination of respect and fear, he’d found it rather vexing at the beginning. Yet her blunt honesty granted him a front row seat to the strangeness that is Hermione Curie—most people could not even begin to guess about the kinds of thoughts she had.

Oddly enough, her point of view also gave him insights to how other people think. As weirdly wonderful her mind was, she could also be surprisingly, annoyingly normal at other times. Witness her insistence on being good. Still, there was no artifice in the way she lit up when he could discuss whatever arcane topic had caught her interest this time. Her smile was genuine when he listened to the strangest of her ideas and was actually able to follow her reasoning about them.

Considering how knowing his hidden side hasn’t scared her away yet, it was not hard to say that she saw him as a close friend. She had no qualms with getting involved in his projects.

Usually, he would not be satisfied with only having that tie between him and a useful acquaintance—and Hermione was oh-so-very useful. He’d seen firsthand her knowledge of things she’s learned, as well as those she’d seen and remember from a smattering of futures. By his reckoning, he could easily sacrifice two of his better followers to gain her and still come out ahead. Of all the strings that you can use to easily pull other people with, friendship is the most nebulous. It has uncertain boundaries and benefits, subject to sudden emotional turns and strange fancies. As an avowedly good person, Hermione was still more reliable than most.

But that was no reason for him to be lax.

It started as a whim. Hermione was an attractive witch—he was not blind. One kiss became several, especially since it was yet another way to bind her to him. The fact that it was certainly pleasant was a convenient bonus.

On the other hand, he had enough self-awareness to notice after a while that he was rationalising. He was not listing out reasons, benefits and drawbacks, and then choose the best option. No.

He had not reasoned out that desire was another way he could keep her close. Frankly, it occurred to him because he was also drawn to her. As much as he wanted to know the events she’d seen in the future, to plumb the depths of her knowledge or the fall that she’d helped him avoid, he also wanted to touch her vibrant curls rich with magic and explore her tantalising curves. Had he succeeded in binding her tighter than he’d unknowingly entangled himself with her? It would not do if she had the greater leverage over him.

It was…it was all rather inconvenient.

He observed other witches to see whether they brought the same reaction in him—they did not. It was hard to be interested to know them further when he could easily guess their hopes and fears. The boundaries of their little lives were clear to him. It would be child’s play to twist one young woman or the other to his whim, simply by giving them what they desire deep inside themselves. All he had to do was find those unexpected wants that everyone had and yet not many had the
courage to admit, unknowingly providing people like him with an easy backdoor. He could have them, but then what? There was no excitement in having a doll, even if it was a living, beautiful one. His initial conjecture was unfortunately right. His interest was not merely a matter of hormones.

His changeable thoughts and excess energy lead him to wander up to the Room of Requirement. There was a possible potential that had been on the back of his mind ever since he saw Hermione shifted her knock-out gas easily between gas and liquid forms. (He wouldn’t tell her of how it crossed his mind. She was never going to shut up about the virtues of muggle education or science otherwise, even if he knew she was right).

If he could not sit still and finish his essays in peace, he might as well experiment.

‘.’

She had almost finished her dessert when her fellow Ravenclaw asked her a question.

“Hermione, what’s that hovering over your shoulder?”

The brunette witch turned to where Julia was pointing. She stared at the white puff and reached out. It had no solidity, felt just like damp air and was a little cool. Eugenie made a soft cooing sound.

“It’s…a little cloud.” Her voice was soft, amazed.

“How the hell did anyone managed it?” Lakshmi asked no one in particular, while Eugenie had leaned across the dark-haired witch to try poking at the cloud as well.

It didn’t take Hermione long to turn to the Slytherin table, trying to find a familiar head of dark hair. He’d stood up the moment their gazes met and walked out of the hall. She knew an implied invitation when she saw one, especially as she scanned in the air above him. It was not instantly obvious, as it had floated at higher than one-story height, but she found it. A pale and fluffy cumulus floated, subtly floating down to pass the doors, before disappearing with Tom.

She really couldn’t help but follow.

“What should I do with the little cloud?” Julia asked.

“Whatever you want!” Hermione replied as she stood up without a concern. She and Tom were on different tables, anyway. Not many people would realise that they went out together.

“Oooh, can I have it, then? Please?” Eugenie’s excitement was palpable.

“Sure, Eugenie. It’s going to disappear sooner or later anyway if you don’t put the effort to maintain it at this temperature and air pressure—I mean, this height above sea level.”

“Oh,” Julia sounded almost disappointed.

As Hermione walked away, she thought she saw Julia also poking and prodding the cloud curiously along with the blonde prefect. An exasperated Lakshmi had given up and just exchanged her seat with Eugenie rather than have the blonde drape herself over her lap in her zeal to reach the cloud.

‘.’
“You made a cloud. You did, right? That’s a real cloud and not an illusion?”

Hermione was practically vibrating on her feet. If she hadn’t been marching straight to the Room of Requirements, she might even be bouncing up and down slightly. The interior of the Room currently looked like a Roman bathhouse, pool included. It was only the presence of the cloud above the waters that was irregular. Truthfully, it took more work than was visible to maintain it outside of the Room, where he could set the precise atmospheric conditions to sustain its existence.

Tom watched her with amusement.

“Yes, I did, and yes, that’s a real cloud.”

She squealed. He didn’t know that her voice could reach those frequencies. As she’d practically leapt and threw her arms around him, he certainly wasn’t complaining now. Of course, he also stole a kiss or three (why wouldn’t he? Her curves were right against him and she was very willing.)

“How did you make it?” Hermione asked as she drew away with flushed cheeks and bright eyes.

The witch was not the slightest bit distracted from her quest to follow her curiosity, brown eyes completely focused on him. Not even the fact that he was unbuttoning her shirt yet again pulled her away. His right hand was untucking it as subtly as possible from her skirt.

“It was your rapid use of Vapora to create your knock-out gas, and then Condensa to liquify and bottle it that inspired me.”

“But I didn’t make a cloud.” She breathed out.

“And yet what is a cloud but the results of evaporation and condensation?” He asked, as if what he did was truly that simple. (It wasn’t, but a magician always acts as if his miracles are effortless).

Hermione kissed him intensely, out of her own volition. It was sweeter now and stronger than wine, because he knew no one else had managed to win her favour as much as he had. She was not a flighty socialite easily won with trifles, nor was she a love-struck girl who’d swoon at sweet-nothings and borrowed verses. His fingers skimmed the skin of her waist, soft and warm with life, revelled in the way she clung to his shoulder and kept them close.

“You have got to show me how you did that.” She said. He quirked an eyebrow.

“Do I?”

“Tom!”

“So pushy. That’s not exactly a persuasive request, is it?” He rested his nose at the crook of her neck, inhaling the light scent of roses and something that was simply her.

“I’ll have you know that I can be very persuasive,” she replied primly. The fact that she made it sound professional instead of seductive was something that struck him as distinctly Hermione. It amused him.

Tom found his mouth curving up at the edges in anticipation.
Some Notes on Wizarding Culture: On the inheritance of estates through daughters in the absence of sons (what these days are known as male preference primogeniture, for example see: House of Windsor/Saxe-Coburg-Gotha), see the wizarding culture notes I put for Ch 33, just at the end of Starkey’s mini bio. In short, I don’t believe that the oldest wizarding families would always use agnatic primogeniture when they’re not even a Norman house (or something even more recent than that). Refer also to notes at the end of Ch 16 on the better position of witches in WW compared to non-magical woman in UK at that time.

Additional Notes: (characters are listed in the order of their last names)

Tancred Macmillan (OC): Sixth-year Hufflepuff. Shares Advanced Potion, Advanced Charms and Advanced DADA with Hermione. Technically, he must exist in some form in canon as Ernest Macmillan’s forefather. If ‘Ernest’ means serious, then ‘Tancred’ is an Old Norman name meaning ‘thought and counsel’. Just thought I’d keep to the same naming theme established by the existing canon Macmillan family members. He is a cousin to Lucretia and Orion Black on their mother’s side (their mother is a Macmillan). Obviously, his family is a member of the Sacred 28. It’s a good reason as to why he’s reasonably well-connected to other people outside his House.

Caspar Zabini (OC): Fifth-year Slytherin. Shares Advanced Transfigurations and Advanced Charms with Tom. ‘Caspar’ is the Latin variant of ‘Jasper’, which meant ‘treasurer’ in Persian. It’s one of the names traditionally assigned to one of the Magi, the three kings that were said to have visited the newborn Jesus. He’s more of the observer in the shadows than anything. The Zabinis are a prominently neutral family —like the Greengrasses. The English Zabinis are still in contact and very closely related with the Lombardian ones. These would be the Zabinis of the Under Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia of the Kingdom of Italy.

Being rather closely located to Germany makes them treat the muggle war and Grindelwald’s dalliance with muggle Germany very seriously. Hence their rigorous preference for neutrality.

I can hear some eyebrows being raised over Under Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia. In case anyone misses the note from Ch. 15, I’ll say this again here: national/state boundaries in the muggle world might not precisely match that of the wizarding world.

Torquil Travers is going to pop up again. I’ll drop his mini-bio at his next appearance.
Chapter Summary

The morning of the Hogsmeade weekend. A carriage ride shared with Gryffindors. Hogsmeade errands to run. There is an Incident at Hogsmeade.

Chapter Notes

A bit later than the usual hour since I happened to be out of the house until now. Slight disturbance to the schedule folks.

So, if you happen to leave a long comment I haven't replied to, I'd like to say that's because I haven't found the time to sit, think and reply. Shorter replies are easier to write on the go, as even some distraction (or people speaking loudly in public transport) isn't going to derail my thoughts completely. Paradoxically, even as I reread longer comments more often (most of the time, thought there are exceptions), they're left hanging a lot more often before I get around to replying them. Sorry about that! I enjoy reading longer comments, really.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

38 Saturday Mornings

Hermione really had no idea why her dormmates and House mates werepitching in so much to help her get ready, but she wasn’t complaining. She just hoped this didn’t mean that they expected her to return the favour when they happened to be going out. Julia and Lakshmi laughed when they heard her say that.

“What? I’m not sure how good my fashion advice is going to be.”

“Exactly. Which is why we’re not going to ask you for any,” Julia said, dryly, ignoring the reflexive ‘hey!’ that Hermione just made. “But you’ve done a lot when it comes to school work, and I’m sure you’d keep doing that. It’s fine. You can continue to do what you’re good at and let us handle what we’re good at.”

Though where Lakshmi procured the shampoo that said ‘boosts shine and vitality for curly hair’ when hers was only slightly wavy at most was beyond Hermione. Hermione wasn’t going to question her good fortune, though. At least no one expected her to straighten her hair. She thought it was fine as it was and damn anyone who thought otherwise.

She did, at least, manage to get her nosey House mates to keep their distance when Tom did come around. Her excuse was that she didn’t want them to scare him off, though her real answer was that she was starting to feel like a Panda in a zoo—watched at all times and with low mating success that the whole staff had to pitch in.
“Not a bloody Panda,” she muttered.

“I’m sorry?” Eugenie asked.

“Oh, never mind. It’s not as if you can’t play voyeur from the doors of the Ravenclaw Tower. I’m simply not staying there for you to spy on.”

“We’re not spying,” Julia insisted with indignance. “We’re helping.”

Hermione had to send her a long, disbelieving look before Julia huffed and relented. “Oh, alright. Don’t blame us if something goes wrong.”

She had to grin at that. ‘Frankly, if anything goes wrong, I’m more inclined to blame Tom than anyone.” What with his megalomaniacal tendencies buried deep.

“Wait, what?”

“Ah, just an in-joke. Ignore that,” she said with relish, turning back from them. “So, Lakshmi?”

“Effy told me that he’s about ten-minute walk from here, and that was five minutes ago.”

“Well. It sounds like a good time as any to go out.”

“Well, wouldn’t it look like you’re too eager if you’re waiting for him outside the Tower?” Celeste Sykes was hovering as well, though why she found it interesting, Hermione had no idea.

Maybe she just happened to be there because she was chatting with her friend Julia? The chaser was already wearing her quidditch uniform and carried her gear in her bag. All she needed to do was head off to the pitch and prepare for Ravenclaw House’s practice already.

“I’ll tell him the real reason is that I have you nosey parkers as House mates. He has a brain—I’m sure he can tell when I’m telling the truth.” She answered—she was sure she had a point. Lucretia, certainly didn’t hang around waiting for Tom to pick her up.

“Celeste has a point,” Julia commented.

Hermione shrugged. “I don’t care. If he’s an idiot who actually believes in crap like that, then he’d just be a waste of my time and nothing’s going to come out of this date.”

The witches were wearing different versions of the fazed expression except for Lakshmi, who had snorted and then gave up holding back her chuckles anyway.

“Oh, I knew you’d be fun, Hermione. Alright, have a good time. Don’t do anything I won’t do.”

“Considering that it’s you, it’s like giving me no limits at all, isn’t it?” She shot back in good humour. Lakshmi grinned.

“Whatever you say. Good luck.” The dark-haired witch said, and the others chimed in as well.

“Thanks, everyone.”

There was this rather large urn on top of a pedestal in a small nook that drew the eye, not far from the Ravenclaw Tower’s entrance. It was rather noticeable, and that was why she thought it was a good place to wait at.
In any other place, she’d be worried if some first or second year kid was going to run and knock it off balance. Considering that this was the wizarding world, she was sure there was a lot of sticking charms put on the urn, or it was enchanted in place by stronger means. She observed the classical Greek pottery technique of red-figures-on-black. Like many magical artefacts, the figures moved in animation. It was a ball game of some sort, and since it was Greek, this meant that all the males were naked.

She grinned to herself. At least the wizarding world didn’t even think of censoring them.

“Indulging in a spot of art appreciation?”

Hermione turned around at his voice. “Well, I was bored.”

There was a rather base sort of satisfaction in noticing that he stared for a full three seconds before he gathered his wits and said something, especially when his gaze flicked down and he noticed the hemline of her navy dress.

He offered his hand instead and she took it. They walked quietly for a while.

The cut of his suit jacket certainly flattered his figure—he had the lean form of a fencer, and a fluid way of moving that reminded her of the sleekness of a leopard than a flashier, bulkier lion. But then again, even the cut of his uniform blazer gave her that impression, and she’d had the time to build up an immunity to his effect on her. Apparently, the opposite cannot be said of him.

“You know, it’s customary to offer compliments to your date, Mr. Riddle. Else she might think her efforts were inadequate,” it was really hard to hold back her lips from curving upwards, so she didn’t even try. Did she have a smug look? She had no idea. It probably was something close, though.

From the flash of exasperation that had passed his face, even if he managed to immediately school it to nonchalance once more, she knew she’d scored a hit.

On the other hand, she hadn’t expected him to change the field of contest. Instead of a verbal answer. This was how she ended up pinned to the wall in the next secluded nook. Not that she had anything to complain about on that front. The next time she came up for air when her thoughts wasn’t clouded by the pleasant buzz, a few minutes probably had passed. Or was it five? She had no idea.

“Telling you that you look beautiful is utterly trite, Hermione, and I’d hate to be trite. Only the most brain dead would choose to say that as it is something obvious even every day.” He said.

“Really?”

“Advanced Defence, the way you move when you duel. Many of your keenest observers are not merely duelling enthusiasts,” he pointed out.

Hermione’s brows creased in thought. She just fought. She didn’t think there was anything special about it, other than how she was good at it (she was the one who was pathetic if some Hogwarts student could beat her and her several years of experience). She had no idea what he was talking about. His disbelief turned to humour as seconds passed and she found nothing.

Tom shook his head. “You really don’t see it.”

“See what?”
He gently pulled her away, slipping her arm in his again as they continued on their walk. “Come on, Tom, see what?”

“I’m sure you can put your mind to it and figure it out soon.”

“But I want to know now! Tom!”

His only answer was a chuckle.

Hermione had thought that they’d set off rather early. It wasn’t that much of a hardship for her to prepare as she was an early riser, and it would help them beat off the biggest lump of bottleneck as the third-years and higher descend to the carriageway after breakfast.

This was why she was surprised when not long after they entered, the carriage door opened again and a Gryffindor witch blushed as soon as she saw them. At least Hermione was rather sure that the blonde was a Gryffindor. Her hair was unexpectedly short at shoulder-length for this era. She sat on the seat across from them.

“Oh, I’m so sorry for intruding! But the groundskeeper doesn’t like to hitch too many thestrals to the carriages too early. He says most students wake up late anyway. He wants them to enjoy their mornings a bit longer and Professor Kettleburn agrees.” The blonde said.

Hermione noticed with interest that she wore mid-calf boots that wasn’t only fashionable, but was something one clearly can duel in. Her respect rose even further.

“This is the only carriage you saw on the carriageway, isn’t it?” Hermione asked, understanding.

The other witch nodded awkwardly.

A wizard stepped in into the carriage after her. His devil-may-care grin was actually rather distinct, and she instantly remembered him as one of the French wizards. The long, braided brown hair was hard to forget.

“Yes, this early in the morning, there’s barely any carriage to be had.” He said.

While Hermione was racking her brains, trying to remember who she was talking to, Tom was faster. He had already given them both a welcoming smile.

“We don’t mind at all, Bernadotte, Victorinus.” He nodded to the wizard and then the witch. That was when she remembered that they were the sixth-year Gryffindor prefects. “Isn’t that right, Hermione?”

“It’s fine,” Hermione said, recognising them from as the French expatriates.

Bernadotte was staring at Tom in consternation. “Dammit, Riddle, I told you that you can call me Pip.”

“And I did say I declined,” Tom dryly replied.

The sixth-year sighed. “Even Philippe is alright. Bernadotte reminds me of my old man.”

“Give it up, Pip,” the witch next to him rolled her eyes. The carriage had started to roll not long after the doors were closed and the latch clicked into place.
“It’s Ceres, isn’t it?” Hermione asked. The witch smiled with pleasure.

“Yes! And it’s Hermione, right?”

The Ravenclaw hummed in agreement. “Anyway, what brought you two to Hogsmeade so early?”

“What else, your idea, of course!” Bernadotte said this with a beaming smile at Hermione. “We need to start coordinating a search in France and Germany, right? And well, preferably any other place that Grindelwald might hole up in as well, but the odds are certainly larger that he’s somewhere in those two countries.”

“It’s better that we get something running soon enough. The last thing we need is for Evariste to try crossing back to France.” Ceres added.

“I think we’ve managed to dissuade him from that. Haven’t we?” Hermione glanced at Tom, trying to remember that one conversation after ADADA class where Evariste was a little too enthusiastic to go off to fight. His reply was short.

“I certainly hope so.”

“Anyway, Eugenie did pass on the idea that he could coordinate the search from Hogsmeade, right?”

They glanced at each other, almost in a silent back-and-forth for a few seconds.

“That’s a good idea, but we know that sooner or later, it might simply be a matter of necessity to have people crossing back and forth between England and France. I think it’s far safer to evacuate the wounded here if they don’t have a safe location in France to go to,” Ceres said after a while.

“And sometimes, you might not have anyone left to evacuate if you don’t give them a hand.” Her fellow Gryffindor replied. In contrast to his earlier mirth, his expression was serious.

“Weren’t the Ministry closing up the international floo terminals? I thought I read something like that on the papers,” Hermione said.

“Both Britain and Vichy France closed up the international house-to-house floo travel. Too many risks—it creates a porous front that no one could monitor. Calling still works because there was low risk and both sides found it too useful. Any travels to and from the great floo terminals, like the one in St. Pancras or the Gare du Nord, are still open. That’s where all the security and customs are concentrated at, after all.” The blonde witch clarified.

“Yet you’re off to an inn to set up a floo connection with mainland Europe,” Tom stated, watching the pair of sixth-years.

The silence was tenser this time, as the two Gryffindors exchanged long searching looks.

“I don’t know if we can trust you yet.” Bernadotte said. He ignored the slap on his forearm that his housemate gave him for that blunt statement. “It’s true, Mignonette. We’d just called out to France on your idea and a few days later, it seemed that they were prepared in case an opportunity like this comes along. Yet it’s not without its risks.”

Tom nodded back. His voice was perfectly normal when he spoke up again.

“Well, I think for now it’s not great difficulty to pass on knowing the exact details of your method to circumvent said blockage, one that I’m sure is of dubious legality.” He didn’t react to their
obvious wince. Hermione had to wonder if her poker face was just as non-existent as theirs—it wasn’t just in their face, she could guess their thoughts from the slight tension of their shoulders, the aborted fidgeting.

*Was this how Tom felt as he read people’s thoughts in their faces with ease for most of the time? Mildly entertained?*

“I’m sure there’s plenty of time later for you to change your mind, or when it becomes necessary for us to know.” Tom told them.

“Why would it ever be necessary for you to know?” Bernadotte asked curiously.

This time, it was Hermione’s turn to try out her mysterious smile. “Oh, you know. *Stuff.* There’s stuff that might need more direct cross-Channel coordination.”

“Stuff.” He repeated, unsure. Ceres rolled her eyes.

“Oh, let it go, Pip. We have things we’d rather keep under wraps, and it’s not really a surprise that they also have some, is it?”

“Ah, right.”

The Ravenclaw witch mused over what they were saying. “Yet if you’re planning on being more proactive in your Hogsmeade base than merely collecting information, it would still be just as dangerous for Evariste to actually be involved in it, isn’t it?”

It must have been something spot on because Bernadotte was actually tugging on his own braid in frustration. “*Melior and Melusine,*” he cursed. “I wish I don’t need to think about it.”

“But you do,” Hermione finished.

“But we do.” The blonde agreed, glum.

“With all due respect, he has no business on the frontlines.” Bernadotte replied bluntly. “Look, we’ve both been in fights. We’re not the heirs of some really fancy families either and our families are fighting families. We’ve gotten pretty good at this. Evariste doesn’t have that knowledge yet, and his family considers that it’s too much of a risk to even get him anywhere near the Front.”

“But the Middle, or the Back,” Ceres pointedly commented.

There was a rather rough patch of the road (or terrain). Sometimes Hermione wondered whether thestrals always bothered with established paths or not, perhaps even forgetting at times that not everyone has wings. Currently, they were all shaken about. Hermione had a hand over Tom’s knee while she could feel him holding her waist. Ceres was faster. She’d gotten hold of Bernadotte’s arm and hadn’t been disturbed much. Bernadotte was less lucky and seemed to have bumped his head somewhere as he was rubbing it while grumbling. That was until colour started to creep up his cheeks and he turned away.

*Why did he…oh.*

His upper arm was pressed against Ceres’s remarkable breasts—she could even give Lakshmi a run for her money. Hermione settled herself back against the seat. Bernadotte’s colour hadn’t quite gone back down even once Ceres let his arm go.

“Sooner or later, de Breteuil is going to resent that and would try to go around the restrictions. He
might even get himself killed.” Tom remarked. He was unusually open with the truth today.

Bernadotte cringed and Ceres was staring upwards at the carriage’s ceiling with resignation.

“Yes, well…” Bernadotte muttered.

“We really hope it doesn’t come to that,” Ceres admitted.

Tom must be giving them both some really sardonic glances, as they were soon either looking away and huffing or just leaning back and closing their eyes.

“What if he becomes part of the Hogwarts’ search team?” Hermione asked.

“Eh?”

“Well, there’d be a Search headquarters at Hogwarts too, because frankly, it’s one of the safest places in Britain. Someone needs to monitor all those incoming data, map them out, list the places that have been covered and make a list of those that aren’t. You know? Coordinating the search itself?” Hermione said. Based on how they stared at her blankly, it probably hadn’t even crossed their mind.

Bernadotte whooped loudly, pumping his fist in the air.

“That’s it! That’s exactly what we need to hand off to Evariste!”

Well, Hermione had accepted the possibility that she’d had to pick up that responsibility too before they could find anyone who can take up the job. If Evariste was actually capable enough to hold it, she certainly wasn’t complaining. It freed her up for other tasks.

“Are you alright with this, though?” The blonde witch asked them. “This is your idea, after all.”

“Oh, we’re fine.” Hermione said easily, assuaging the other witch’s concern, before she remembered to turn to Tom. “We already have many things we’d have to manage, don’t we?”

Tom nodded easily. “Yes. It’s actually very convenient for us too if we can find someone who can accept the possibility early on. Our schedule’s already rather full, I’m afraid.”

The Gryffindors blinked and took a moment to take that in. That was probably when they realised who exactly they were talking to. Oh, they were talking to Hermione Curie and Tom Riddle, sure, but they hadn’t quite remembered that Hermione and Tom between them had enough class load for three people—and all advanced classes too. That widening of Bernadotte’s eyes was probably when he remembered about Hermione’s Daily Prophet article, and they both belatedly remembered that Tom was also still a prefect on top of it all, even if he did seem to be running The Society too.

“Ah, right. You’re both really…busy,” Ceres murmured in surprise.

“But we can still make the time if we have to,” Hermione assured. “It’s just nicer when we don’t. Then I can pick up other plans instead.”

She could see them both breathe in relief. It was probably one potential crisis averted on their part. The atmosphere was much more relaxed in the moments after that. Tom, on the other hand, wasn’t one who would waste the presence of a captive audience and had prepared his inquiry.

He sounded them out for tonight’s meeting.

“Speaking of the Search, we’ve managed to establish the headquarters yesterday. I was thinking of
holding out first meeting this evening—the sooner we can begin, the faster we can find Grindelwald, after all. Now, what are your thoughts on this as well as…”

*Ah, the art of the elevator pitch,* she thought with amusement.

The Gryffindor prefects cheerfully parted ways with them after they arrived at Hogsmeade. Their destination was clearly Hog’s Head Inn. Back in the carriage, they were enthusiastic enough to be able to do something that they welcomed Tom’s suggestion of holding their first meeting this evening. The sixth-years could easily assure them that most of their friends were going to be interested in attending. That was at least one faction confirmed.

Once they were alone again, Hermione took a deep breath and caught the smell of grass, as well as bread from a nearby bakery. There was something relaxing about walking on the winding cobblestone roads and among several quaint Tudor-style houses, their criss-crossing support beams on display for all to see. It was probably how dissimilar it was from the hustle and bustle of London—even as a witch who can floo in to work, the thronging mass of people was still unavoidable when walking down Diagon Alley. Or more particularly, when she had to go out to muggle London.

“Hermione?”

“Yes, Tom?”

“There’s something we need to settle first. You’re going to use the Malfoys’ funds.”

“Um, what?”

“For all the expenses that you’ll incur today. I’m sure you have gifts to buy, favours to curry with some of them. It would be impossible if you were to try to get everything on your list of things you need to purchase with only the funds you receive from Hogwarts.”

Hermione coloured, but he easily tipped her face back towards him. She hadn’t even realised she was looking away.

“I know because I used to only rely on it as well,” he said, matter-of-fact, and Hermione couldn’t help but appreciate that the person talking to her was someone in the exact same boat as she was in.

“But some thank-you gifts are rather time sensitive, aren’t they?” He continued, all too knowing. “You wanted to give something to Agatha Abbott because she was the one who’d found you in the first place. Who knows whether you’d have timely help otherwise? The same is true when you were thinking of getting Professor Slughorn some candied pineapple. He was instrumental in stabilising your condition.”

She was too surprised to immediately answer.

“How did you even—”

“You told me all these things when you were still in the infirmary,” Tom replied. Hermione sighed. There was definitely a downside to having him as her only conversation partner for one-and-a-half week. Well, him and Eugenie, but she wasn’t worried about her dormmate. Hermione certainly didn’t remember *all* of what she’d said when she was feeling talkative (or feeling too happy from painkillers) and she was beginning to wonder just how much of it would stick in his exceptional memory.
“I’m not going to accept charity—”

Tom snorted. “Charity? Charity is a whole new ward in St. Mungo’s. It’s a new orphanage in London. Charity is a four-bedroom cottage for a spinster aunt in Bath. However much you spent today for your errands, I can assure you that if Abraxas lost that much coin falling under his bed, he wouldn’t even notice it. He wouldn’t even notice the loss of ten times the amount if it was mislaid over a week.”

He waited patiently for her reaction, as unaffected as a rock by the sea.

Hermione started to speak more than once but closed her mouth soon enough with a sigh, uncertain of what she wanted to be said. Abraxas or Melchior certainly wouldn’t even blink at the amount of money she would end up asking for today. It was below their notice threshold, as Tom’s example had amply demonstrated. They wouldn’t even consider that amount charity or gift. It was the equivalent to small change to them, isn’t it? It was just, there, she supposed. It was money they weren’t even using. Money that would just sit in the goblin vaults of Gringotts otherwise and not even circulating in the economy.

“You realise that if St. Mungo asked you to prove the effectiveness of some spells or medical procedures you already know would work, you would need the funds to set up the study to prove that, don’t you? You will need to recruit lab assistants, possibly even healers and nurses. I’m sure there are other things the whole effort would need that only you can think of.” Tom’s voice was level.

Damn him, but he was right. There were too many things she wanted to do, and for some of them she certainly needed a steady source of funds. She could feel herself weakening, but she appreciated that he wasn’t even pushing. Tom was just there, patiently letting her sort through her thoughts on her own, but clearly available if she wanted to toss some ideas out at him and see what he thought about it.

Waiting.

“You can pay him back once we’ve figured out how to create diamonds, sapphires and the lot.” He added. “In case you haven’t figured it out yourself, he likes emeralds by the way. Give him one the size of an ostrich’s egg, and he might even give you his secondborn.”

“Not his firstborn?” She asked.

“Well, he still needs to leave a Malfoy heir. Someone needs to keep their nose in the air and lord over everyone else at Malfoy Manor.”

Hermione had to laugh at that. It was truly a good idea. She allowed herself to lean her forehead on his shoulder for a while.

“Take it as an investment that he entrusted to you.”

“Oh, alright.”

“Alright?” He asked.

“We can certainly help spend Abraxas’ allowance.” She finally said.

- Compared to the time when she shopped with Professor Merrythought that was distinctly business-
like, fully aware of the limits of her budget and all the things she still needed to buy, being escorted across Hogsmeade by Tom Riddle was a distinct pleasure.

It began in Honeydukes, as she’d determined to get some chocolate for Agatha Abbott and the candied pineapples for Slughorn. Yet Tom noticed when her attention strayed to a jar of colourful meringues (‘Flavour: Summer Days’, wait, what?). He picked it up and placed it in her shopping basket without a second thought (it was easy for him since he was the one carrying it). Another batch of salted caramels went in as well, ones whose flavours were said to dance in your mouth as they melt. Sugar quills were a given, since she thought they were a nice antidote to boredom and outright sleeping when studying or in class. It was when he’d picked up a box of dried fruits with a sprinkling of sugar (‘bursting with freshness and juice inside!’) that she had to laugh and pull him away.

“There’s still other Hogsmeade visits, Tom. Really, there’s no need to empty the store on the first visit! How would I eat all those candies, anyway?”

“You’d share many of them with your dormmates,” he pointed out. And he was right again, damn him.

“I still have your box of chocolate.”

“There are many things here that aren’t chocolate,” was his answer. Even with his simple reply, the possibility was too tempting for her.

The confection of dried fruits ended up back at the basket after he caught her looking in its general direction for the third time, and she had to make herself walk out of Honeydukes before even more items ended up on her shopping.

After that she restocked her stationery, with Tom restocking his along with hers. They somehow ended up in ten-minute debate about the merits of different paper weights and textures. It was enough to get the proprietor to watch them with amusement and interest, at least until Hermione realised what she was doing and threw her hands in the air.

“What are we doing? We’ll just buy them both and see how it holds up for assignments and notes!”

“I’ll still say that it’s better to choose the papers of heavier weights for assignments, though. You’d never know how much jostling it would experience when the parchment rolls are stacked together.” He advised.

“Thicker would tear less,” Hermione agreed. “But it adds too much bulk if you use it for notes. And I have a lot of notes.”

“We’ve agreed to disagree until before we’ve tried both, isn’t that right?”

She sighed. “Oh, alright. Yes, we’ve agreed to disagree for now.”

Hermione was distracted by the fact that the place stocked vellum for a few seconds before she had to ask herself, what was she going to use vellum for? She tried to remember her vague memories if she could recall what magic might use it but couldn’t come up with anything for now. So, she moved on to inks. Of course, being once too used to accessing the muggle world back and forth, she was spoilt by the choices she had in pen colours.

“What? Only five colours of ink? That’s not nearly enough for the varieties of potion ingredients or the different specimens in herbology!” Hermione insisted to the hapless shopkeeper.
“Oh, you’re a perfectionist about your sketches and illustrations, aren’t you?” Tom finally wandered back to her side.

She made a noncommittal sound. He was right, their potions and herbology classes sometimes require sketching for notes or homework.

“Never mind. I’ll just buy all five, triple some of them for mixing experiments and see if I can somehow concoct a different formula that would give additional variations in the colours. I can always mail-order more for the colour inks used in mixes and experiments that worked.” She said.

“Um,” the shopkeeper started.

“We’ll just take all that for now,” Tom was doing his best to hold back his amusement. Hermione saw the way his blue eyes gleamed and sighed as she turned back to the proprietor.

“I’m sorry. It’s just…alright, I’m just a perfectionist witch. It’s a thing.”

“Oh, no problem, really.” The wizard assured her.

He was surprisingly laid back. On the other hand, it might simply be the volume of their purchase that made him appreciate them as a customer, even with her exacting standards. After the visit to the stationery store (‘The Scrivener’), there was no question that their next stop was to the Owlery to send all the boxes and packages back to Hogwarts.

Once that was done, Hermione felt a little lost, even as she felt a pleasant buzz from being productive. She was drawn by the scent of freshly-baked bread back to the bakery once more and they bought a few of the day’s offerings. It was when they were sitting on the tables just outside the bakery that she began to notice the streets had begun to fill with out-of-uniform Hogwarts students. She was suddenly glad she’d came earlier.

“What time is it?”

“Some time nearing ten,” he replied, not bothering to check for a more precise time. He was aware she wasn’t looking for an accurate reckoning.

“Here comes the crowd again,” she murmured. Her disappointment was palpable in her voice, as was the slump of her shoulders.

“We can move somewhere else,” he replied.

“The Three Broomsticks?” She wondered out loud. He sent her a long side-glance.

“Do you know that at least half of the crowd is heading that way?”

Hermione groaned and laid her head on her folded hands. Hogsmeade was a nice, picturesque village to relax in, but it helps when you’re not a jaded, time-stuck witch of indeterminate age. That she had apparently acquired an even larger loathing for crowds than she did before didn’t help things. It was fortunate that she remembered the Shrieking Shack just now.

“Oh, I know! Let’s check out all the empty and abandoned houses here.”

She didn’t react to his sceptical expression, already standing up.

“Hermione, wait—”

“If we can rehabilitate one, we’d have a base in Hogsmeade, Tom!”
Hermione set off in the direction of Hogsmeade’s residential area. She was heading towards its outermost section, in fact. It would’ve been too suspicious if she arrived at the Shack immediately, but she can be systematic about it and try all the empty and abandoned houses from one end to the other. It also had the upside of leaving her far from the madding crowd and certainly away from any overly nosey House mates or year mates of theirs. She had no worries about him following her; he’d catch up sooner or later.

If there was anything that she’d never failed to rouse in him, it was curiosity.

The first house was an instant loss.

“Most of the first floor has fallen through to the ground floor,” Tom remarked not long after they opened the front door. He was gazing up to the holes that let in the light from the first floor, and possibly even gaps in the roof.

“And parts of the ground floor are holes to the basement.” Hermione finished, staring down. “On to the next one, then.”

The second seemed fine at first glance. Further investigation yielded a second floor that smelled distinctly of mould. What’s worse, one can smell it in all the rooms, even if only one showed clear presence of it on the walls.

“Nope. This one would need a lot of overhaul too,” she said this with a sigh.

“A good part of the walls would need to be torn out if you want to chase down the rot.” Tom was standing next to her with an expression of clear distaste. “The orphanage had a runaway mould problem once, and it was…time-consuming and distracting.”

The pause between his words made her wonder how many weeks the renovation took up, and how much noise he’d had to live with over that particular summer. The hand that held his arm tightened. He sent her a puzzled look but she said nothing.

As they neared the village’s centre of activity, there were fewer houses that were run down, much less one that was clearly abandoned. She had an inkling that the next one was certainly the Shack. It must have had a full garden that thrived far better than the ones in the other failing houses, because the front yard was overrun with shrubs and the path wasn’t visible. The air smelled greener here, though, more pristine. Carefully circling to the back yielded a yard that had been invaded by gorse and brambles—Hermione couldn’t help but start picking on the blackberries among the brambles and snack on them.

Tom only took one or two when she offered him, but he kept watching her with the slightest quirk of his lips that she had no idea what for.

The undergrowth wasn’t completely unmanageable if one were wearing boots like her (she still felt slightly victorious that she’d managed to ditch the damned mary-janes that were part of the Hogwarts uniform of this era). It didn’t take them long before they managed to make their way to the back door. The lock held at their testing, but it was nothing that a quick Alohomora wouldn’t fix.

Compared to the mouldy house, the air was noticeably dry and she breathed a sigh of relief. She’d had no idea whether the Marauders had needed to fix-up the place, or if it was already in serviceable condition from the beginning, but she was certainly not looking forward to the prospect
of battling rot or vermin infestation. There were dusts swirling in the air as they walked in, sure, but at least there were no holes on the floor.

It didn’t take long beyond a cursory inspection for them to agree on it.

“I think this is it.” She said with satisfaction. “Some basic notice-me-not charms planted around the perimeter, and maybe a basic threshold ward just to warn us of trespassers who managed to get through that and see who they are. Then, we can just leave it be for now and return to check it more thoroughly at some other day.”

“We also need to check the deeds. Make sure we know who had owned it before and whether the land had reverted back to the village of Hogsmeade in the absence of a clear heir.” He added.

Well, that didn’t actually cross her mind.

“Right. That too.”

The notice-me-not charms wasn’t that hard to plant. It took some ten-minute wandering around the grounds, but it was easily done. Hermione would have gone around again if her whole body hadn’t tensed. The brunette had fingered her left wrist for her emergency portkey bracelet that was no longer there. What was it? She wondered, as she moved quieter than before and stuck to the shades of the trees. What had her instinct picked up that she hadn’t noticed?

Tom slid seamlessly beside her. He didn’t make enough noise to startle her trigger-happy reflexes, and he didn’t come from outside her line of sight to alarm. He was in the same highly alert mode that she was in. She gestured with her wand that she wanted to cast a spell on them and he nodded. She cast the one to augment hearing on both of them.

She could hear the birds in the trees clearly now as they chirp and hop, the flurried beating of their wings was audible too. The high branches occasionally rustled in the wind.

That was when she heard the sounds of screams from the direction of the main street.

“Tom, give me a safe place to apparate into. Hogsmeade station is too far and…” Hermione trailed away.

…and most of the well-known stores would be right on main street, the focus of all the activity. She didn’t want to apparate into someone. That was a far more painful accident than just getting splinched.

“The carriage house.” Tom promptly answered. “Remember when we arrived at the carriageway? When we first stepped down, if you turn left, you’d see a pair of ash trees a little out of the way. You can apparate us right there.”

“Um, which one was the ash tree? We didn’t exactly hang around to get a good look.” She defended herself. And well, she wasn’t that good at knowing which tree was of which species if she only relied on their outline. Hermione wasn’t exactly a country girl.

He stared at her in disbelief but continued. “It was the pair near the bushes with white flowers to your left.”

“Right. Let’s skip this joint.”
She took his arm, waiting for him to realise that yes, she wasn’t kidding about the apparation, before she whisked them both away in a snap of space tucking itself away from around them. The disorientation that followed wasn’t easy to describe, particularly the part where she was always sure she could taste colours. Yet it was leagues better than the whiplash of using a portkey.

Tom gripped her arm harder on the landing, but she didn’t blame him. It was always worse when you’re apparating side-along, and to his credit, he didn’t even stumble.

The carriageway was in front of them and they set off at a run towards Hogsmeade’s main street. There were still some people running towards them.

“You take that side of the street, and I’ll take this one?” She asked.

“Upstream, then?”

“Yes.”

She stuck to the wall to their left while Tom crossed the road. It wasn’t hard to go against the current; the crowd had started to empty. Even if Hermione was starting to feel itchy at the lack of adequate cover, she hadn’t really seen any hostile wizards (or witches) either so far.

The crack cutting through the air curdled her blood. *Someone’s shooting with a gun.*

She increased her speed. She made sure she met Tom’s glance long enough that he noticed she was changing her pace to a measured run. Her heart steadily picked up its beat.

When she was around three storefronts away, she saw the shooter. He wasn’t wearing any robes, his clothes were more of the labourer—rough wool coat, shirt that wasn’t even white in colour anymore. There were wounded people trying to crawl away and Hermione had to force herself to focus on the attacker first. Others had barricaded themselves in the store to her right (whoever lead that effort, she was going to give them a medal for initiative).

There was a brave soul or two who tried fighting him back, casting spell after spell that seemed to strangely be rebuffed. *An anti-magic charm,* Hermione deduced quickly. It was useless for anyone who uses magic, because even casting from the inside would break it. But it was perfect for a muggle, wasn’t it?

Tom was slinging crates across the street at the man, breaking his concentration and burying him under all that weight. He’d noticed the shooter’s magical immunity at the same time she did.

There was an overturned pot not far from her feet. She picked it up and apparated several metres closer to the attacker in an instant. He was just a few steps away from her now, groaning under the crates. She ignored the shouts telling her to back away. Tom was running towards her at the edge of her sight, but he was too far to do anything or reach her in time. The moment the shooter’s head popped out of the boxes, she bashed the pot on his head without a second thought. The man went down like a rock.

Hermione pulled the necklace he was wearing and pocketed it before she checked for any rings. None. She tried running a diagnostic spell over him—if he still had an anti-magic barrier, it wouldn’t have stuck at all. It worked. Her spell told her that he had a concussion. *The necklace is probably the charm, then.*

The brunette witch stood up and moved the crates enough to get him out with a wave of her wand. She bound the unconscious man with a good use of *Incarcerous.* Only then did she do something to
She felt Tom gripped her arm tightly and turned to him.

“That was reckless of you.”

“Not really. He couldn’t shoot after you’ve piled him like that.”

She gave him a long level stare, the one that said ‘situation under control’ to junior Aurors. He wasn’t easily cowed like they would be, but she could see him easing up from his previous tension. Tom was still sending her that dark look, though, to her confusion. *What was that for? I’m fine,* Hermione thought, *we’re both fine.* Then, she decided to wonder about it some other time.

The brunette witch thought she could hear another shot somewhere.

“How many shooters are there?” Hermione asked with frustration.

“Someone shouted that there was another one further down the street. The one who tried to attack the Three Broomsticks was already subdued.” Tom answered.

How he updated himself on the news while he was also trying to corner the shooter like she did, she had no idea. Hermione could see one or two people who happened to still be in the streets, staring at the two of them in wonder. They were mostly in a daze, uncertain whether it was really over. The wizard who had been shooting curses at the man looked as if he was about to approach them; presumably to thank them, considering his relieved expression. For all his height and serious expression, he seemed young—probably another Hogwarts student.

Well, she had to admire his courage to keep slinging spells at the attacker even when he didn’t see it having any effect.

“We should probably head down and find the other one, then,” Hermione said. She didn’t exactly miss the slightly vexed look Tom had at her determination, but he didn’t say anything against it.

“And the wounded here?” He asked.

Realisation hit her rather late, and her smile was sheepish. “You’re right. *Only* after I’ve checked them.”

“That was good work. Thank you.” The wizard who’d held the shooter back hailed them.

“You’re welcome. But I’m just doing what anyone would do if they can,” she replied easily, missing his stunned look. Why Tom was holding back a smile, she didn’t have a clue. The newcomer was slightly surprised when he saw who her partner was.

“Riddle? Your help came at the right time.”

“It was my pleasure, Crouch,” Tom replied with ease.

“Hold still,” she told the new arrival. If Tom recognised him, he was definitely a Hogwarts student. She saw the bloodstain on his left arm.

“Why?”

“I’m trying to cast a diagnostic spell and then a healing spell. You do realise you’ve been shot in the arm, don’t you?” She asked in a dry tone. It was bleeding, but the adrenaline probably made it hurt less. Her no-nonsense tone seemed to have caught him off-guard.
“Ah, alright, then.”

Hermione cast a diagnostic charm at him and healed the gunshot wound on his arm—it was a clean shot. The bullet went right through and didn’t hit any major vessels. Seeing the practically-straight-line entry and exit wounds, it probably didn’t leave any shrapnel either. Heads were starting to peek out of open windows and doors and people started to walk out again.

“Brackium Emendo,” she cast, far more successfully than Lockhart did on Harry’s arm.

“I think the bone here is fractured—I mended it, but I doubt it would truly set until at least a day. Don’t lift anything heavy or strain it in any way for a few days. Even then, check with a healer later to be sure. Maybe get a little Skele-Gro in for the calcium and other nutrients needed for bone healing” The brunette advised.

“Aren’t you a healer?”

“My skills are only at trainee healer or novice nurse level.” She answered, before turning to Tom. “One more shooter to go, then?”

He silently raised an eyebrow at her. She almost smacked her palm to her forehead.

“Right. Other patients first.”

“You’re both heading towards downtown?” The other wizard asked in disbelief.

“After I checked everyone else here? Yes.”

She would have started moving once more if Tom hadn’t taken the first step and stumbled. His expression was also one of surprise.

“What…?”

Her instinct was faster than her thoughts as something zinged past them in the air; she’d tackled Tom even as she was still thinking. They both went down on the street.

“Get down!” She shouted. “Sniper!”

Fortunately, the wizard she’d just healed had good instincts and had scrambled behind the fallen crates in the middle of the street. She let go of Tom and scanned the street up and down, intent on locating a good cover for them both. Tom had picked himself up easily as well.

That was when she noticed that her left hand was splashed with red. Yet she didn’t feel anything. Whose…? But she’d only been holding…

She looked up at Tom with fear in her eyes.

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Chapter End Notes

Whoops.

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**Additional Notes:** (characters are listed in the order of their last names)

For both characters (to reduce repetition): Sixth-year Gryffindor prefects and Beauxbatons transfers. The only class they shared with Hermione is Advanced Charms.

**Philippe ‘Pip’ Bernadotte (OC):** French with some Swedish descent (still in contact with his Swede cousins). Unlike de Breteuil, his family was never that high in the nobility (they were mercenaries at first, after all) to even hold the whole thing about main branches and cadet branches. So, it didn’t even matter to them even if he was the oldest male child of the oldest line.

**Ceres Victorinus (OC):** Half-French, half-English, with her mother being a muggleborn witch. Her family is one of those that are old (notice the old Roman name) but has always been content with where they are, hence why they’re rather relaxed on marrying ‘out’ to muggleborns and the like. The Victorinus usually ended up in the army or Auror corps.
39 Hogsmeade Crisis I

Chapter Summary

Tom is shot. Hogsmeade is attacked. The two of them enters the crossfire. Hermione enters her field medic mode. Arranging evacuations. Raids. Aftermaths. A prefect meeting.

(Summary applies to both chapters titled ‘Hogsmeade Crisis’)

Chapter Notes

And this is the chapter I’d been wanting to write since the beginning (variations of this sub-arc had been in my mind for several years, actually, but without a solid enough main story to be attached to). Fantasy medical stuff! Action! Alas, I didn't realise how much groundwork needs to be laid before I can get here.

Also, thanks to new readers who are dedicated to leaving a lot of reviews!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

39 Hogsmeade Crisis I

Hermione stared at the hand that had been holding Tom’s back. Red.

Her blood ran cold. The plus side of facing muggles, she supposed, was that no one placed any anti-apparition wards. The moment they were both standing, she apparated them back to the Shack. The dust swirled past her face, making her want to sneeze, and the air inside was noticeably staler now that they had just been in the open air, yet she was still relieved. They were just inside the door—Tom had his back to it, even.

“Hermione?”

She recognised his expression right now—she’d seen it in Harry, in her friends. It was trust. Her hand had moved and started casting the diagnostic spell as she whispered the incantation.

“You’ve been shot.” She said softly. He didn’t seem worried.

“It doesn’t really hurt much.”

“And some people walk around with what they think is a minor gunshot wound before suddenly dropping dead. No gradual worsening whatsoever.” She said. Hermione read the results; a cracked rib—so that’s where the bullet was stuck in. She augmented her hearing and pressed her ear to his chest. His heart rate was rather elevated, but it was no surprise after all the running.

“Take a deep breath.”
He complied. She noticed the way his breathing stopped suddenly when the pain made itself obvious, but Tom continued after that. “Hold it. Release it slowly.”

Alright. No punctured lung. She thought. Hermione returned her hearing to normal levels and asked to see his back. She could see that he really thought it wasn’t necessary, but he didn’t mind humouring her. She only needed him to go down to his shirtsleeves to check—based on the neat entrance wound, the bullet wasn’t fragmented.

Well, she hoped to hell that it wasn’t some type of bullet she failed to recognise that would fragment on impact. For now, she’d just seal it, as well as cast *Episkey* that would be enough to close up any ruptured blood vessel, barring any really deep ones. Fortunately, no harm to major arteries and veins showed up when she checked (various diagnostic spells are actually rather good at detecting large damages—it’s the smaller, finer ones they usually have a problem with).

“*Episkey.*” A few more of that and she was done.

Hermione was still holding Tom’s suit jacket instead of handing it back as he stared quizzically at her. She still couldn’t stop thinking about the possibility of shrapnel in the bloodstream, though. All it would take is for one to get lodged in the heart or brain before it became fatal. It would be highly ironic if she managed to get him killed by muggle weapon due to her interference. She didn’t know whether she wanted to laugh or cry.

“Hermione?” He asked, his voice quieter. She must’ve looked tense if he was trying not to spook her.

“I’m trying to remember a spell analogous to *Anapneo*. If that one was designed to clear the airway of foreign objects in it, this one is designed to take out foreign objects out of the bloodstream—the key word here is *foreign*. You’re out of luck if you’re trying to take out a clump of fat or a blood clot, for one.” Harry and Ron faced wizards, not muggles. She didn’t really have the spell at the top of her head because of it.

Tom didn’t stop her rambling. “Alright. Does it have a Latin root like most known spells or from a Greek one like *Anapneo* and *Episkey*?”

“Greek,” she breathed out in relief at the first clue she remembered. “Like many medical spells, it’s Greek.”

He nodded. “Now, what does it mean? I’m sure for one as diligent as you, you’ve always tried to find the English translation to all the spells you learned.”

“It compels blood to flow. Which implies free-flow, of course.”

“Ah, not one that orders the flow to be free?”

“That wasn’t specific enough about the sort of flow, I guess.”

“So, it’s similar to how *I breathe* in *Anapneo* implies the ability to breathe with an unobstructed airway. Hmm. It would be *flow, blood or flow, bloodstream*, isn’t it? I suspect there’s a difference in the subject—as it’s not referring to ‘I’, the sufferer, but the sufferer’s ‘blood’. It would be *Roi* instead of *Réo*, then.” When he saw her surprised expression, he actually did roll his eyes. “Please, Hermione, I’m not entirely incompetent in Greek.”

She snorted. If he was ‘not entirely incompetent’, then most other Hogwarts student would be ‘abysmally incompetent’. On the other hand, she really appreciated his ability to not feed her panic, as well as being able to keep up with her thoughts enough to be a guide.
“Roí aimra,” Hermione cast.

She remembered the spell now (intricate wand movements included), ending it with the wand pointed at her left palm. There was nothing on her palm but flecks of blood. Even with the futility of the spell, she still couldn’t help the relieved laughter at actually knowing that there were really no little splinters waiting to wreak havoc in his bloodstream.

“Satisfied yet, Healer?” He asked her.

Hermione let out a long sigh. “Yes.”

“Then we might as well head back and take out the one who shot me.” He said.

“What?”

“Well, I’m not about to drop dead right now, am I?” Tom was annoyingly casual about this. She glared at him.

“No,” she admitted.

“Just a little trickle of blood instead of major bleeding too before you fixed that, am I right?” He asked back.

“Well, yes,” she answered with reluctance.

“Am I noticeably handicapped?” He asked back.

She glared at him, to no effect, quite aware that she was good at what she did and she’d been taught by the best too. “I don’t think so, no.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

Hermione apparated them next to the walls of the storefront with the crates.

People had run back from the street once they figured out it wasn’t safe. The Hogwarts wizard was still behind the crates, but he’d taken the bound attacker with him as well. At least he can think under pressure. This was also when she was confronted once more with the wounded people still lying down on the street or trying to inch away.

“Damn,” Hermione cursed as she saw them.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to get them,” Tom cut in.

“But—”

“Is a healer even expected to endanger themselves to rescue people? Wouldn’t it be better to keep the victim number down instead of adding to it?”

Hermione couldn’t help but walk in circles as she thought. He was speaking sense, but she still wanted to do something.

“I know! Watch the windows, Tom. If you see any sign of the shooter from this angle, you can certainly attack him. *Fumos.*”
She cast the Smokescreen Spell out towards the street. When it thinned out due to the sheer area it had to cover, she did it several more times and Tom picked up what she was doing and assisted her by casting the same spell.

“If you still get shot after this, you will not be going out there again.” His voice was clipped.

Hermione was really getting too used to his habit of either commanding or demanding things, because she barely even blinked at that.

“Your conditions are noted and accepted.” She replied.

Again, his words made sense. The brunette witch saw no reason to be contrary for contrariness’ sake, though his surprised expression at her quick agreement was a little annoying. “What? You’re right. If a smokescreen can’t stop me from getting hit, then the risk is too big.”

With that, she set off to the nearest person—a man—who had been trying to crawl away.

“Hi. I’m Hermione Curie, and I’m going to try to heal you enough to move, so please stay still, alright?”

“You shouldn’t be here! It’s dangerous!”

“That’s what the Smokescreen Spell is for.” She said, with the same level of equanimity. Hermione took the pulse at his wrist. “I’m going to take your pulse at several different places now, alright? What’s your name?”

“Page, Ebenezer Page,” he replied, calmer now after she’d assured him.

He seemed relieved at her presence. She spoke to him about every step she did. He wasn’t pale and his body temperature didn’t seem too different from her own, so she eliminated shock quickly. The pulse on his wrist was steady, as was the one behind his knee (she couldn’t exactly reach his ankle with his shoes on). Not enough blood loss to weaken the heartbeat at extremities, and he had none of the faded, disappearing breathing sounds that would signal pneumothorax.

The Hogwarts student that had been hiding behind the crate took the initiative to run out while the smokescreen was in effect. He even took the pains of dragging the bound and unconscious attacker with him (someone should teach him the fireman carry, she mused, he certainly has the size for it).

Ebenezer Page was certainly conscious enough to tell her where he was shot—one to his side and one on his stomach. Casting the same spell that she’d just used on Tom actually gave her a few splinters of metal that made her wince. She simply dropped them on the ground.

Hermione ran several diagnostic spells. Cracked rib—wasn’t surprised with the location of the wound. No perforated intestine or stomach. Good. His breathing didn’t sound irregular either, so wherever the bullet that hit his ribs from the side was, it didn’t hit his lungs. Another spell told her that his blood oxygen levels normal, just to be sure (and she didn’t give a damn if that particular spell wasn’t even invented yet). A few more cursory checks and after cleaning and healing his entry wounds (and sternly reminding him that he would still need to get checked by a healer that knew how to treat wounds from muggle weapons), she assured him that he was certainly well enough to run for cover at the nearest shop. He did just that.

To her surprise, the Hogwarts student had run back to her position after dropping off the attacker somewhere (presumably with Tom).

“Is there anything that I can do to help?”
She was close enough to see the prefect badge he’d pinned at the collar of his shirt. Gryffindor prefect; it was no wonder that Tom knew him. He certainly didn’t look like a fifth year, what with a faint shadow of a beard that he had. Probably seventh-year, then.

“You can help move people if some of them can’t move under their own power,” she said. “But we wouldn’t know who’s who until we get to them. I’m Hermione Curie—I wish we could meet under better conditions, but well…”

“Timaeus Crouch. I’ve heard about you, but…” he seemed to restrain himself. She let out a small chuckle before breaking into a brisk jog.

“But you have no idea how much of it is real. Well, I think I can assure you that I’m a decent enough field medic—or field healer, I suppose, if that’s what you call it.”

“Oh, I’m already convinced now. You needn’t concern yourself about it.” He replied, easily keeping up with her speed.

There was a witch lying face down, and Hermione already had a bad feeling about it but forced herself to check anyway. The skin was cold, and there was no detectable pulse. Considering the witch’s white hair, she wasn’t surprised. The elderly is always a high-risk group, she reminded herself as she turned the poor woman around, checking for obstructions to her airway. She might be able to revive the lady if she chose CPR, with might being the key word. They saw a witch who was frantically waving at them from behind a bench and Hermione had to choose.

Triage, she reminded herself. You can save the living but not the dead.

Even knowing that, it didn’t stop the knot in her stomach from forming. Fortunately for her, she was a witch—she didn’t even need to do CPR manually.

“Zontana Cardia!” Hermione casted towards the prone witch. That should palpitate the heart for another minute. The witch’s chest rose slowly from the artificial power given, before falling down as the diaphragm deflated. If that didn’t help… she winced. The wand movements weren’t that simple either…

The hidden shooter sent a random shot. It fell wide off the mark from either of them. When she looked around, the murky air from the Smokescreen Spell was still maintained.

“Do you think you could repeat the wand movements?” She asked, suddenly turning to Crouch. He stared at her in surprise. “For the spell that assists the heart to beat. It has to be repeated every minute, because it only lasts for a minute, but I have to see the other victims.”

“You could demonstrate that and I’ll try to follow,” he said.

She did. Once, twice and even a third time. She watched him try to pick it up and see the spell fizzle halfway to its destination (she asked him to just randomly cast to a bush—they could observe the light from the wand if it worked). It was still imperfect.

“Just keep trying,” she assured him. “And try it with the lady over there once more. If nothing happens, don’t feel too bad. Remember, it’s not your fault. If you hadn’t been with me, I’d be forced to abandon her immediately and move on. Triage. Sometimes, painful priorities have to be made in the field.”

Hermione hoped it was enough.

“I understand.” He went back to the prone witch, still trying out the movements.
The brunette witch also hoped she wasn’t condemning a fellow student to nightmares if he failed if saving someone’s life, but a choice had to be made. She forced herself to move on to the victim who was awake and waving her hand; she was homely in appearance, with straw-coloured hair, but her eyes were bright with intelligence. The witch was unlucky enough to be shot by the attacker’s misfire—the bullet hit her left foot. Hermione’s smile froze on her face when she realised what the man did next—he shot her in the chest.

“Let’s see if I can stabilise you enough to get you out of here, shall we?” Hermione began. “I’m Hermione Curie.”

“Joyce Pickering,” the blonde breathed out, “and I’m very glad you’re here.”

Her skin wasn’t cold yet but it was cooler and her breaths were short. Diagnostic spells told her of broken ribs (absolutely not surprised there) in two locations. The witch had closed the entry wounds of both shots with Episkey herself—she simply couldn’t reach her back for the exit wound. It explained why despite the worrying splash of red on her chest, she was still relatively fine. Ms. Pickering was quite talented at it too—her right foot was still now just a mush of crushed bones as well as being one massive bruise, but at least she wasn’t bleeding. Her heartbeat was steady even if it wasn’t always detectable from the wrist.

The exit wound, at least, wasn’t a sucking chest wound. Hermione closed it, figuring that it wasn’t likely to do much harm if closed. Once she made sure that the broken ribs were aligned well, a quick Costa Emendum mended them. The new bone connecting the rib ends to the ribcage wasn’t exactly as hard as proper bone yet, and Hermione had her suspicions that the mended ribs weren’t as straight as they seemed at a glance, but it would do. They can always break it again and realign it later.

Presumably with a lot of painkillers—but that’s much better than failing to breathe right now and possibly dying if it got worse.

Now, Hermione just had to figure out if fixing that was enough, or if something else was bothering Ms. Pickering’s lungs.

Crouch called her back in a hurry when he noticed the heart was stopping and he hadn’t managed to cast the spell.

This was how Hermione thought what the hell. Joyce Pickering’s condition was stable enough and she could certainly spare two minutes or three. She fixed up any cracked or broken ribs the witch had with Costa Emendum. She had to appreciate the irony of teaching how to do physical CPR to a wizard.

Tom came up to her side a minute later, as she was watching Crouch perform CPR.

“What spell was it?” He asked in a low voice.

“What spell what?”

“What was spell that he didn’t get, that you had to teach him how to do it physically?” She had no idea why his tone was so acerbic, but she had to be impressed at the speed that he put events together.

“How did you—”

“You didn’t need to do any of that before you left her for the witch at the bench. If you can teach me, I’m sure I can take his position and he can continue casting the Fumos that I’m sure isn’t
“Tom, your misanthropy is showing.” Hermione noted. On the other hand, she had no idea why she found it slightly amusing.

He was unconcerned. “Yet there is none that would complain.”

That was what she did in the next minute while occasionally watching Crouch—teaching the heart-palpitating spell to him. Tom, being Tom, managed to execute it perfectly, even if she did think that his bored expression was a little much. She tapped Crouch on the shoulder and explained the exchange of tasks. The Gryffindor looked relieved.

“Yes, I can cast Fumos,” he said with confidence. Tom simply stood on the other side of the middle-aged witch to cast.

“Zontana Cardia.”

The light blue spark that swirled in a circle upon hitting her chest before disappearing, like water swirling down the drain, was the first sign that he had it down. The other was the chest rising and falling slowly. Crouch had moved to the periphery to continue casting smokescreen spells as well as slinging offensive spells if the sniper started shooting again. Provided that he can locate the man—it was an inconvenient reality that the smokescreen worked both ways. Tom had admitted in a roundabout way that he’d had trouble locating the shooter.

“After five minutes, cast Lumos and check her pupils under the light. It should contract. If it doesn’t…” she sighed. “If it doesn’t, then her brainstem’s already dead and she’s a lost cause.”

Hermione left for Joyce Pickering with relief. It really made a difference if you had a team with you, no matter how completely accidental and strange that team was.

Joyce Pickering could be moved soon enough. Tom called Crouch over to carry her, discreetly casting a lightweight charm on the witch. Afterwards, he added a few more smokescreen spells in the air. The remaining two victims hit her in the gut rather fierce; it was a small boy and his mother. The woman had fallen and covered him on purpose, telling him to stay still and not to make any noise so that the bad man won’t catch him.

The mother was unconscious when Hermione found them—the puddle of blood next to her leg didn’t help matters. The boy was uncharacteristically quiet. He didn’t even complain about the wetness he must feel on his trousers from the blood trickling. Hermione quickly cleaned it for him.

“What’s your name?”

“Tristan Moon.”

“Alright, Tristan. I’m Hermione Curie, and I’ll try to save your mother. But first, we’re going to have to keep you safe. Tom will show you a place to hide, alright? Your mother’s going to be worried when she wakes up and she sees that you’re still here. There’s still a bad man out there.” Hermione said.
“But I’ll meet her when she wakes up, right?”

“Yes, you’ll meet her once she wakes up.”

He nodded, unusually grave. Tom had a jaded expression the moment he knew she was going to pass the child to him, but it didn’t show at all when he spoke to young Tristan.

Mrs. Moon’s pulse was weak but present. Hermione closed all her wounds quickly with Episkey. They can worry about potential infection later when she wasn’t bleeding to death. No broken or fractured bones, thank goodness. She began to think that the main issue was to get blood into her as soon as possible.

“Crouch!” She shouted and waved at him. He had been standing at the sides already and he readily ran towards her when she called.

“I’ll need you to carry Mrs. Moon to the nearest store—”

“That would be the tailor’s shop.”

“Alright, I assume that’s also where her son is. Make sure she’s laid down comfortably and wrapped to keep warm. I’ll check on her again later.”

He picked her up in a bridal carry. Hermione remembered what Tom did and cast a featherlight charm on the unconscious woman.

Throughout all this, she’d been casting her gaze around the length of the street, waiting for some sort of help to come but seeing none.

*Why aren’t the Aurors here yet?*

“I don’t think going in straight for the shooter is a good idea,” Hermione said as she and Tom walked towards what she now knew to be a tailor’s shop under cover of the magical smoke.

“We don’t know how many people are there other than the shooter. We don’t know how long they’ve been there and if they had the time to set traps.”

“Muggles?” His expression was dubious.

She huffed. “Don’t be silly. You were already shot by a muggle weapon and you’ve just seen the sort of damage it can inflict on all those poor people earlier. A muggle trap can be just as dangerous. I thought you’d stopped taking faulty mental shortcuts.”

He nodded, acquiescing. “True. Well, we can always try to evacuate everyone from the stores here—I’m sure they have back doors. The floo is still working and you can’t be the only person that can apparate around here.”

“And then what?”

“How about burning the building down?” He offered. “He’s guaranteed to end up dead that way and we would not need to risk anything. I hope the storeowner has insurance because it would such a shame otherwise.”

“No! That’s just—oh, dammit that was not funny.”
The smirk on Tom’s face told her that he thought otherwise.

The business of the tailor’s shop was made obvious by the presence of several mannequins on display, as well as the bolt of cloths stacked in shelves lining the wall.

Of all the people who sheltered in the shop as well as those who were caught while visiting, she wasn’t surprised that there were the three Slytherin witches she’d dubbed in her head as the three idiots. She ignored them for now, even as she can see two of them blanching when they saw her step in with Tom. It wasn’t as if they were going to try anything with the enthusiastic Mr. Page waving from a little to the back, where he seemed to be regaling several other people. She presumed he was telling them of what happened. Hermione waved back with a smile, while hoping he wasn’t telling anything too wild about her.

The attacker was unconscious and slumped in a corner. No one approached him.

“There’s a fireplace here, right?” She asked the room. There were some uncertain murmurs, but a witch with bleached blonde hair answered Hermione firmly.

“Yes, there is. Why?”

“Because I think it’s time to evacuate all the hurt people to St. Mungo’s. Mrs. Moon, in particular, needed a blood transfusion.” Hermione stated.

“I feel fine!” Mr. Page insisted from his corner, prompting several people to chuckle.

Hermione didn’t resist the urge to roll her eyes. “And what did I say earlier, Mr. Page? You have to see a Healer that can give you a more thorough check-up. In fact, if you don’t voluntarily leave, I’ll stun you and cart you there myself.”

There was a laughter or two, especially as Ebenezer grumbled audibly, but he didn’t fight it.

“Now, the nice lady over here,” Hermione turned to the blonde who’d answered her question.

“Iris,” she said.

“Ms. Iris, can show you the fireplace, and St. Mungo’s is just a floo-travel away.”

Mr. Page assisted the Ms. Pickering who was still feeling lightheaded while Timaeus Crouch had picked up Mrs. Moon, with Tristan trailing behind him.

“Crouch, thanks for the help.”

The Gryffindor shook his head. “I hadn’t been able to do much until the two of you arrived.”

“But you still stuck with us when you could’ve left.” She noted.

“Well, why didn’t you leave?” He asked back, giving her a knowing look when Hermione could only chuckle at his question. “You would’ve made a fine Gryffindor, Curie.”

Hermione grinned, her smile tinged with a hint of something else. “I know, but it’s nice to hear it from someone else. Good luck.”

“The best of luck to you too.”
With that, the wounded were on their way to get help. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. She glanced at Tom, making a gesture with her head towards the room.

“You have no inclination to explain things to them?” He asked.

“I’m feeling rather mentally spent right now, so, no thanks. I just want to sit down and enjoy the quiet.”

He agreed with the division of tasks she’d just suggested. While he stepped fully into the room, catching the attention of most, Hermione went off to find some sort of stool to sit on—she sent a silent stunner in the direction of the bound attacker, just to ensure that he didn’t wake up too early. A witch helpfully slid one over to her and she thanked the woman for it.

“As I’m sure most of you have noticed there was an attacker in the middle of the street,” more than one people glanced at the unconscious attacker. “My name is Tom Riddle and the charming lady that accompanied me is Hermione Curie. Yes, we have disarmed him and tied him down, but he’s not the only attacker. There is still another one hiding in the second story of one of the stores—”

Gasps were audible throughout the room.

“This is why it’s safer for everyone to start moving away from here, probably through the floo network. Now, I’m sure that many of you would like to simply go home or leave for more pleasant places. But consider if rumours of the attack on Hogsmeade had already spread by now. Maybe it had even made it into the news segment of the Wizarding Wireless.”

He paused. Hermione wondered if he knew exactly how many seconds were needed for best effect.

“Imagine your worried families and friends trying to find out what happened to you. Would they have gone straight to the place you’ve chosen to go to, or would they try to look for you in Hogsmeade?”

Tom nodded in apparent sympathy as realisation dawned on most of them.

“Yes. That is why I’d recommend you to only go to a different place in Hogsmeade. The people at the Three Broomsticks, for one, have managed to subdue the attacker there too. I caught up with this as I was heading this way.”

There was a more optimistic feeling in the air as they heard that. Hermione noticed the blonde witch—Iris—that she assumed was the shop’s staff returning from escorting people to St. Mungo’s, though for some reason Crouch wasn’t back yet. Hermione waved at her and stood up. The shop assistant walked in her direction out of curiosity.

“How was it?” Hermione asked.

“The healers are seeing them.” Iris said. The brunette sighed in relief while the shop assistant continued. “The wizard who was with me—Tim, was it? He wanted to see Mrs. Moon taken care of, her son is settled and comfortable and even volunteered to try contacting her family members and explain to them what happened. He’s really responsible, isn’t he?”

Hermione had to hold back her grin. So, he told her his name was Tim, was it?

“Well, he is a Gryffindor prefect. You’d have to be a masochist to accept the position if you don’t enjoy responsibility to some degree.”

Iris snorted, but she also had a small grin on her face. Tom was still speaking to the room.
“The Three Broomsticks is a pub. At usual weekends, it’s full enough as it is, add today’s additional crowd and I fear that anyone trying to go there by floo wouldn’t even be able to step out of the fireplace.”

That actually got a few chuckles from the room, from people who were well aware what the crowd was like.

“Now, as the Hog’s Head Inn is at the other side of Hogsmeade, there is a question I need to ask. Has anyone tried to contact Hog’s Head Inn by floo?”

There were some murmurs of uncertainty as people look around the room, checking whether anyone they knew did it. From the indistinct mumblings going on, it was clear that the answer was a resounding no.

“We’ll need a volunteer to step in and check, then. I presume it’s relatively safe as it is on the other side of Hogsmeade.” Tom said.

The muttering in the room was still no less focused than before. Surprisingly, it was Iris who stepped forward. “I’ll go. We have a fireplace at the back.”

“Thank you very much, Miss Iris,” he nodded, according her some respect for her mettle. “I commend you on your courage.”

She smiled, changing her merely pretty face into something lovely.

“Oh, no, thank you. It’s not much compared to what you and Hermione did. It’s the least I could do.”

Hermione disagreed, though she spoke softly to avoid the whole room hearing. “It’s not without risk. We don’t actually know anything about the Inn.”

“Well, we won’t know until we try, yeah?”

She met Hermione’s eyes without fear. The brunette had to admit that the shop assistant wasn’t backing down.

“Cast a shield spell before you step out of the fireplace,” she suggested, unable to stop worrying.

“I’ll be fine, but I’ll do as you say.”

The blonde witch walked towards the back once more.

“Now, has anyone contacted the Aurors?” Hermione asked.

“We tried! But none of the calls got through.” Another witch expressed her frustration. She was slim and fashionable—if this was the 1920s, she would’ve been a star among the flapper girls. Hermione couldn’t help but frown at her words.

“What do you mean it didn’t get through?”

“When there’s a national emergency, or if the Aurors are currently overwhelmed—like last year—they sometimes close their floo connection.”

“But we’re the emergency,” Hermione didn’t hide her annoyance.

“I know. What if they didn’t think it was important enough?” the other witch fretted.
“That can’t be it. They’re not doing their jobs otherwise,” was her reply. It was unusual as the floo network tended to be very reliable. As for the Aurors themselves…well, she’d seen how dedicated Harry and Ron could be, and the least you could say about Moody was about how dedicated he was.

“What do you know about the Aurors?”

It was one of the Slytherin witches who said that, in a slightly belligerent tone. Hermione merely gave her a long unimpressed stare and the Slytherin witch couldn’t keep the eye contact longer than she can. She dismissed them again.

“If anyone has any idea of a place in Hogsmeade that’s not too close from here, that’s also convenient to gather in, other than Hog’s Head Inn or Three Broomsticks, then they can make the suggestion. The more alternative places that people can go to, the better.” Hermione said.

Hermione didn’t mention Hogwarts. She knew that the only Hogwarts fireplace accessible to floo travel (as opposed to floo communication) is in the headmaster’s office, and she suspected perhaps the teachers’ offices or their residences. Yet even the access is complicated there. It was probable that no outside visitors can enter if not by the explicit invitation of a member of the staff—in this case, it would mean that the floo connection would have to be opened from Hogwarts.

Compared to other places, Hogwarts was a fortress that was difficult to enter, and she was fine with keeping it that way.

“The Hog’s Head Inn is safe,” Iris had returned.

Hermione could see relieved expressions spreading around the room. She approached the shop assistant quietly.

“Can I trust you with that guy?” She gestured her head towards where the unconscious attacker lay. “Just cast a featherweight charm on him and you can cart him around easily.”

“Ah, good idea,” the blonde nodded. “What do you want to do with him?”

“I’d say hand him over to the Aurors, but they didn’t seem to be showing up just yet. I think you can entrust the owner of Hog’s Head Inn to watch over him, though. You’d probably need to explain what happened here to give him context, though.”

“What, that you’re askin’ him to look after the chump for you?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“No problem. Good luck, Hermione.”

“You too, Iris.”

Tom had just fielded a few impromptu questions and had now turned back to the main topic.

“Now, we know for certain that Hog’s Head Inn is safe, and merely one floo travel away. Everyone, please head to the fireplace in an orderly fashion.” Tom spoke up. There was something to be said for the effectiveness of a calm and good-looking wizard in getting people to move without many arguments. She had a feeling that if she were to attempt it herself, she’d probably have to deal with more setbacks.

Iris weaved her way through the people easily towards the bound attacker, probably by dint of
experience. She threw him over her shoulder, what with the help of the featherlight charm, and raised her voice.

“Oy! Everyone, please don’t shove! There’s enough floo powder for all, alright? No need to panic.” Iris said.

She managed to get most people to pay attention to her as she explained to them what she’d found and seen, and that it really was safe at the inn. She did manage to confirm that Three Broomsticks was indeed secured from someone who’d been there, though at the same time she warned that it was also rather full, so she didn’t exactly recommend that to outgoing people. While Hermione was pleased about things going well, something else was happening behind her.

“Please, let us help you.” A familiar female voice said.

On the other hand, Hermione might be counting her eggs before they hatch.

Hermione tried to hold back the feeling of schadenfreude she felt as she turned around and saw the three Slytherin witches in front of Tom. Some amusement must still have leaked through, as Tom shared a mocking look with her from over the head of one of the three witches. It was fleeting, but she was getting better at spotting these passing glimpses on him and other people. Other witches (and the occasional wizard) had been more accommodating and simply head back. Of course, they might just be too relieved to be able to leave.

“Miss Carrow, the last time I checked you did not even make it to Advanced Defence class,” Tom said.

“It doesn’t mean I can’t duel.” She insisted.

“How many of your spells can you cast silently? How many can you cast with abbreviated wand movements? Can any of you apparate?” There wasn’t the slightest trace of impatience in his voice, but he did not hold back his words. She could see that the most princess-like of the three of them were taken aback by Tom’s professional requirements.

“Surely that is not necessary against a muggle?” The tallest of them asked. She was also the one who seemed to be the best at fighting compared to the other two.

The slightest furrow of his eyebrows was the only hint to his rising annoyance. Hermione thought that she could be a bit more generous and try rescue him.

“If you’re really curious, I’ll fight any one of you one-on-one, and I’ll promise to defeat you using only one spell sent at you. I’ll send no other spells to attack. What do you say?” She said. It might be petty of her, but she took distinct pleasure in the way their backs stiffened and their spines straightening up from her words.

“You—”

Whatever the tall witch was going to say, Hermione didn’t know, as she’d cut it off herself.

“That’s a good idea,” Tom cheerfully replied. “You see, the last time Hermione and I fought, we only managed a tie. I’m confident that if you can keep up with her, you can certainly keep up with us.”

The blonde princess-like witch had an expression of disbelief at his statement, but at least she was smart enough not to say her opinion out loud. Between Hermione’s challenge and Tom’s statement, the two of them had managed to back the witches to a corner now.
I did say that this fic is going to be on a weekly/biweekly basis, but so far it's still been practically weekly, barring some exceptions, since I wanted to get the story moving fast enough until we get here. From this point, I would occasionally update after two weeks had passed instead of one week because, well, studying and the usual demands of real life on my time. At least no one can complain that I left you hanging at last chapter's cliffhanger.

Additional Notes: (characters are listed in the order of their last names)

**Jemima Avery (OC):** Fifth-year Slytherin prefect. Shares Advanced Potions and Advanced Charms with Tom. Her first name means ‘dove’ in Hebrew. Blonde, beautiful and taught very well of how to show herself to her best advantage in the cutthroat competition of finding the best appropriate husband (Marriage is Serious Business among the purebloods), she’s one of the few classical pureblooded princess of Slytherin House. Too clingy for Tom’s peace of mind.

**Violetta Carrow (OC):** Fifth-year Slytherin. Shares Advanced Potions and Advanced Charms with Tom. Has dark hair, her name comes from the flower ‘violet’, as well as also carrying the meaning for the colour violet. Twin sister to Rufus Carrow. A known close friend to Jemima Avery and very protective of her.

**Timaeus Crouch (OC):** Seventh-year Gryffindor prefect. His name is the perfect pun if he’s going to be the father to canon’s Bartimaeus Crouch Sr. (‘Bartimaeus’ itself meant ‘son of Timaeus’). Timaeus is the Latinized form of the Greek name Τιμαιος (Timaios), derived from τιμαω (timao) "to honour". A prefect that takes his duty seriously.
40 Hogsmeade Crisis II

Chapter Summary

(See previous chapter’s summary for summary)

Chapter Notes

My cousin's wedding was last weekend. Also, my gut's inflammation flared up just then, in the middle of reception. The one day I didn't think I'd be out of the house long enough to need to carry meds, or can't easily find food that it would be a concern.

Joy.

40 Hogsmeade Crisis II

“I'll try it first.” It was surprisingly not the tallest of the three witches that spoke up—it was the dark-haired one among them. Something about her button nose reminded Hermione of Pansy.

“Excellent! Now, I'll have to ask everyone else to back away to this point while I referee the fight.”

They stood up a good distance away, with Tom standing in the middle with a handkerchief. It was easy to guess that the moment his arm came down was the time it would start.

Hermione stood in a relaxed, loose-limbed pose.

The flash of white handkerchief fluttering had her sprinting from a dead stop. Whatever spell the Pansy look-a-like sent went wide off the mark. Hermione idly raised two shields to hold against the next several hexes and jinxes that were cast, the witch getting more desperate the closer Hermione gets. Another strategically raised shield, and then she stepped out from behind it to kick her opponent right in the midsection. The Slytherin witch was thrown back a nice distance. Alright, I am still feeling pretty vindictive at them.

“Expelliarmus,” Hermione calmly cast. She might not be that good at hand-to-hand, but she did have the basics down. It was enough for self-defence (and kicking prissy Slytherins in fights, apparently).

She could hear Tom’s lazy drawl calling out.

“Victory to Hermione.”

“You used shields,” the other witch accused.

“I said I’d use exactly one spell to attack you. I didn’t say I wouldn’t use any for myself.”

When she seemed intent on complaining, Hermione cut in. “Did you know that the attacker we
fought with outside had been wearing an anti-magic charm? How would you have dealt with that if you’re apparently this helpless now?"

The witch’s face reddened.

“Congratulations. A muggle can bring you down and kill you.” She said, smiling but not bothering to make her words or tone any more pleasant. “Now please go away someplace safe before you get yourself killed. Or even worse, you might get someone more competent than you killed when they’re trying to save you.”

The shorter witch stood up, still rather shaken. Hermione kept her within her line of sight as she walked a few steps back and then turning around to see the other two. It was only then that she offered the witch her wand back.

“Is there anyone else that wants to try?” Her composure and voice were cool.

The princess lookalike wasn’t going to try, she knew. That was why she stared down the tall witch next, waiting for her to move. The other witch didn’t say anything.

“Great! Now, everyone can move on and leave this to Tom and I.” Hermione stated.

“You’re not waiting for the Aurors?” The tall witch asked.

“We don’t know when they’re going to come, if at all. Someone needs to bring him down.” She said.

“And that someone is you?” The Slytherin was sceptical.

“To be honest, she did bring down the shooter outside,” Tom answered with a studied casualness. “Hermione did it with a single physical attack—which, now that I think about it, sort-of mirrored what she did just now, doesn’t it? I’m sure she’s quite capable of bringing another one down.”

Hermione could see fear growing in the blonde Slytherin, hemmed by her two henchwomen. Other than making her sound like some sort of skilled martial artist instead of someone who simply clocked a man when he was down, she appreciated Tom’s defence. It certainly shut them up.

“What are you looking for?” Tom asked her when he saw her lying down at the lowest steps of the stairs and gazing up from the carpet. With most people out of the way, the task of searching the shops fell to the two of them once again.

“Tripwires. They’re not exactly magical traps that you can detect with a spell.” She answered. “Hermione, does the man we brought down look as if he’s part of a disciplined, organised outfit?”

She paused. Well, he was definitely not from any army, unlike the ones Grindelwald brought against the Ministry. “No?”

“Then which do you think is more plausible, that he’d just arrived today or yesterday and it was his first visit, or that he’d actually visited Hogsmeade at least a week before to scout and prepare? And possibly even trap the place he was staying at?”

The brunette witch pushed herself up and saw the humour in his eyes.

“You just have to use common sense, don’t you?” She grumbled.
“I do try.” He said, with none of the humility that one usually expects to hear when someone gave that sort of reply. “How are you even sure that he’s in the second floor of this place?”

“Well, based on the angle of your wound, and my memory of our position, it was either this store, or the ones to its left or right. Since we’re already here, I thought we might as well check out the place.”

She was about to step up when Tom went off ahead.

“Tom!”

“In case there is a trap, it’s better if only one of us gets hit, isn’t it?” He replied.

“Yes, but why you?”

“I’m already hurt. It’s better if further damage happened to me while you stay unharmed. You’re the one who can apparate and get us out. It would be more inconvenient if you were the one to get hurt first, even for me.”

His answer was a dispassionate, logical one. Some part of her still couldn’t help but see it from the lens of selflessness and the way she and her friends would sacrifice their lives for each other. It did not seem to matter to her mind that she knew selfless was the last thing that he could be, and the ensuing dissonance was headache-inducing. The easiest solution, she had concluded, was to just accept what he’d said and stop thinking about it.

They reached the first-floor landing and heard nothing. Hermione augmented her hearing with a quiet murmur and then did the same for Tom. They waited for a while, but there were no steps on wooden floors, no shuffling of shoes. It wasn’t fine enough to hear breathing in another room through wooden doors, though. She dispelled the charms.

“This is annoying,” Hermione muttered.

If it was an ordinary Auror raid, someone would just cast a Protego attached to the end of their wand, maybe make it double-layered, and then rush in. Yet shield charms were no good against modern bullets (Harry, in his infinite curiosity and experimentation, had once found a musket and figured out how to load it. Unless it was shot at point-blank range, the Protego of a trained Auror actually stood up against it).

The witch sighed. Now what? She tried racking her brain. Planning raids were usually more of a Ron or even Harry’s thing than hers. At most, she gave feedback to whatever plan was already in place.

“Use your knock-out gas,” Tom said.

“Ah, good idea. There’s still the issue of being in different rooms, though. Do you think Ventus is enough to send it into a room just relying on the space underneath the door?” Hermione started casting Aguamenti and its modified version that brought bleach on the floor around them. Tom crinkled his nose once at the smell but said nothing, only casting a bubble-head charm on himself. Hermione did it to herself a moment later.

“I don’t think it would be effective for moving air to small gaps like that.”

“Dammit. I wonder if there’s a way of sending it through the water pipes…”

His suggestion was far more direct. “What I’d suggest it to blow the door open from a distance and
then blow the gas in.”

“Oh, right. We can just do that.”

They did, starting with the door closest to the stairs. The rooms were mostly storage rooms, filled with bolts of cloth. Hermione had picked up someone’s forgotten hat, tucked in a dusty corner of a store room. She transfigured it into a bottle and used it to collect the gas. Their plan was pretty solid against what was presumably a single muggle or two, at most, and they systematically continued, taking turns at blowing doors open and blowing the gas in (and then Hermione condensing and then collecting it all back with an Accio into the bottle when no one came out). Another room was someone’s study, and there was also a bedroom. It was just too bad that said muggle wasn’t even in the building in the first place.

“Well, that was anticlimactic,” she complained, before pausing in surprise.

*Wait, I sounded too much like Harry. He* tended to be disappointed with raids that was too easy or ended too fast, even though Harry agreed with her that it *was* a good thing that no one got badly wounded.

“One of the other two stores, then?” Tom asked.

She sighed. “Yes. Probably. Oh joy, we’d probably need to repeat everything all over again and start by evacuating them.”

On the upside, she now had a ready-made bottle of isoflurane. She did exchange the transfigured hat for an actual bottle—she was rummaging in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. Hermione dumped the Pepper-up Potion in it into the sink. She didn’t need the gas to accidentally be let loose by a stray Finite.

“Well,” Tom remarked casually. “At least the storeowner can breathe a sigh of relief. We certainly won’t need to burn this store down.”

She gave his arm a light smack for that tasteless joke. Not that she thought it would make any difference, but it was the thought that counted.

The store to the left of the tailor was actually the stationary store they had visited earlier during the day. The shopkeeper recognised them, probably since they had purchased significant amount of parchments and inks. Some people had taken refuge there the way they did at the other shop. Hermione repeated what they’d said earlier about the presence of a shooter holing up in one of the buildings on this side of the street, and how it would be safer if people were to leave.

Hermione was surprised that the people had not tried leaving via floo. But after listening to the opinions of several visitors, she had the impression that they were expecting the Aurors to come quickly. That *had* been something niggling in her mind, and now it became an actual mystery. What was also worrying were the concerns that at least one or two visitors had.

“What if they didn’t think this was a big attack? What if they decided they didn’t need to come because of it?” A wizard asked.

“They don’t even know of the attack,” Hermione reminded them. “Because no one has been able to contact them, remember? The people at the tailoring shop next door failed at floo-calling the DMLE. Or are you saying that you’ve managed to call them and someone at the other end actually *said* it was unimportant?”
“Well, not really…”

“So why think that, then?” She asked.

“It’s hard not to when you’ve been seeing things in the papers.”

The papers? What? She didn’t think she saw anything noteworthy in the *Daily Prophet* so far, though she had to admit that she didn’t read every single news article there and only stuck to the highlights.

“Has anyone tried to floo to the Leaky Cauldron, and personally reach the Ministry of Magic that way?” Tom asked. “Even if it is impossible to floo-call the DMLE for some mysterious reasons right now, I doubt that the problem extends to the entirety of Diagon Alley.”

There were low murmurs and uncertain glances. No one volunteered or even spoke up, and she found herself appreciating the plucky shop assistant next door. She intended to chat with Iris the next time she visited. The brunette witch supposed that people liked status quos, and they might not welcome any change during already uncertain times, but the amount of milling around happening was getting ridiculous.

“So, who would want to get out of this street first? Iris from the tailoring shop next door had checked Hog’s Head Inn and found that it was safe. You can all go there first and then decide where you want to move on to.” She said.

Hermione was just glad that it made people start moving.

“Why aren’t you going there with everyone else?” A middle-aged man asked.

“Because I’m going to track the shooter down,” Hermione said. “At the very least, it would make it easier for anyone that came after us—probably Aurors—to figure out how to get him.”

“Aren’t you just a Hogwarts student, though?”

“We know enough to not make stupid mistakes and live through the process,” the brunette answered.

He still seemed rather sceptical, and Hermione dreaded the possibility that he’d wish to join them. The last thing she needed was an associate whose skill and temperament she had no idea about, joining for the first time in an actual operation instead of an exercise.

*Can you say friendly fire?*

“Actually, if you wish to test either of our fighting skill, you can just ask. We’ll be glad to assuage your concerns.” Tom said with all politeness, his smile completely unintimidating.

It spoke to how she was getting to know him that she knew he was getting impatient—he was usually less confrontational in the methods he chose to handle people. The wizard chuckled and blustered a little about how he couldn’t possibly ask that, and that it wouldn’t be fair, but seeing the matching bland expressions they both wore stayed unchanged, he trailed off awkwardly.

“I think most people have left already, Sir,” Hermione said. “I’m sure you can contact your family and wait for them at Hog’s Head Inn. They might start getting worried, especially if someone had already managed to contact the wizarding wireless over the attacks. You wouldn’t want them worried, do you?”
She plastered her most harmless smile and gently directed him towards the fireplace at the back while she went on about all the things they could do at the Hog’s Head Inn that they couldn’t right now. She was doing it for the benefit of the other members of the public that had been stuck there, not just the wizard she was escorting—giving them something to look forward to. Then, she entrusted him to his fellow visitors to the shop who gave her a solid nod back. They’d take care of him. It would seem that helping Harry and Ron practise their friendly-but-persistent persona that Aurors need to take to direct a confused public helped her find the right tone to set.

Afterwards, she and Tom found themselves at the bottom of another set of stairs. Again.

“I can’t believe this didn’t occur to me before,” Hermione muttered. She started casting cutting spells.

On further thoughts, she knew why it didn’t occur to her—she had never been the heavy hitters and tankers on the vanguard of a charge. She was the one who adjusted the whole terrain to her team’s advantage, and she did it better when she was just one witch amongst them and generally unnoticed to start her more complicated spells that usually take more time and concentration than the usual combat repertoire. Real transfiguration required a lot of focus.

Any trip wires already have been cut at the point of her entrance, courtesy of the barrage of spells from the frontline assault team.

A few moments of stillness at the top of the stairs showed that no one was going to come bursting out of the doors anytime soon. She augmented both of their hearings. One of the farther doors down the hallway, to the right, seemed to have someone walking around on the wooden boards in the room behind it. *Eureka*. She dispelled the charm.

Hermione held Tom back before he walked in that direction.

“Might as well clear the rest of the rooms to be sure. We don’t need a surprise attack on our rear when we least expect it.”

Well, at the very least they’ve gotten their routine down pat as they each put on a bubble-head charm. Tom was eyeing the wand movements for her invisible bubble-head charm, and she had the unsettling feeling that he’d be able to cast it himself after he watched it for just one more time.

Knowing that there was one room with audible human presence made them feel more confident that the rest was generally empty, so even if she did let loose her knock-out gas, there was no blowing doors open (that would be noisy, anyway). By the third room, it was starting to feel a tad routine that Hermione was worried her alertness would go down. She was glad that it was only the room with the sound of footsteps that was left now (there was one other room, but that already had its door open, and a quick search showed that it was only a storeroom).

Harry’s ability to just barge into a room, shields up and wands blazing with ten explosive spells at once, was something she’d never realised she’d sorely miss until now. He really did make it convenient for everyone else who was following behind him. At the very least, it would’ve been a lot faster.

They did blow the door open this time, and she *did* send the gas in ahead of her.

“D-d-don’t kill me! Please! Take anything!”

The wizard was on the short side, and all his cringing didn’t help. The dazed and frightened man turned out to be the store’s owner.
“We’re not here to kill you or take anything. We were looking for one of the attackers,” she explained.

She sighed and settled to calm the wizard down while Tom discreetly checked the room himself. She apologised for her intrusion but explained the emergency. She told him that another shooter was still out there on one of the other stores near his, and he would be in danger if he didn’t get away.

The wizard was glad to do so, but he was thinking of his store. Hermione wanted to assure him that the last thing most people wanted to do was rob a stationary store, yet she knew that his fears were real to him and her explanation wouldn’t change that. Luckily for her, Tom stepped in.

“Close it up, then,” Tom pointed out. “Everyone else in this place has left. You’re the only one here. I’m sure you can lock up and raise the wards and then floo to Hog’s Head Inn, right?”

So, after a final check to ensure that he was indeed fine and would soon leave, they left the store.

At any point in time, one of them always kept the man in their field of vision. Hermione only spent a few moments wondering whether Tom’s paranoia was getting to her. Yet considering what happened the last time she gave her unguarded back to someone else, there really was nothing wrong with being too careful.

This left only one more plausible shop for them to check.

It was nothing as interesting as Honeydukes, or even The Scrivener. In fact, it was a rather run-of-the-mill, unimpressive dry goods store, whose sign probably needed to be repainted because she couldn’t make it out clearly. Though the more she thought about it, the less it should surprise her. Why shouldn’t Hogsmeade residents need a shop to buy their daily necessities at?

The wizards and witches who were stuck in there seemed to be composed more of Hogsmeade’s residents than Hogwarts students or outside visitors, their clothes more understated. It might explain why they were more at ease at directly asking them what the quietness on the street meant.

“Is it safe to go out now?” A white-haired witch asked.

“No, not really. There’s still one more shooter that needs to be taken care of,” Hermione answered honestly. “But the people in the tailor’s shop next door as well as The Scrivener have all gone to Hog’s Head Inn by floo, so I’d suggest that you do the same.”

“Why Hog’s Head Inn?” A wizard approached her.

Where other people might have gotten shorter as they got older, he seemed to only lose weight and kept his height, ending up as the human version of a stick insect.

“Because it’s a place that Iris from the tailor’s shop has checked as safe, and it’s a place where many people can gather together. If you’re looking for someone or if someone is looking for you, it’s a good place to start.” She answered, and she could see most of them mulling over it.

“Well, I’ll just get back home. Patrick’s at work and he wouldn’t have known until he checked the newspaper tomorrow.” A plump matron said. She said cheery goodbyes to everyone else and the ones who knew her greeted her with the same ease. “I’ll be borrowing your fireplace, Gladys. Sorry for the bother.”

“Of course, dear. It’s no problem at all.”
It didn’t take the rest of them long. Even as many of them chatted about what they think their family members would be doing right now, they had already picked up their bags and shopping (when there was any). They asked Gladys, which was the old lady behind the counter, to show them to the fireplace. To be honest, it felt more like they were all haring off to some weekend bridge club than some evacuation due to a crisis.

A few of them patted Tom or Hermione in the arm saying that it was very brave of them to have gone out to reach the store and inform them of the all the things going on. She took it with a smile and Tom was his usual gracious self (though she could tell that this crowd was definitely less annoying for him than the previous one—his pleasure was not entirely artificial).

“Not that I don’t actually enjoy this well-ordered retreat,” Hermione said to a neat-looking witch. Instead of flowers, there was a large and vivid red leaf pinned to her hat, “but none of you seemed to be that surprised or worried.”

She shrugged with that universal ‘what can you do?’ gesture.

“This is Hogsmeade, dear. We’re right next door to Hogwarts, and you know what they say about Hogwarts.” She said.

“What do they say about Hogwarts?”

“There’s bound to be a prophecy every quarter century or so, or a new dark lord. If you’re extra lucky, you get both. Sooner or later they drag us into it! Frankly, you get used to all the doom and gloom if you live around here.”

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh at that.

“That’s fascinating, Miss…?”

“Maple. Calliope Maple.”

Hermione blinked a little at the name, almost too similar to a fictional detective she knew. Then she spied the red leaf on her hat, and her last name made sense. “Hermione Curie. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, I know who you are, Young Lady,” was Miss Maple’s shrewd reply. Was it just her imagination, or did the witch’s gaze actually strayed to Tom once? “Good luck facing any prophecies or dark lords. You’re in Hogwarts now, you’ll need it—and I say this as an alumnus.”

Hermione grinned. “Thank you.”

With a nod, the witch walked away, also with her bag of shopping with her. Rationing, Hermione realised, was generally non-existent in wizarding Britain. She couldn’t help but wonder how the food shortage was handled here, what with the German blockade around UK. Being able to easily cast a sunlight spell must’ve made growing plants, and even tropical plants, easier. No wonder Hogwarts could still easily serve banana cake.

“Well, that was very civilised,” Tom remarked when all of them had gone to the back of the store.

“You have to wonder how one village can take it in a stride while most of Britain panics,” she replied.

“The rest of Britain need more dark lords,” he answered with usual twisted humour. She raised an eyebrow, curious about where it would lead.
“Really?”

“After all she did say that Hogsmeade is used to it; they’ve come to expect dark lords and ominous prophecies to appear sooner or later. What better way to desensitise the rest of the populace than to ensure they’ll face routine attempts at world domination?”

Hermione did let out a bark of surprised laughter at that.

“You’re incorrigible, Tom.”

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Hermione was really having the déjà vu sensation of joining yet another one of an Auror team’s raids, albeit with the unusual twist of her leading the charge too. They went up another flight of stairs and trying to detect any unusual sounds…

There were footsteps above them.

One person, unless there was someone else who was sleeping. Even then, it only meant that they would be facing two.

She realised then that perhaps it was the reason this store was chosen in the first place—it had a garret room. Assuming that the attic was just another storeroom, it would scarcely be checked every day. They conferred on the tactics to use for a while and then ascended the stairs. Tom went first, according to the very logical reasons he’d given earlier—he was already wounded and she was the one who could actually get them both away.

While Tom was using a subtler, albeit slower, unlocking spell on the lock (instead of *Alohomora*), Hermione cast *Oleumenti* in a line on the other side of the door.

It might be an overkill method just to oil the hinges, but it was worth the effort for added quietness. The door drifted open silently. There was a man on a chair by the window. Tom took two steps to the right and attacked him immediately—two stunning spells hit the man at once only to fizzle out. Fortunately, he didn’t seem to realise that something was wrong or even noticed their presence yet.

The next thing that hit him, head first, was an armoire from one side of the room. There was the heavy clunk of his rifle hitting the floor boards. Hermione went left, trailing the wall while scanning the room and making sure there was no one else.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

It was just one room, with no other connected, and the roof sloping to half an adult’s height opposite of the door. She noted the bleeding gash on his head and her reflex was to cast *Episkey*. The spell bounced and she huffed in frustration.

Tom divested the man of his necklace and few rings, before finding a piece of handkerchief to wrap them all in. Hermione stunned the man twice, before moving the heavy armoire away. She bound him with a quick *Incarcerous* and just hoped his concussion wasn’t going to be too bad.

Thundering footsteps could be heard from the floor below them. They both had their wands ready, facing the half-open door.

Dumbledore crashed into the room, auburn hair flaring dramatically behind him and Hermione could almost feel the incoming waves of pressure from the magic he’d collected around him. It was akin to being a small fish being pushed back by the swell of an incoming blue whale. Dexter
followed just a few steps away and she saw the yellow flash of his long braid, his magical presence more soothing and less overpowering than Dumbledore. They were an interesting contrast—Dumbledore with his purple, yellow and green outfit and Dexter in shades of black and grey.

The brunette sighed in relief. *Dumbledore’s lucky this had been straightforward. I might have been more trigger happy otherwise.*

“Tom? Hermione?” Dumbledore gazed at them both in puzzlement. She could feel the pinpricks of magic fading away from her skin as the transfiguration professor lessened his hold on them.

“The sniper’s unconscious and bound, Professor,” Hermione said. “We’ve cleared the entire building too—his was the last room we needed to check. We’ve been trying to track him down for a while.”

“We know. We heard from the people you’ve sent to the Hog’s Head Inn.” Dexter said, worry in his grey eyes. “Good work in evacuating the people, by the way. It doesn’t mean what you were doing wasn’t dangerous.”

“We’ve been waiting for the Aurors to come. If they had, we would have gladly let them take over,” Tom said, more relaxed than he’d been before. “Yet if it wasn’t for Hermione, more people might have died shot and bleeding on the streets.”

“There were people bleeding?” Dumbledore’s gaze was sharp.

“That was the work of the first shooter. We took him down. When Hermione was trying to help the wounded, there were shots fired from higher ground—that was how we knew there was another shooter.”

“And these people are…?” Dexter began.

“Already sent to St. Mungo’s with the assistance of Iris from the tailor’s shop and Crouch, the…Seventh-year Gryffindor prefect, I think?” Hermione mused.

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, that’s Timaeus alright.”

She could see that the two professors were beginning to wind down from their previous highly alert stance.

“How did the rest of Hogsmeade fare? I heard that the Three Broomsticks managed to defend themselves, but I also heard there was another attacker further down the street? We were about to head there once the wounded was secured, but then we got diverted into the sniper hunt.” Hermione said.

“The attacker outside the Three Broomsticks had the misfortune doing so when Galatea, Honoria, Adele and Phyllida was trying to relax inside.” Dumbledore said with amusement in his voice.

Hermione winced. He disturbed the downtime of the duelling mistress and several other experienced witches? The man was toast.

“As you can guess, he was no threat at all to them.”

“As for the other attacker you’ve heard, Andrew Abbott made a good attempt at holding him back, mainly by throwing around so many things he had to duck and avoid them instead of shoot. It was just a shame Abbott’s aim wasn’t better,” Dexter said. “But he did allow more people to safely escape that way. The…sixth-year Gryffindor prefects?”
The Head of Ravenclaw turned to the other professor, who confirmed his query. “Philippe Bernadotte and Ceres Victorinus. Yes, they’re sixth-year prefects.”

“Well, they arrived sometime later and managed to push the man back, corner him to an alley. That was when Albus, Filius and I arrived at the scene, and then he presented no trouble anymore.”

“Was Abbott fine? What about Bernadotte and Ceres?” Hermione asked.

“Bernadotte and Victorinus was fine. I can see why Galatea said that they were among her best students. Well, Abbott did have a small wound to his side…” Dexter mused.

She inhaled sharply, holding her breath.

“Is he at St. Mungo’s yet?”

“No? We thought a quick Episkey would do—”

“Take me to him right now, Professor.” Hermione insisted, stepping forward towards her Head of House. “Because he needs to get that wound seen to properly unless you’re open to the risk of him suddenly dying.”

The two professors were slightly taken aback at her intensity.

“Was it really that bad?” Dexter asked.

“Oh, you should listen to Hermione, Professor. She was just as frantic when I was shot.” Tom said, offhand. “So yes, there’s a significant chance that Abbott’s wound might be fatal.”

“You were shot?” Dumbledore asked, stunned. It seemed that the surprises came quickly for the professors.

“That was how we knew there was the sniper. On the other hand, if I wasn’t standing in front of Hermione, it would have been her. So, it wasn’t too bad. She could heal me, after all, but I would have trouble healing her. Logically, my getting shot is actually the best outcome.” Tom said. His usual polite and reasonable self was actually a tad disconcerting when combined with the morbid topic—Dumbledore, for one, was clearly still trying to digest all this.

“Professor,” there was a warning tone in Hermione’s voice. Dexter came back to himself as he shook his head.

“Right, right. You should all prepare yourself for side-along apparition, then. We’re going to the Inn.”

With that, the world was squeezed and folded away from around them.
Chapter Summary

Hermione finds Andrew Abbott. In which there is not much rest to be had as the prefects began a meeting. Lunch break. Hogwarts once more. Tom's request. The Society's meeting.

Chapter Notes

I find it interesting that no one commented on Tom's rather skewed sense of humour.

Remember the "politics" and "political manoeuvres" tags that I gave this story? We're going to see the scale of the game Tom is playing here.

Now, onwards to some of the issues raised in some reviews on FFNet (crossposted here for your edification). I happened to be talking to some of my friends as well as my sister on it, and the conversation pulled out my own reasoning from somewhere deep inside my head. I actually managed to write most of this without much effort:

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Keep in mind that everything is written from Hermione's perspective most of the time. Even if she's perceptive and experienced enough that her assessment of things is accurate in the high 90 percent, there is always room for error, no matter how small. It is not the author's job to explicitly tell the readers just what small stuffs the characters miss/got wrong. We're only seeing Hermione (and Tom's) experience, in their small corner of Hogsmeade.

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About Hermione not using Homenum Revelio
(Skip if you're not that curious about the technical details):

This is a convenient spell to use if you're being chased by people or were chasing a group of people and you just lost track of them as they entered a new area. If you have experience in chasing groups so far as to not hold back from entering their territory, you also get used to being put on the back foot as you do that, as they have every advantage of not only knowing the grounds better than you, they can also prepare the terrain to benefit them and disadvantage you.

In these kinds of situations, there would be several efforts to spoof the spell already in place. At the top of my head kidnapping dozens of muggles, knocking them out cold, tying them up, and then scatter them all around your base could distract it. And that's just the low tech/low magic approach. Whatever number of people or directions they're from that the spell informs the caster is going to be useless due to the high amount of noise. This is the main weakness of the spell; it's not actually a friend-or-foe identifier.
If the wizards and witches can come up with an anti-apparition ward that can be deployed pretty quickly in the field, there's no doubt that it wouldn't take much effort to develop an anti-revealing ward that effectively functions as an enforced fog of war.

With these in mind, it's not surprising that Hermione's reflex in facing an entrenched attacker is to _not_ use the spell and just move on to assuming there _are_ people in the room and find ways to flush them out or clear those rooms for her team (as noted, usually it's the outright tanks like Harry who cleared them*).

*Harry still has the occasional nightmare of the time he accidentally sent a fire spell to a muggle used as a live shield by a wizard who popped up from behind a couch.

Of course one can argue that there are still good odds of the spell working, since the possible hostiles are using muggle weapons instead of wand. I'd like to point out that we can take the time to think and come up with several alternatives at once since we're playing armchair analysts after the fact, but in an emergency and under pressure, it's really trained behaviour and drills that come to the fore, and the Hermione's skills and habits are still very effective.

(There's another piece on people's reactions in Hogsmeade in the last chapter, but due to the limitations on note length, I'll shuffle this to the end note).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

## 41 Aftermath

They were at a small table at the restaurant on the ground floor of Hog’s Head Inn, rather close to the fireplace. It wasn’t usually a preferred spot, considering the traffic passing through the floo network, but it suited her purpose just fine, as most people actually avoided the spot. Neither of them was even sitting at the table.

“Roi aima,” Hermione casted, ending the complicated wand movement with a tap at her left palm. Several metallic splinters appeared in splotches of blood. Andrew Abbott stared at her hand in disbelief.

“Those were inside me?” He asked.

“They were in your blood. One wrong move and one of them might block a blood vessel in the heart. Congratulations, you have a heart attack! If that didn’t happen, one of them might obstruct a vein somewhere in your brain. That would mean a stroke for you, and certainly instant death if no one caught what your potential problem was.” Hermione said. She knew she was scaring him, but sometimes, fear was one of the few things that forced a suggestion to stick.

“This is why when you’re shot, you got to a nurse or healer. Ask them if they know how to treat someone who’s been harmed by muggle weapons, who know what’s the difference between those and a spell. If you’re not convinced, you’re safer at St. Mungo’s, alright?”

Hermione might have started her mini-lecture in a strident tone, but after seeing his pale face, she’d toned it down and ended it at a more sympathetic note. She vaguely remembered the tea among
Ravenclaw girls, where the few things she’d actually noted was that Abbott was good-looking. Well, he was—as blond as his twin sister, athletic and as handsome as prince charming.

“I’ll remember that. Thank you, Miss Curie.”

She shook her head, smiling warmly at him. “Oh, it’s no trouble at all. Did you know that your sister found me when I was lost and wounded, just as I arrived at Hogwarts? It’s the least I can do.”

“That was Agatha doing the decent thing. This—I heard you asked Professor Dexter to apparate you immediately here. That’s just…impressive.” He was mostly relieved, but she could see he was also deeply grateful.

Hermione wondered how the fact that she could read his thoughts and emotions clearly on his face made her consider him as plain and unchallenging. (You wish he was more challenging? Really, Hermione, he’s a person, not a tome of magic, it’s fine if he was straightforward.)

(Still, doesn’t that make him somewhat of a bore?)

“Professor Dexter apparating me here just happened to be the fastest way to get here. Otherwise, I’d have just taken the floo, really.” The brunette witch assured him.

She mentally shook her head. She had to admit that Andrew was genuinely nice and charming. It was simply unsettling to realise that she didn’t feel the slightest bit of attraction to him—and she was quite sure she would’ve found him attractive when she was in Hogwarts the last time around. He certainly shared many qualities with Cedric Diggory (and she had liked Cedric back then). Hermione didn’t have time to mull over it further as she was suddenly hugged by an overly-relieved Hufflepuff witch—the brunette had to balance herself weirdly to avoid touching anywhere with her bloody left hand, bullet fragments included. It was none other than the Head Girl herself.

“Agatha?”

“Thank you. I don’t know what I’d do if I lose him. He’s always been there, ever since I could remember,” The blonde said with misty eyes as she stepped back.

“Oh, it wasn’t as bad as I’d thought. There was no internal bleeding anywhere, even if I did have to mend his lower ribs.” Hermione said. “My medical knowledge is still not comprehensive enough to catch near-everything that can go wrong. Again, he still needs to see an actual nurse or healer and get some Skele-gro in.”

Agatha was clearly sceptical about how his wounds was less serious than she’d thought, or the way she downplayed the extent of her skills, but the seventh-year didn’t say anything about it.

“Still. Thank you all the same.”

“You’re welcome,” the brunette witch smiled back.

Agatha had started asking Andrew about what he was feeling, if he was still hurt anywhere, and what his wounds are. It was clear that Andrew was humouring his sister, but he did list the injuries Hermione told him, along with the injunction not to exert himself in the next several days until his rib set. The brunette witch disposed the splinters in the fireplace while a quick Tergeo removed the blood on her hands.

When she glanced around the room, she saw Tom was sitting at one of the larger circular tables in the middle.
She recognised the pair of Slytherin seventh-years now to his right, Oswin and Emma, along with the Slytherin Montmorency—and was that Crouch? Oh, wow, that was Crouch. He was as determined and as eager as she last saw him before he helped escort the wounded to St. Mungo’s. She recognised Bernadotte and Ceres and… **Daedalus?** Daedalus was to Tom’s left. There was Verrault, of course, looking ever so severe, and suspicious of Daedalus’ easy familiarity with Tom. Daedalus seemed too used to it that he didn’t even give Verrault’s looks a second glance. She didn’t know the Hufflepuffs, but now that she can identify practically everyone else, she suspected that they were prefects too, the ones that weren’t the Heads at least.

There were two unrolled parchments on opposite sides of the table, a quill banded in black was floating and automatically scribbling on each of them. **Verbatim-quills,** Hermione thought. *They’re already having a meeting?*

The moment he noticed that she was free, Tom casually raised his hand and waved. That slight head movement, though. Was he asking her to come over? Oh, he is. *But isn’t that a prefect meeting?* Confused but curious all the same, Hermione drifted in their general direction.

“…they do not even care that this is a civilian area! I really don’t like how helpless we are. How many students could’ve been hurt if any of the attackers had been attacking at Honeydukes? Or the bakery or restaurants?” Apparently, Crouch was in the middle of a tirade. He looked for all the world like Agamemnon, railing for the Trojan war to start and furious at Paris’ treachery.

“We have to do something about it. We should be able to defend ourselves better."

Daedalus shifted to the left and Tom pulled a chair out of somewhere. Hermione took the seat.

“Crouch, it’s clear that you care very much for your fellow students. That concern was why you called the prefects who happened to be present into a meeting.” Tom said. “But as prefects, we are responsible for the safety of the students first and foremost. To enter violent engagement with anyone even if they are attacking people or students, would be frowned upon.”

Crouch was fuming. “Are you suggesting that we do nothing?”

“Judicious application of the Smokescreen Spell is enough to divert the attacker, allowing you to escape safely with your charge.” Tom answered.

“But that might not be enough! There might be more than one attacker and—I can’t believe you’re saying this now, Riddle, when I saw you and Curie running straight into the fray with offensive spells!”

To be perfectly honest, Hermione had no idea why Tom was suddenly taking a pacifistic stance. It was just so…not him. That was why she only felt increasingly awkward when Crouch put her on the spot like that. Tom was still unaffected. She took that to mean that everything was still going according to his plan.

Or plans. Whichever that was right now.

“You’re not listening carefully, Crouch,” Emma’s cool tone cut in ruthlessly. She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Tom was actually giving you the answer to your question. You asked us if we couldn’t do more as prefects. That was the issue. Tom had just informed you frankly about what we can do—that as prefects our acceptable course of actions are limited. If that answer wasn’t what you wanted to hear, then that would be your issue instead of his.”

“Ask the wrong questions and you’d get the wrong answers,” Montmorency added, gruff.
“I don’t understand,” Crouch spoke at a quieter tone.

“There are rules, Crouch, and we are bound by them.” Verrault said, unsympathetic, even if his discomfort in having to side with Tom was clear in his grimace.

Hermione was sure she could hear a chuckle that was turned to a hasty cough from her left, where Daedalus had leaned back on his seat and was watching everyone from under half-lidded eyes. Not that it would be easy to see with his messy bangs falling over his eyes.

Bernadotte snorted at his fellow Gryffindor prefect.

“All right. Tom is going to keep showing you the rules on what prefects can and can’t do, and you’ll just keep snapping back at him because you think he’s being a coward. Dammit, Timaeus, lemme give you the short version because we don’t have all day.”

He took a deep breath. “You can’t stand up and fight as a prefect.”

“What…? Why not?”

A quite voice spoke up next. It was a wizard whose prefect badge gleamed in Hufflepuff colours. *Fifth or sixth year, then,* she surmised.

“Tom is correct. Bernadotte is right. If you wish to stay true to what a prefect is responsible for, then it would be the students. We are not responsible to fight against anyone—we are not Aurors.”

There was a slight accent to his tone that she couldn’t recognise instantly. She was sure it wasn’t French, though.

“But it would be foolishness to continue obliviously in the face of danger! Surely, we must be prepared for more attacks, Casimir? Because after these two, I doubt they’d stop.”

“This is going to take a while,” Daedalus muttered under his breath. His expression was wry when Hermione’s eyes met his.

Bernadotte groaned and he was rubbing his face when he started speaking.

“Timaeus, old boy, the point we’re all trying to say is that you can’t do this in the name of being a prefect. You do this in the name of you being you. You’re someone who doesn’t want to just roll over when people come to kill you. You want to fight back—which I say is a damned good idea. You said you’ve seen Riddle and Curie striking one of the attackers headlong? Then it’s blindingly obvious that they thought it was a damn good idea too. Same like me and Ceres here.”

He leaned forward. “But as to why I’m doing it? It’s not because I’m a prefect. It’s because I’ll attack bloody Grindelwald himself if it would be enough to rid us of that branleur dégénéré from Britain and from France.”

Ceres made a pointed cough next to him. Bernadotte shrugged. “Pardon my French.”

The mood of the table had begun to shift ever since Bernadotte first spoke, but now that the sixth-year had mentioned the current dark lord extant in Europe, it was heavier than before.

“That’s quite a leap in topic, isn’t it?” The Hufflepuff said again (*Castor? No, not Castor, but something close. It’s not Caspar either*), “from whether we can do more as a prefect to fighting Grindelwald?”
“That was the point. I guess I should’ve said that sooner, huh? This isn’t a topic for a prefect meeting, Timaeus. If you had wanted to pick up your wand and fight, you should’ve joined the Society instead.” The other Gryffindor wizard said. He leaned back rather casually in his chair, hands in his pockets.

“So, did we get jerked around enough for now? Can we break up what is apparently a useless prefect meeting?” Bernadotte asked with bellicose attitude.

“We do need to lay down some emergency procedures. This is as good time as any,” Emma answered. Her gaze was professional behind the lenses of her glasses, unperturbed by the French wizard’s antics. “And Timaeus, Bernadotte is right. If it’s fighting you’re interested in, you should try attending one of the Society’s meetings. Now, we’re going to go over your encounter, Tom and Hermione’s encounter, as well as Bernadotte and Victorinus’. If Andrew is in good enough shape, we’d like to hear his experience too.” She paused, taking a breath.

“Hopefully, this would help us determine a better way of avoiding violent engagements in the future—”

Bernadotte coughed.

“—in our line of work as prefects. Personal actions taken for personal reasons are up to each individual, of course. This would also provide us with a transcript of events we can easily copy and hand to the Aurors, thus giving them no excuse to take us out of school for a whole day or more and make us miss classes.”

Hermione found herself nodding, completely agreeing with Emma’s priorities.

“Man, I don’t mind missing some classes,” Bernadotte muttered under his breath.

“Doesn’t mean I want to go up against Emma for it,” Daedalus snorted. That shut the Gryffindor up.

“As for the retelling of experiences, every other prefect not telling their story is free to walk around and engage in some other activities for the time being—they can always read the written report, after all. The only time that everyone’s attendance is required is when we’re trying to make new guidelines and recommendations based on today’s experiences.”

There were some groans, though it was hard to determine everyone who made them since frankly, most didn’t want to end up under Emma’s stare. Hermione was sure that Daedalus was definitely one of them and Bernadotte was obviously one as he dropped his head on the table with a loud thud. Verrault was probably the only person who seemed to be looking forward to it. Even if the meeting only begun due to Crouch’s misunderstanding of what being a prefect meant, In the end, it did end up being an actual prefect meeting.

She had the feeling it was just because Emma simply loathed to let such a good opportunity to waste—after all, why not get something done while they’re all already here?

Hermione did end up describing her actions and Tom’s against the first attacker, to the various prefects gathered there. Bernadotte was gaping at her.

“You just…hit him? With a flowerpot?”

“Obviously spells hadn’t worked, had it? Tom figured it out at the same time as I did, but he was
faster in acting about it, hence the pile of crate getting thrown at the chump.” Hermione said. “It had to be a physical attack. There was a flowerpot handy, so I thought, why not?”

“He could attack you,” Ceres commented.

“That was what I thought,” Tom muttered, but loud enough to be heard at the table. She sent an annoyed side-glance in his direction.

“If I can apparate closer to him, I can certainly apparate away. No anti-apparition wards, remember? I was very close in no time and not even his head was above the crate back then,” Hermione said with a huff. She thought she heard a quiet ‘you can apparate already?’ from the unidentified Hufflepuff prefect, but she couldn’t be sure.

“I knew what I was doing, trust me.” Hermione insisted.

“If you say so,” Bernadotte said, but it was clear that he was still reserving judgement.

“And once you were sure he was unconscious, what did you do?” Emma asked, pulling her attention back to the story.

“I searched him for all accessories and took them off. Odds are, he gained his anti-magic shield from some charmed bracelet or something similar. All I found was his necklace. Considering that I could cast Incarcerous at him after that, it’s probably where the anti-magic charm was placed on.”

On and on she went, with Tom and Crouch taking over once the sniper was in the scene.

“That was when I was shot.” Tom said, after Crouch had mentioned running towards the crates for cover. “Hermione noticed the blood on her hands and then she apparated far enough to do something about the wound.”

“You got shot?” Bernadotte asked somewhere between wonder and disbelief.

“The bullet’s still inside even now,” the Slytherin answered without blinking.

The weirded-out look spread through the entire table. Everyone focused their gaze on him with the speed and morbid curiosity of a crowd staring at the mangled corpse at an accident—they were all awkwardly stuck between wanting to snoop and get closer to the carnage while at the same time dismayed at the prospect of finding something bloodier than they’ve already known.

Tom merely stared back at them evenly, saying nothing else. If they were going to play a waiting game with him, Hermione thought, they had to be prepared to wait a long time.

“Riddle, has it ever occurred to you that perhaps now is a good time for you to visit St. Mungo’s instead of attending a prefect meeting?” Daedalus asked from Hermione’s left, his tone was that perfect politeness that actually screamed passive-aggressive gentleman to anyone familiar with a Brit.

“I’m no longer bleeding and I don’t have any wounds at all,” Tom answered with the same detached affect. “It’s just a foreign object stuck on, where was it again, Hermione?”

“The back of your fifth or sixth rib, I wasn’t exactly in the mood to count.” She said flatly.

“On a rib. Exactly. It will certainly hold for a whole day, as our lady healer here has attested, much less several hours.”
“And I thought Andrew was too dedicated to his responsibilities.” The Hufflepuff wizard from earlier murmured. “It seems I spoke too soon.”

“Damn right, Casimir,” Bernadotte said with a sigh.

Verrault gave Tom a grudging look of respect and looked as if he was personally pained at having to do that.

The Slytherin wasn’t the slightest bit disturbed. “Now, after that was done, we apparated back to the street—to the side of course, and that was when Hermione saw all the people the attacker had shot earlier. She couldn’t help but wish to help, and that was when I came up with using the Smokescreen Spell as cover.”

Well, Hermione had been too busy with the wounded to pay attention to what the wizards were doing, besides keeping the smokescreen up, so it was mostly Tom and Crouch’s narration. She could see surprised expressions sent her way as Tom described how she was going for all the attack victims, and Crouch even added the time Hermione taught him CPR because he couldn’t master the Living Heart Spell fast enough.

“Don’t use me as your standard for how first-aid should be,” she quickly added at the impressed looks. “I was in the process of getting enough training to be a field healer—you’d be just as good as I am if you’ve learned what I have. I’m not quite there yet, but I’m certainly well past any amateur level.”

Tom continued on from the white-haired witch that was entrusted to him and he couldn’t save. His gaze passing quizzically to hers as she tensed at that, but he smoothly continued the story on to Hermione and the next wounded they needed to see. When the narrative reached the point where they were all safely inside the tailor’s shop, the Ravenclaw could see more than one prefect releasing the breath they’d been holding back.

Hermione had yet to start about the hunt for the second one when she could feel his hand on her arm and the slightest shake of his head when she glanced his way.

Ah, alright. That one is not for this record, then. That was around a quarter to twelve, a convenient place to stop to break off for lunch.

Several other prefects that had apparently planned on visiting Hogsmeade in the afternoon instead of the morning, a shocked Eugenie and Julia included, and they’d only just arrived now (Hermione felt all those people who chose to delay their visits were lucky). This was later than the two witches had planned on arriving (which was, before lunch), but considering the emergency situation beforehand, it wasn’t surprising. Hermione was too happy to note that her friends were fine, as they hugged her in turn in their worry.

“Sorry about the dress,” Hermione said.

Eugenie blinked several times without saying anything. “What?”

“Your dress,” the brunette gestured to herself. “I’ve leapt, rolled and done who-knows-what in it. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of the seams are pulled somehow. Oh, there’s probably blood stains here and there too.”

The blonde dropped her face into her left hand. Julia distinctly snorted beside her. “Melusine. Really, Hermione. That was the last thing I was thinking about. I was too happy to see that you’re alright.”
“It’s just…it’s such a nice dress.”

“It’s just one dress.” Eugenie said. “In fact, you can keep it. I’m sure it would be something interesting to tell your children, no? That this is a dress that you’ve fought off the Attack on Hogsmeade in.”

“Even better, you can tell your children that you wore it in the first outing with their father.” Julia added blandly.

Both Hermione and Eugenie groaned at that.

“You’ve been listening to Lakshmi’s brand of chatter, haven’t you?”

Julia smirked but didn’t reply.

Professor Gildenstern, Hermione had been told, had set up quick-and-dirty wards over the Hog’s Head Inn that even the organisers of the Quidditch World Cup would envy, so extensive and layered they were. That was why the professors felt secure letting other students floo in to the inn from the carriage house and even let the place fill to capacity as concerned family members arrived.

(There was always at least one Hogwarts student with journalistic aspirations, and apparently, that student had contacted the wizarding wireless with the news of the attack, resulting it being broadcast very quickly. This explained the noticeable family members that had arrived and started looking for a particular student or another).

The Aurors had arrived, and had to bear some pointed questions from Dumbledore, a disappointed Dexter and one Phyllida Spore on the warpath (Slughorn was slightly awkward, because he was of the same opinion as his colleagues, but his default social mode was always ‘nice’ and ‘nicer’, especially when speaking with people in power or authority that can make his life easier). The Aurors had no idea what happened and no floo calls got in. It was something to be considered later, as for now, the priority is in taking custody of the suspects and sweeping Hogsmeade to make sure that there were no more of them that lay hiding—as Hermione and Tom’s encounter with the sniper had taught them.

Then Tom pulled her away to the fireplace and they flooed to The Hare and the Fowl.

“Oh,” Hermione commented in surprise.

They stepped out of a large brick fireplace that would not be out of place in a farm. The wooden furniture was well made but not carved to a fine detail or perfect polish. It felt more simple, honest. The place was actually rather serene, and when she said that, Tom pointed out that it wasn’t on Hogsmeade’s main thoroughfare. She could see Professors Gildenstern, Lagrange and Merrythought on one of the other tables, though, with the Ancient Runes teacher talking at a fast pace. She felt vaguely sympathetic to them, knowing well enough that they probably were still talking about work even now.

“So, what’s this about?” Hermione asked.

“I did promise you a dinner on Saturday.” He said. She let out a startled laughter at that.

“Well, yes. But it’s turned into a rather messed up day that I thought you’d have cancelled altogether.”

“Do you wish me to cancel?” He shrewdly asked.
“No. It’s just…” she shrugged helplessly. “Some people might think that today was far from perfect. They would then rather just try on another day.”

“I think that a lunch in a quiet place is a perfect foil to the riotous events. In fact, we might as well start by ordering desserts.” The Slytherin said. They weaved their way to one of the window tables. “The raspberry meringue terrine is refreshing for a hot day.”

“Desserts first? Not afraid to spoil your appetite?”

“Why not? Hadn’t we run far enough and spilt enough blood? Chased one man down from the slightest hint of his shadow?” Tom smoothly asked. “Is that not enough labour worthy of Hercules for a day? Why can’t we feast and be merry?”

“You should be an actor,” Hermione replied, amused.

“Am I not one yet?” He affected mock-confusion.

She laughed. “Touché. Very well. To celebrate for our survival, it is.”

Well, Hermione certainly wasn’t going to say no to desserts, especially when she can justify that she’s certainly used up a lot of energy just now.

He shook his head. “Oh, it’s not simply survival, Hermione. That is too simple and base.”

“What is it, then?”

“The first step towards victory.” He stated.

It was only later after Hemione had returned back to the Inn that she saw Rajesh Setalvad, fifth-year Gryffindor prefect, only just arriving.

Bernadotte seemed tickled to bits that Setalvad had missed the entire morning—Setalvad had family business to attend to that he couldn’t get out of even if he wanted to, according to Julia.

“Guess what happened, Raj?” The French wizard asked.

A confused and recently-flooed-in Setalvad stared at him uncertainly, still beating the occasional ash or the stray floo powder off his formal wizarding robes. He did look unusually handsome today, thick black hair neatly styled, which lead Hermione to suspect that he was being pulled to matchmaking dinners by his family.

“What?” Setalvad said.

“Hogsmeade got attacked. Riddle and Curie apparently struck one attacker down with the speed of Jove’s lightning! I got into a hell of a fight too.”

“Buggering hell! The one weekend that my family had to call turns out to be an important one!” He cursed some more while Bernadotte was shamelessly laughing like a hyena. Not even Ceres’ elbow to his ribs made a difference.

“Tell me what happened,” Rajesh was right in front of Bernadotte.

“Ha! What if I say I’m not telling you?”
“Philippe!” Rajesh growled, as Bernadotte ducked away and skedaddled, still chuckling.

“Ah ha ha! You can keep guessing, Raj! Just your bad luck that you weren’t here, eh?”

Setalvad was close to yanking his black hair. “Come on! The least you could do is tell me!”

The fifth-year compensated by hounding the other Gryffindor wizard for details about his experience. His persistence to follow him practically everywhere for half an hour caused even Bernadotte gave up and simply told him to get ‘borrow, cadge or steal’ a pensieve—he’ll just copy the memory for Setalvad.

Agatha Abbott called the rest of the prefects to gather around because she wanted to start the meeting. Hermione was surprised that neither Abbotts were absent.

The Head Boy and Head Girl respectively had joined them at the table, along with the other prefects that had arrived later (Eugenie and Julia included). The cool looks and demeanour of the rest of the Slytherin and Ravenclaw prefects that had just come through, on the other hand, irritated Hermione. Especially since she could easily figure out the source of the witches’ annoyance—her presence there.

It was admittedly funny to see the blonde, Slytherin princess whose friend she’d just kicked in the torso was actually a prefect. The witch pressed her lips together when she saw Hermione, especially when she noticed that the brunette was sitting to Tom’s left, but she didn’t say anything. Well, as fun as this is, Hermione mused, my time here is mostly over. She made to stand up.

“Where are you going?” Daedalus asked.

“Well, I’ve told my experience already, right? It’s just going to be a prefect meeting after this and…” she trailed off. The seventh-year Ravenclaw shrugged.

“It’s fine.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Stay around for everyone else’s experiences. I’m sure you’ve got some interesting insights.”

Ceres nodded from across the table. “Yes. Please stay, Hermione. I’d like to hear your opinion too.”

Hermione sat down again with not a little confusion.

She hadn’t figured out was why most of them didn’t seem to find her continued presence unusual. Clearly, she’d said her piece. Yet neither Eugenie nor Julia were fazed to see her still at the table.

On the other hand, as she was swept up in the prefect meeting, she missed the greater currents that was churning underneath Hogwarts. It was one of the undertows that pulled her unexpectedly down. Yet what was so unexpected about it? Hermione was only one witch. For all her efforts, she could as easily stem the tide as she could read and anticipate an entire world.

Tom was revising the evening’s meeting of The Society.

It was the farthest thing from being cancelled. The attack on Hogsmeade only emphasised how precarious the peace in Britain’s wizarding world. It did not matter that it was not the centre of
governance like the Ministry, or the hub of activity like London. The dogs of war had come looking for a new hunting ground, and their baying had now reached the borders of Hogwarts.

No one liked being vulnerable, least of all the powerful, as they are the ones least used to the sensation. Yet powerful was perhaps the single word that can easily describe most, if not all, of the families of Tom’s circle of friends and acquaintances.

“Gentlemen, a change of plans,” Tom announced in his dorm. “Tonight’s dress will be sombre and formal. The Knights will also be there.”

Abraxas looked up uncertainly from his bed. Today had been filled with too many surprising news for his liking, though he was glad (and proud) that Tom had come out on top again.

“Everyone, Tom? Including Mulciber and…?”

Tom paused mid-step. That ‘and…’ encompassed several people they both knew.

“Tell them there’d be plenty of hors d’œuvre.” He said instead. Sometimes, the best bait for the fish really was just lots of food.

“I’ll spread the news, then.” Melchior said, already picking himself up from his desk. “How about Hermione?”

“What about Hermione?”

Melchior looked down for a moment in thought. “Well, she needs to be informed of any changes, right?”

“Of course. It’s nothing for you to be concerned about.”

Nott waited for another moment, and when nothing else was forthcoming, he nodded. “Right. I’ll be going, then.”

As Melchior left, Tom was just about to leave himself. At least until Abraxas’ confused voice can be heard. He turned around deliberately, his face schooled to a bland neutrality.

“Um, Tom? Where are you going?”

“Abraxas,” Tom said pleasantly, “the relevant question would be, weren’t you going somewhere?”

“I am?”

“Are you sure that the house elfs would be able to execute the appetizers to a satisfactory level of technical excellence? Your mother is a very capable lady, and I’m sure you are very aware of the standards she sets and can direct the elfs accordingly.”

“Oh, of course, Tom! I’ll get to that right away.”

“Good man.”

Tom nabbed Jonah Rosier on his way out, tipping the first-year Slytherin who’d located him with several of Honeydukes’ Seaside Caramels. Other than the usual sickles and galleons, candy was a convenient currency to the lower years for Hogwarts’ upper years. This was mainly because Honeydukes doesn’t accept owl orders at all.
“Yes, my lord? Anything I can do for you?” Jonah asked, almost as perceptive as his older brother.

“Find Hermione Curie in the Ravenclaw Tower and tell her that I’m coming along to talk. That’s the first message. This is your second message,” he handed a sealed note, “to be delivered to…”

He sent the boy ahead of him after he tipped appropriately.

Hermione was already walking half a hallway down from Ravenclaw’s entrance when he met her.

“What about tonight’s meeting? Is it cancelled? Was there another emergency?” She asked quickly. He wondered if she realised that her curls were a little flat on the right side. Perhaps she’d nodded off at her desk. He decided that saying nothing would be best.

“It’s still on schedule. There’s nothing to be concerned about.” Tom said.

“Well, your message doesn’t exactly give me many details.” She groused.

“It doesn’t mean it doesn’t need to be adjusted.”

“Obviously,” her answer was short.

“Walk with me?”

She huffed but took his arm all the same.

They were by the Hogwarts Lake. The grounds were predictably empty today.

Hermione insisted that they pass the kitchen to pick up some snacks for the giant squid. Tom had stopped questioning her quirks at this point, though it did mean that they had to contend with a baffled Abraxas who overheard. Yet as Tom always looked like someone who knows exactly what is going on, at any given time, the blond didn’t even ask. Now, they were here, for all intents and purpose merely two students, spending a leisurely afternoon enjoying the last warmth of a soon-leaving summer. (Of course, it was mostly Hogwarts summer, courtesy of the released heat trapped from the summer months by Hogwarts gigantic and complex wards. Real summer had already come and gone).

“Sombre and formal? Well, I certainly have Hogwarts’ black robe,” Hermione mused.

“I wrote a short note to Lucretia Black,” he said. “She would have a better idea of what is required and heard she would be happy to help you.”

She was staring at him sceptically. “Just how complicated can the requirements of ‘sombre and formal’ be?”

“There are differences if you’d rather not look as if you’d just returned from a funeral, to put it mildly.”

“It can’t be that hard, can it?”

Hermione saw him giving her one of those long appraising glances wordlessly, and she could almost see the various sentences that he had to keep to himself. Her lips couldn’t help but twitch upwards after half a minute had passed. She chuckled at his uncommon quietness.

“Alright, alright. I know my limits. I’ll defer to Lucretia’s knowledge.”
“Thank you.”

She threw in some more old sandwich. She didn’t know how that came to be part of the squid’s diet, but the house elfs assured her that it was, that the squid was alright eating it and it would not give the creature indigestion, at all.

“I doubt that you got me out of the Tower simply to talk about a change of dress codes.” She said.

“I revised the meeting’s plan.”

“And?”

He took the paper bag from her and started throwing old tuna sandwiches too. The squid happily splashed its arms in the middle of the lake, trying to catch all of the food. A crest of water flew their way, which was stopped by Tom and Hermione raising a shield in front of them.

“If you were trying to teach a complete novice about arithmancy, would you start by telling them about arithmantic arrays?” He asked.

“What? Of course not!” She turned to him, but he was still methodically throwing feed to the squid.

“If you were trying to introduce a first-year to magical creatures, would you choose thestrals or hippogriffs for them?”

“Too advanced. I’d have chosen something easier like flobberworms.”

“To teach potions by first introducing the three-dimensional ingredients substitution chart is—”

“Ridiculous, of course.” Hermione eyed him sideways, her brows dipping low. “But you know that.”

He made a non-committal hum. The wind blew past them, still coldly refreshing instead of shiver-inducing. Hermione pulled her unbound hair back after it was blown slightly off.

“What’s this about?”

“Tonight’s meeting.”

“You’re going to teach lessons from a class?” She asked, disbelieving. She’d returned to watching the squid and occasionally throwing the old sandwich or two.

“Not quite.” Tom said. “It’s why I’ll have to ask you to be patient and not stop me when I’m explaining the equivalent of values in names. I’ll eventually finish describing something akin to arithmantic arrays.”

It was almost a minute later when Hermione couldn’t stand listening to just the whisperings of the waves on the shore, or the breeze skittering lightly over their hair and clothes. She carefully dropped the paper bag on the ground and turned herself to face him fully.

“What are you planning, Tom?”

“You already know what I’m planning.”

“Tom, please.” She was holding his right forearm. Her grip was looser than the gaze she held him with.
He leaned forward and spoke in a softer tone, “Trust me.”

Well, you’re not asking much, are you? She thought, sardonically. “Yet I’ll feel better if I know, anyway.”

“I don’t often ask you of this, but I’ll say it this once. Trust me.” Their shadows were a joined elongated form on the grass, entwined together.

“Tom,” she began.

He covered her mouth with his. Hermione knew he was not trying to distract her; if he was, he’d be completely distracted himself. If he was trying to feed the fire inside him by touching her, it only resulted in him burning up at the same time. She was drawn to him, as she had been from the beginning, and even in her daze she tried to understand what he was saying. Oh, gestures and acts were less precise than words, but there was an earthy honesty about them. She could taste thoughts he’d never said and those he did not quite realise yet. Yet not all the complexities were easy to grasp, and sometimes, her understanding came and went as fleeting as a dream upon waking.

But pieces of impressions stay all the same.

“Hermione.”

It was a request. She closed her eyes, trying to recall all he’d said wordlessly, her left hand caressing his face.

“Alright. Just for this once.”

’-

Hermione still couldn’t understand Lucretia’s insistence on getting a sombre dress that would fit her from among her, Lakshmi’s or Eugenie’s collection.

“I realise now that a Hogwarts black robe can’t exactly rival any of those, but what’s wrong with that first long black dress that fits?”

It was, unexpectedly Lakshmi’s.

“You don’t really like the profusion of beads used as accents.” Lucretia absentmindedly replied.

“Well, no, but I can deal with it—”

“You don’t need to ‘deal with it’ if we can find another that’s more appropriate. Besides, it does look slightly mismatched compared to your usual tastes, doesn’t it?”

Eugenie’s was away for one thing or another (Lakshmi was mumbling, so she didn’t hear it clearly). They did find one from among Lucretia’s collection. It wasn’t surprising, given that she seemed to have so many of them compared to her other dormmates. It was something dark blue, which Hermione had to admit she preferred better than the first. A little semi-permanent shortening charm later and it fit Hermione as if it had been tailored for her.

“Lucretia, I have no idea why you went through all the bother for me but thank you very much anyway.” Hermione said. Lucretia’s smile was gentle.

“You’re welcome, Hermione. It really is no bother.”

“What? You’re not thanking me too?” Lakshmi pouted.
“Well, ours is more of a quid pro quo deal, isn’t it? You help me and you get front row seats to any mess I get into.”

“Then don’t forget to update me with what you saw the moment you came back. You do remember the names of everyone attending, don’t you?” She was eyeing Hermione sceptically.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Believe it or not, I do. Almost everyone, anyway. And yes, I’ll keep you ahead of the gossip mill, Lakshmi.”

“Good luck,” Lucretia said. Hermione smiled back.

“Thanks again.”

Hermione could see several wizards turning back to stare at her after the first glance. Alright, she knew that the school robes weren’t flattering most of the time, especially when it wasn’t finely tailored. She couldn’t look that different, right?

The air was heavy with expectation and potential now, given that this time, none present were in uniform and were in formal robes instead. There was also a darker tone to the atmosphere from the first intrusion of chaos to the safe, highly-ordered life in Hogwarts. Today’s attack on Hogsmeade was still fresh in everyone’s minds, even though Hogwarts suffered no casualties.

Instead of mere lamps lighted at the glass sconces, the clean-up team had managed to find a chandelier from somewhere and pulled it up using the iron ring placed at the ceiling just for that purpose. The long table was laid with appetizers that were exquisite in their detail. Where they find the banners of the Hogwarts houses to hang from the ceiling, she didn’t know either. The sombre coloured yet rich robes on everyone made Hermione feel as if she’d stepped into an Early Tudor painting.

Considering the number of people who’d greeted her the moment they saw her arriving on Tom’s arm, she did rather feel like Elizabeth of York there.

Tom circulated (of course), she was already satisfied enough to have seen where Julia and Daedalus were. She knew where she can go if she ever ran out of people to talk to.

“Hermione!” Bernadotte hollered, quite oblivious to the stares he received from his raised tone. “Here! Timaeus just told us about this really fascinating muggle technique you showed him to revive dead people!”

She was torn between feeling glad for his appreciation and rubbing her temples since the number of people turning to look their way doubled at the mention of reviving dead people. She simply walked towards them instead of answering back immediately.

“It’s not exactly dead people! Just because someone’s heart’ had stopped beating does not mean it could not be massaged back to activity!” Hermione insisted once she was closer.

Bernadotte grinned unashamedly. “Well, an unbeating heart is still pretty dead, isn’t it?”

She didn’t really mind getting pulled into conversation about CPR with Bernadotte and Ceres—they were genuinely interested in it. The French wizard still managed to look distinctly roguish in dark maroon robes, like some warlike marcher lord of old. In contrast, add a baby to carry and his partner looked as if she could model for a painting of ‘Madonna and Child’, considering her demure plum robes and shining blonde hair.
As Hermione had heard their brisk description of how they had fended off another attacker on their own, she knew that Ceres’ appearance was deceptive.

“I don’t think I’ve seen the rest of your countrymen?” Hermione asked during one of the lulls in the conversation.

“Technically, the meeting isn’t due to start in another fifteen minutes,” Bernadotte answered.

“Well, yes. But you’re both already here, as is Eugenie. I thought maybe there’s something unusual about their delay.” She said.

“Auguste is describing how excellent your idea is to Evariste, probably trying it as subtly and carefully as possible.” Ceres answered. “Maximilien is…no, I have not the faintest idea of what Maximilien is doing. All I know is that he often does not want to be left out of anything that Auguste and Evariste is already involved in.”

“He’s offering unhelpful and snide remarks whenever Evariste is too stubborn or foolish.” Bernadotte answered offhand.

“Pip.”

The brunet wizard shrugged her warning away.

“Oh, you know he would, whatever else he’s doing. Then, Seneca doesn’t want to exert more effort than necessary. So, if all these fellows were going to arrive with no time left to spare, why shouldn’t he go with them? Never mind them for now, Curie. Come on, you were saying something about the risk of cracking a rib in the physical version of the process if you’re too vigorous?” He redirected the conversation back to their original topic on CPR. Hermione followed without a second thought.

“Yes. That’s why that even though the Living Heart Spell is complicated, it’s still a better alternative. But you have to admit, the ingenuity of the non-magical world to even come up with it in the first place…”

And off they went again.

More and more people arrived until Hermione was sure that it was just about everyone. She could see Emma discreetly casting her glance around the room and conferring with something at the palm of her hand, occasionally touching her glasses in impatience—the Slytherin was staring at the guest list, Hermione presumed.

“Oh, I think Riddle warned us about this, in case you didn’t know.” Bernadotte said.

“Warned you about what?”

“He’s going to start with something to pull the purebloods in.” Ceres said, before sighing. “Which meant the usual pureblood supremacy claptrap, though considering it’s Riddle, it’s probably already subtler than most. I suppose I’ll just take deep, long breaths and listen, then.”

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Hermione didn’t quite understand what either Gryffindor prefect meant, nor was she sure of the reason behind Tom’s earlier entreaty at her. Then Oswin became the master of ceremonies and welcomed everyone. He commented on the tragedy that was today’s attacks and hinted on how it underscores the importance of moving faster to anticipate ‘future threats’. 
After that, he ceded the floor to Tom.

(“Now, we all know who Tom Riddle is, don’t we?” Oswin asked wryly, and there were murmurs as well as muted chuckles, but most people were in agreement that Tom didn’t need to be introduced.)

When Tom Riddle stepped forward, the quiet murmurs of conversation gradually faded away. Hermione couldn’t tell whether it was his sheer presence or a subtle skirl of magic. Between his bearing and patrician features, attenuated by his formal dark green robes, he looked every inch of Machiavelli’s ideal prince.

“We’ve all expected to have this meeting under much more fortuitous circumstances.” He paused, letting that heavy atmosphere circle around them all again.

“I know I do. This might not be a convenient thing to say, considering our Minister right now, but it still has to be said since it is the truth. Who attacked us?”

He asked the whole room. His gaze moved from one Hufflepuff, to one of the German Slytherins.

“I ask again, who attacked us?” His tone was sharp, demanding.

“Come. Surely, it’s not such a difficult question, is it? Most of us had been to Hogsmeade today. If we hadn’t been there at the beginning, then surely we would’ve asked a friend to know what happened.”

He met Julia’s gaze, before turning towards one of his Knights (she couldn’t recall the name, just that it was one of the people she’d beaten in ADADA).

“M-muggles.” The wizard said.

“Excuse me?”

“It was muggles.” The Slytherin answered with more confidence. Tom clapped him on the shoulder, and he almost fell out of shock.

“Muggles. Yes! It was muggles.” He walked back to the centre of the room.

“Anyone saying that we’re safe from them does not know what the reality is on the front lines.” Murmurs broke out at that. “Yes, we’re now part of the front lines too. This attack had just solidified that new state, hadn’t it? Before, we can still say we’re safe. Now, who can claim that?”

There was a huff from the other side of the room, and it was audible in the quiet.

“Yes, Maximilien de Montmorency?”

“Whoever has been lulled into thinking that muggles are not dangerous is a fool. Why do you think our ancestors decided to carve their own place, to cut off our lands from theirs? It is not out of foolishness or idleness. They wish to avoid the muggles.”

“Thank you, for your informed opinion” Tom replied at the first natural pause. He did look as if he was building into a tirade.

“Yes, after all the shared history, they turned on us on the first opportunity, didn’t they? Blamed us for their own ills and pulled us to their own wars. Such violent, unnaturally warlike creatures, these muggles.” He pondered out loud, almost philosophically. “And they blame us for the destruction
far easier than they admit they are the root of their own evil. Really, we are well off living without
them.”

“Then we should destroy them.”

She knew that harsh voice. That was Carrow, Rufus Carrow. Hermione managed to hold herself
back, but that was only because she was gripping Ceres’ hands rather hard. The Gryffindor didn’t
complain the slightest, answering her grip.

“Not a bad idea, Rufus. We would have been rid of them once and for all” Tom said, nodding
along placidly, as if he hadn’t just agreed to a suggestion of genocide.

“Except you would have walked straight into a trap.” He stated.

Several sounds of surprise were heard, including that of Rufus Carrow.

“Oh, I know. What trap could muggles lay against wizards and witches, you ask? Therein lies the
trap. It is too easy for a person to focus on the single wolf in front of them that they did not realise
the bear is bearing down upon their back. Let me tell you what Hermione and I found when we
were checking the fallen muggle—an anti-magic charm.”

Sharp intakes of breath and exclamations of disbelief rippled through the crowd, along with an
almost-mutinous murmur. Several heads also turned to Hermione, some were curious and others
were unsure about Tom’s claim that she had fought beside him—not that she cared about whether
they believed it or not.

“Now, let me ask you this—does anyone here truly think that the muggles are capable
enough to make an anti-magic charm, on their own?” He asked.

More than one voice replied, even if softly.

“Impossible.”

“Muggles? Surely not.”

“You’re pullin’ me leg!” Hermione actually recognised that one—it sounded like Starkey.

“Are you sure you identified it correctly?”

Hermione didn’t know who the smart-aleck Ravenclaw was, but she was sure she hadn’t seen him
before. Tom was unaffected. He merely approached the other wizard until he was right in front of
him. The crowd even parted easily.

“Yes, we’re both certain of it. In fact, the Auror that I handed it to was also certain of it. His name
is Alastor Moody—just in case you wish to contact the DMLE him and ask to see it yourself. Go
on. Be my guest.”

There was some short laughter at that as the wizard sunk away again, but the humour didn’t last.
Soon enough, the restlessness build-up again, and Tom spoke just before it became uncomfortable.

“We know the muggles are as dangerous as they are a barbaric people. Yet to create magical
objects? No. That’s simply beyond their innate capabilities—after all, they don’t have magic. We
have to ask the next logical question after that. Who gave them the charms?”

He returned to the centre of the clearing once more.
“This is actually very simple. Who had recently planned various attacks around London with the help of muggle minions?”

This time, it was Bernadotte who used his sizeable lungs to answer and ensure it was heard throughout the room.

“Grindelwald!”

The tension ratcheted in the room. A few, like Bernadotte, was raring to have a go at the dark lord. Most hadn’t expected their enemy to be so great, or to cast so long a shadow all the way from his base in Europe and they were having second thoughts. The belligerence that had been building up previously was already partly ebbing away now.

“Now, now. None of us are foolish enough to simply throw ourselves in a duel against him,” Tom said, reading the mood of the room correctly. The few chuckles heard in the room were relieved ones.

“There are many steps towards his defeat than just the final fight. For one, does anyone even know where he is right now? Here, we have a nice, great map of Europe on the wall over here. Now, can anyone point at any one place and say, ‘Grindelwald’s base is here, or has been here, this I swear on my magic?’”

The room was quieter at the words of the oath, serious as they were.

“No. No one even has the slightest idea of where he is. That is why I propose that this would be the first purpose of our Society—simply to find out where he is. The Aurors have yet to find him. We have no idea how far they’ve searched, or if they are seriously lacking in manpower to allocate. What I do know, is that we can do this.”

His confidence pulled the audience’s up from their uncertainty, their worries.

“I’m sure many of us have families in the continent. I know that to ask people to risk their lives for a cause is not something to be made lightly, and thus I leave this entirely at your own choice. If anyone were to agree to help with the search, to send us news and results back, the Society will be grateful for your assistance.”

A wizard stepped out from the crowd. A stern expression and long blond hair held in a ponytail. With wide shoulders that filled his forest green robe, Hermione recognised Sigmund von Moritz easily.

“We stand beside you, Riddle.”

“Von Moritz, you have my thanks.”

“We will also help you search France,” Auguste Murat stepped out from the other side.

“Thank you, Murat.”

He addressed the whole room once more. “Grindelwald might think that he has successfully pulled the wool over our eyes, but we know better. We know that he is the real enemy, and we will find him and cause his downfall.”

“The days forward may be difficult, but we will not let Grindelwald terrify us.”

The words were not yelled out, but they were firm and unyielding. It was enough to rouse some
cheers from the audience. The speech was officially over and the crowd fluidly fell apart into small pockets of conversations once more, most of which were excited or at least interested. Emma and Oswin were nimbly moving between groups of people, with the Slytherin Montmorency not far behind. She’d actually seen Daedalus explaining something to some new faces—probably Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, as she recognised half of them and Bernadotte confirmed that none of them were Gryffindors. It was a change from last meeting where the seventh-year Ravenclaw seemed more content to watch the proceedings from the edges.

“Some parts of that was really uncomfortable,” Hermione muttered.

“Trust me, I know.” Ceres nodded sympathetically. “My mother was a muggleborn, so my English grandparents are not magical at all. But then, you know how the old purebloods are.”

Oh, she knew. And how she knew, from Walburga’s deranged portrait over at Grimmauld Place to the Death Eater remnants and other zealots later on that they’ve captured and interviewed—yet she’d never thought that those experiences would be relevant to her current school life. Hermione had known she lived in 1942, but it was all too easy to forget about that detail when Hogwarts had stayed pretty much the same from Tom Riddle’s time to her own. The teachers might be different, the advanced classes less up-to-date, but even her schedule was familiar to her.

It was only when she was confronted with how people think that she was jarred back to this past era that she was still living through.

“I still think we should do something about the muggles, though,” a passing witch told her friends.

“Later maybe,” her friend replied. “After Grindelwald’s no longer threatening us. It’s not as if the muggles would do anything in the meantime if it wasn’t for him, would they?”

Hermione noticed that the group wasn’t even Slytherin.

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Chapter End Notes

Additional Notes:

On people’s reactions in Hogsmeade
(Skip if you’re not interested in the discussion or my interpretation of prophecy/heroic cycles in the wizarding world):

Notice that different people in different stores behave differently, the crowd in the dry-goods store is the farthest one from the rest. They all have their own thoughts, and just because they act similarly does not mean they think in identical ways. Sometimes, an old lady just want to get home from shopping and catch up with the rest of her family away from the center of action.

On the other hand, the wizarding world is also a community who credulously accepted that a baby just beat a dark lord in his prime. You can take two paths from this point, that:

a) they’re truly that foolish, which I consider to be a simplification and stereotyping of
an entire community of people, or

b) there is actually a some precedent for this, even if it's not exactly a common/regular occurrence.

The second is the interpretation that I went with. Consider, if there had been various cryptic but spot-on prophecies surfacing again and again through the ages, rising in tandem with the dark lords/ladies that plague them. Consider also that youth is no barrier to magical prowess in prophecies (especially when they turn out to be the Chosen One), they'd be less likely to dismiss a confident, competent young wizard or witch in the face of a crisis compared to the nonmagical world. You can argue that it's weird of them, but you can't argue that it has no basis in reality, considering how their world works.

Their myths and stories are less like the ones of the nonmagical world's and closer to the oral histories retained by some of the native tribes of Australia. They actually have checks and balances in the system to stop the story from drifting/changing as it is retold through generations. Some of their stories are actually first-hand accounts from before the frigging last ice age, and would be a good addition to the continent's climate record. (Nunn & Reid 2015, Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago).

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**Agatha Abbott (OC):** Seventh-year Hufflepuff and current Head Girl. Blonde, pretty, cheerful, helpful and other kind traits, she is certainly a bright and lovely. Her twin and also her partner as Head Boy, Andrew Abbott, is similarly just as bright. Note that the Abbotts are part of the Sacred 28.

**Andrew Abbott (OC):** Seventh-year Hufflepuff, Head Boy as well as Captain and First Chaser on the Hufflepuff's quidditch team. Blond, handsome, athletic, helpful as well as all other sorts of wholesome things, there's no doubt that he's a rising star. Canon dictates that he should exist, as someone would have been Hannah Abbott's grandfather.

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42 Old Haunts and Old Issues

Chapter Summary

Chats at the Society meeting. In which Hermione reaches her limits at socialising. Annoyance and anger. Confrontation. A solution is suggested. A fight goes wrong, though fortunately not fatally.

Chapter Notes

*Whistles innocently.*

All relationships are always renegotiated over time, since to be human is to change and grow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

42 Old Haunts and Old Issues

To Hermione’s own mild surprise, she did actually manage to talk with more than a handful of people. It was not as awkward as she’d feared either.

She had managed to chat with Abraxas for a moment, as her comment on the table made him go on delighted explanations about the variety of appetizers. Parkinson and Mulciber still looked slightly uncomfortable around her, but they were actually more straightforward than most Slytherins. Once you’ve beat them, that was it, they’d leave you be. The Ravenclaw didn’t stay long around them and wandered away again.

“Hermione! You look beautiful tonight.” Melchior greeted her pleasantly.

She smiled. There was nothing sleazy in his appreciative gaze; his smile was warm and his words honest. She hadn’t been surprised to hear that he had his share of admirers before, much less now.

“Thank you. You look dashing too.” She turned to the wizard that Melchior had been talking with. “We were in Advanced Transfigurations together, isn’t that right?”

“Oh, yes, I almost forgot. Hermione, this is Caspar Zabini whose family is from Lombardy. Caspar, this is Hermione Curie, Hogwarts’ newest rising star and our very own Nightingale.” Hermione could hear the pride in his voice as he said that and couldn’t help but feel a little embarrassed.

“Melchior.”

“It’s true and you know it.”

She still felt the praise in her name to be exaggerated and over the top, but clearly Melchior thought otherwise since he only smiled mysteriously. He’s picking up a little too much of Tom’s
mannerism, she thought inwardly.

“Pleased to meet you,” the brunette offered her hand instead.

Zabini bowed over her hand with a solemnity she was still not quite used to, and he replied to her greeting with slightly more formality than she expected. She found out that his immediate family lived in Venice, and he’d easily followed her conversation on the time she visited Italy and seen Michelangelo’s *Pieta* or the Sistine Chapel. He could even recommend her about further places to see.

“You’re not going to point out that they’re muggle works?” Hermione asked him at a lower voice than usual. He gave her a philosophical shrug.

“Art is art, Signora. Beauty does not need anything else to explain it, nor does its existence need justification. Is the mountain magical or not? Does it matter as long as we can rest our eyes on its majesty? Breathe the cool air on its side? Should rubies and emeralds be magical or not magical?”

“They’re just objects,” Melchior agreed.

“Exactly. We should appreciate beauty where we find them.” Subtle, but flattering. She appreciated his conversation skill.

There were also a few fourth-years she definitely didn’t recognise, but Melchior helpfully murmured ‘friends of Orion Black’ to her to provide context. Not that she remembered the names of either. Somehow, they ended up talking about art (attend enough state functions with Daphne or Draco and one ends up picking some of the frequent conversation topics up). She was certainly surprised at Zabini’s ability to pull the other Slytherins to talk about art instead of more controversial topics—and they talked about muggle artists without blinking too.

Either the magical-muggle divide wasn’t as large as she’d thought, or many purebloods were rather good at ignoring cognitive dissonance. It wasn’t long before she took her leave, but it did not feel like time wasted. A particular tall, blond wizard waved at her. How he managed to look as if his hair was artfully disarrayed instead of a plain mess, she didn’t know. If she was back in non-magical London, she’d have thought him to either be an artist or a bum. A good-looking bum, but a bum all the same.

“Hermione!”

“Daedalus?”

“Just the witch I want to see. Come on, we’ve got a little conundrum that I’m sure you can help us solve, considering that you’ve just gone through some practical experience that almost all of us lack.”

“What is it about?” She asked.

“We had a couple of disagreements that I’m sure you can help settle…”

Of course, she ended up chatting longer with Daedalus. He deftly pulled her into a conversation with several other seventh-years on whether the ability to quick-draw your wand was important in emergencies or when you’re attacked—her conclusion was, very. She can even give several scenarios where it would make all the difference in outcome, though she didn’t bother clarifying that many of them weren’t even hypothetical and was actually Harry’s experience (Watching and studying Harry’s memories on the field was actually a significant part of junior Auror training classes).
Even with the ease that she could chat with many people, including the Slytherins, she could not stop hearing all the other conversations that happened in her vicinity. There was the rising dislike against muggles and the scepticism on whether it was possible to live in peace with them.

She was talking with Julia and her sixth-year friends when the last one happened. Hermione waited until the current conversation topic was over and decided to talk to Ceres and Bernadotte for one last time. Julia bid her friends goodbye and followed Hermione easily.

“I think I’m turning in early,” Hermione said.

“Alright,” Bernadotte accepted her words without much fuss. Ceres seemed to be thinking something over.

Julia, on the other hand, was surprised by her statement.

“What about Tom? You came with him, right?”

“Expecto Patronum!”

Hermione hadn’t been paying attention to her patronus when she cast it in the fight against Tom in the ADADA class. A messenger patronus could locate him and so she used it, more intent on following where the blurry white form went. She hadn’t focused much on it, so it wasn’t surprising that it was blurry.

When she cast it now, at the edge of the room filled with scions of old wizarding families and nothing to distract her, the creature that burst from the end of her wand was finely rendered and lifelike. It was lambent with bluish-white glow. She could hear the gasp of awe from Ceres, as well as an impressed whistle, courtesy of Bernadotte.

Her patronus was one of the owls with funny ear tufts on its head. It cocked its head to the side as it watched her curiously. With a nod that she almost swore was sentient, it flew up above the crowd, carrying the message she’d thought clearly at its formation.

(It’s not even an otter anymore, is it?)

She felt another pang of loss, as another piece of her old life fell away. Hermione Granger was an earnest, hardworking Gryffindor witch.

Yet who was Hermione Curie, Ravenclaw prodigy?

“You could cast a patronus?” Julia asked, not quite believing what she’d seen. She was instantly distracted by the flight path the bird of light took in the air, sparkled motes trailing at the edges of its wings.

“I’ve always thought it would be convenient if I can do that, but I’m not sure I have the time to spend just to practise that one spell.” Bernadotte said.

“It’s not as hard as it looks.” Hermione said. “I can teach you, if you want.”

“After ADADA class on Wednesday,” Julia replied quickly, with the zealouslyness of someone who’d been waiting all this time for the right moment to say it. “I’ve checked my schedule, cross-checked with your schedule, and it’s safe to say that most people are free then.”

“That would be after Advanced Charms for us, but I think we can manage,” Ceres said.
“Let’s just try it for next week first,” the brunette said, wry, knowing enough of Julia’s overenthusiasm to realise that she could easily overcommit if she let the other Ravenclaw coax her. She sighed.

“Now that I’ve done that, I can certainly leave.” Hermione concluded.

Julia was still baffled. “Wait, what does that have to do with you leaving?”

“That was what the patronus is for—to tell Tom I’m leaving. What, you thought I was bored enough to randomly cast it?” Julia’s unsure expression and Bernadotte’s shrug told Hermione clearly of what they thought. She huffed. She wasn’t that eccentric. “It’s a messenger patronus. It’s a modification of the usual one and you can use it to send messages to other people.”

“Oh, that’s useful,” Ceres said.

“It is. See you later, everyone.” She left before anyone could ask her more questions or detain her.

If Hermione didn’t leave now, she’d throttle the next pureblood spouting yet another idiotic comment. She might cast Avis and send ravens to peck at their heads.

She might direct the birds to pluck their eyes.

It wasn’t as if it was impossible to grow eyes back if it was an actual, physical trauma that caused it than some mysterious dark hex. (When her thoughts are this bloodthirsty, that was a clear sign that she needed to leave).

Her feet had taken her to the library before she quite realised where she was going.

Hermione even passed the rarely seen Grey Lady. The ghost curtsied gravely to her, and Hermione couldn’t stop herself from curtsying back.

The Ravenclaw ghost had disappeared when she lifted her head again.

In the archaic, dark blue dress she was wearing, Hermione felt more than ever that she was another phantom among the many that haunts the hallways of Hogwarts. Just another one whose memories of life were too strong for them to wish to let go, even if holding on meant remembering again and again events that they found too painful or bitter. Was she simply masochistic to want to go through various wizarding wars again?

I should probably just go back to the Tower and go to sleep, she shook her head, as if it would loosen all those ideas from cluttering her mind. Her thoughts were getting maudlin. It was probably only the events of the day that was beginning to get to her and maybe tiredness.

But she was too close to the library already, and seeing the familiar double doors gave her a more intense feeling of home than what she’d felt when she first saw Hogwarts’ castle.

It’s not as if she even knew what owl her patronus was, right? She could look it up if she’s in the library. Plus, she hadn’t even taken any charms classes last week. She might as well read lightly for next week (she knew most of the material covered, but a refresher was always nice).

“Good evening, Madame Cobb.” Hermione greeted the librarian. She was actually a rather beautiful witch with dark hair, though there was something eerie about her indeterminate age.
“Good evening, Hermione. Beautiful dress. Was there a party I wasn’t aware of?” Arachne Cobb asked.

“Oh, it was just a mostly-pureblood affair. You know how it is.” Hermione replied dismissively. The librarian’s smile was understanding.

“Feel free to stay as long as you want.”

“Thank you. I think I will.”

So, Hermione took up one of the carrells at the back, the one closer to the Restricted Section, several books at hand. As she read, she found that there were several owls that her owl could have been—it didn’t help that being made of monochromatic light meant that you can’t determine the actual colouring of your patronus if it was a real animal. Size doesn’t help either, because she’d seen people with rat patroni who can summon rats the size of a Great Dane when they needed to fend themselves against certain dark creatures. She supposed it wasn’t that important in the grand scheme of things and simply moved on to reading about charms.

At least, that was before she fell asleep somehow. The book slipped on the table and her head fell on her arm and Hermione lost herself in a timeless bliss.

Sometime later, something compelled her to wake up. It was unclear whether her subconscious heard and realised the presence of someone else or whether it was the gut feeling that almost always meant sensing changes in her magical surroundings. When she did open her eyes and lift her head, she saw Tom was writing on a parchment on the seat across the table.

He was still in his dress robes.

“When did you get here?” Her voice was still slightly scratchy.

“A little over five minutes ago. Something came to mind when I was walking so I wrote it down.”

He didn’t seem to be writing an essay—considering the crossing out he was doing and the long lines, it seemed to be more of a diagram.

“What time is it?”

“An hour and,” small green numbers floated before vanishing quickly in front of him, his wand movements rather abbreviated compared to those actually required by the Tempus spell, “fifteen minutes since you left.”

Hermione dropped her head on her arms again, letting out a long sigh. She still wasn’t in the best of moods, not even after that impromptu nap. After trying to breathe slowly, she picked herself up again and met his dark blue eyes.

“Why did you come here?” She asked.

“Why can’t I visit the library?”

She had no patience for his games right now.

“Fine. You can do whatever it is that you need to do. I’ll just head back to the Ravenclaw Tower to sleep.”

The brunette had started to collect the books she’d taken. She didn’t even care if he took around
half of them—she only wanted to drop them on the collection trolley. Neither was she surprised that he’d rolled up the parchment in no time and slipped it somewhere, probably the sleeve of his robe. The quill had probably been sealed with a tap of his wand too.

“We need to talk,” Tom said.

“Oh, so now we need to talk?” She kept her voice carefully low. No need to bring the wrath of Madame Cobb on them. If Irma Pince was serious and implacable, then the always smiling, polite Arachne Cobb was surprisingly five times scarier.

“I was allowing that time might be necessary for you to relax.”

She laid the books on the first trolley she saw and Tom did the same.

“Look, I’m in a bad mood. Not everything is about you, Tom, but if you stay around longer, I can’t guarantee that I won’t start throwing barbs in your direction too, considering that you’re not exactly uninvolved. This is my last and only warning.” Hermione hissed.

“I’ll take the risk.”

She threw her hands in the air. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Hermione wasn’t exactly walking anymore—she was striding, just short of breaking into a run. It helped that Lucretia thought that boots were perfectly acceptable footwear for formal events as long as they were elegant, so her spare pair had been transfigured into something more fitting. Tom kept up with her fast pace.

At her speed, the brunette witch only managed a hurried nod at the librarian. Madame Cobb was not the slightest bit surprised at her hurry; the librarian simply smiled and nodded back.

Hermione was already heading for the grand staircase that would end right at the doors to the Hogwarts grounds on the ground floor.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“What’s wrong? Everything! Nothing! I don’t know!” She snapped. “It would all make better sense in the morning. All I wanted to do right now is strangle half of the people attending simply the petty crime of being idiots! Which I know would not help my cause the slightest, and it’s not as if they were raised any better, but it still doesn’t change what I’m feeling right now, does it?”

She didn’t like the slight helplessness that appeared at the edges of her anger.

“That’s where you’re wrong.” He said.

“What, that they’re not idiots?” She raised her voice.

“No, you said half. I say almost all of them are fools. You don’t have to take everything they say seriously. If you start with that assumption, people will never disappoint you.”

He got a laughter out of her, even if it was more bitter than anything.

“Well I can’t. I still have high hopes for the human race, though goodness knows I question myself about it at times. It’s why I sometimes envy you, of your ability to carelessly dismiss huge chunks of the populace. Not that your approach wasn’t without its weaknesses—it would give you blind spots if you’re not careful.”
“I know. But you’ll catch the details I’ll miss, the unexpected—” he waved his hand with the unpleasant expression of one shooing flies, “—quirks of the human psyche. Like mercy and love and all that rot.”

“I still want to create vultures to send after you.” The admission came easily to her as her wand slid into her hand with the smoothness of hot knife cutting through butter.

“What for?” He asked, more amused than concerned.

Hermione turned around to face him as they’d reached one stair landing, one floor below the library entrance, her curls already flowing wilder from the magic she’d pulled into herself in anger.

“I am not deaf, Tom. One speech was not enough to win all the purebloods over, is it? That was what all those conversations was for. All the platitudes about doing what the Ministry couldn’t, of putting muggles and muggleborns in their places, of all the dumb cattle muggle jokes—” she raised a hand to stop him from speaking. “I know it’s all just bait for your little fishes. It doesn’t mean that I’m not still bloody pissed off.”

He stepped forward without fear, his raised hand pausing in the air beside her face.

“Give me the name of anyone you hate and I’ll find a plausible fatal accident for them.”

“You can’t be careless with accidenting someone, Tom,” she was exasperated. “There are people are still looking for your faults, people waiting for you to slip up.”

“All the people in that room scarcely mean anything compared to you.”

“Shut up.” She snapped, furious. “That doesn’t mean they’re nothing. They all still mean something to you. It’s why you even bother with all the theatrics in the first place. I know. I don’t need your sweet talk to calm down.”

Hermione was glaring at him, enough magic curling around her to fuel an impressive Fiendfyre if needed.

“Power is your poison of choice, Tom—and they’re the worker bees that would bring everything you need to construct your damned kingdom. This is why I walked away before I started tearing all the freaking idiots I found there, maybe even beginning with you.”

He kissed her next to a suit of armour, yet kindness was beyond her right now even with their mutual flame. Her faith in humanity was battered and worn—the bleakness was dragging her under and he just won’t leave her alone. She scratched his back, ignored her own need to breathe to pull him down and drown with her. Hermione turned their position around at one point and pushed him against the wall in turn. Her bites were sharper than usual. Yet from the way he answered everything she gave to him with a relentless fervour, it concerned him not in the least.

When her fury had abated slightly, they were both panting.

“Feeling better?” He asked.

Hermione groaned when she spied the right side of his neck. “God, that is going to be an awful bruise.”

“That’s what the concealment charm is for.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She retorted, before sighing. “As pissed off as I am, the last thing I want
to do is to vent it at you.”

Tom tilted his head to the side. “Why not?”

*Because domestic abuse is wrong,* she thought, before realising how absurd her entire situation was if she had to say it to *him*, of all people.

“I’m hurting you.”

“Nothing worse than what I’d get in a duel.”

She was a little flabbergasted by his response that her next words were unplanned.

“It’s not exactly fair, is it?”

From how he simply stared at her for another moment or two, it was obvious that he wasn’t quite clear why the statement even made sense to her. Based on his amusement, it certainly didn’t for him.

“Hermione, I suggest that you check the corresponding marks you have before you say that.”

She shrugged. “I still don’t think it’s going to be as bad as yours.”

“Well, if that’s your issue” he finally said. “Why don’t we make it fair, then? Let’s have another fight in the Room of Requirement. You’re free to unleash your annoyance and I’m free to defend myself.”

She looked askance. “In a *dress*?”

“Let’s set that for another half an hour, then. Shall we? That would be enough time, wouldn’t it?”

Since Hermione wanted urgently to thrash something, she certainly wasn’t going to decline if Tom came up with an idea of a fight.

Hermione took the elegant dress off with dispassionate precision. There was none of the lingering sighs that some may express in having to return such exceptional dress. For her, it was a costume, and she’d finished playing her part in the play. She undid the charms Lucretia had used to shorten the hem and sleeves to return it to the original lengths.

“How’s the meeting?” Lakshmi asked curiously from her bed.

“Successful,” she said. “Though I suppose you can’t help the prejudice thrown around, it still pisses me off.”

“Ah. That explains your sour expression.”

“Yes. And I still want to kill something.”

Unlike Eugenie’s possible concern as to whether she was feeling alright, Lakshmi considered that statement to be absolutely normal and barely reacted except to eat more pistachios. Hermione slipped the hanger in the dress again and hung it on the outside of Lucretia’s wardrobe. It wasn’t even certain that something that fine could be given to Hogwarts’ laundry. She picked her usual pair of boots, took the only trousers she’d bought with her stipend from Hogwarts and chose a random shirt. After that, Hermione started to bundle her hair up and pinned it that way, leaving
only a few tendrils that had escaped.

“You’re going out again?” Her dormmate asked curiously.

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“I did say that I still want to kill something, right? Well, Tom volunteered to be that something, so I thought, why not?”

Lakshmi tapped her plump lower lip with a painted nail. “I know Riddle’s a cold person and all that, but I’m having weird pangs of sympathy for him somehow.”

“I don’t think you need to. Tom is just as destructive, actually. He’s fascinated that I’m someone he didn’t have to hold back much in a fight against. Trust me, the fact that I’m a witch doesn’t make him suddenly hesitant at attacking—he sends Reducto as easily as a common jinx.”

Hermione nodded at Lakshmi’s surprise. “It’s true. Then, some of the spells we use aren’t exactly…hmm, how do you say it, approved for Hogwarts curriculum.”

Her dormmate’s eyes sparkled with interest.

“Ah, well. It’s good that you have each other to sling spells at, then.”

“Oh, you have no idea how cathartic it is to be able to attack him. Even if we’re sticking to non-fatal damage.” Hermione’s tone was coloured with more than a little dark humour. She might still have some Voldemort issues she wanted to exorcise and she was even humming a little at this stage.

She was about to pick her jacket and walk out before something crossed her mind. The velvety, almost-black rose with the spicy scent might be beyond her to transfigure (and without a wand, no less) but she could do irises and daffodils. The brunette witch tore a loose parchment into four pieces, and made three, sweet-smelling black irises to tuck into her hair and one daffodil.

She bared her teeth in a smile that wasn’t exactly friendly at the mirror. There. That’s it. She was ready for battle.

“Hermione?”

“Yes?”

“Sometimes, you can be scary.”

Hermione grinned at her friend. “Why, thank you.”

Tom had arrived with an ensemble that was as basic as hers. He was holding the door to the Room of Requirement for her.

“You didn’t pick a field that would advantage you, right?”

“Where would the fun be in that? I thought you’d appreciate a little escapism.”

She took his offered hand.
Hermione understood what he meant by escapism once they stepped in. The room was large and done in Rococo style, as the bright and playful wallpaper and ceiling stuccos can attest. Elegant French windows lining one length of the wall and she could smell rose and jasmine scents wafting in from their direction. There’s a well-maintained garden outside, then—or in this case, a very good illusion of one.

There was even a grand piano on one end of the room, and a four-poster bed on the other, with carvings no less detailed than the ones displayed by the table and chairs. The rest of the furniture displayed similar levels of taste and pedigree.

“Now, we get to destroy this beautiful room,” Tom said with ease.

She can certainly get behind that—Hermione had already started calculating the dimensions of the room. “This level of detail…I assume this is a reproduction of a real place. Where is it?”

“The Malfoy’s summer manse on the banks of the river Orne, Normandy.”

“Abraxas plays the piano?” Hermione asked in surprise.

“Contrary to how he seems to be at times, he is actually a very sophisticated man.” Tom said.

She couldn’t help but laugh at that. It seemed that was his intention in the first place, because he was smirking right beside her.

“You’re joking.”

“No, not at all. You can easily gain this as your holiday home if you were to become Mrs. Malfoy.”

The brunette witch snorted. “As if I’m not aware of his family’s position on blood purity. They wouldn’t let him look outside the Sacred 28, or maybe France’s Gilded Lilies.”

“Yet even the Malfoys bend to power,” he commented.

“If I have to subjugate his family to get him to marry me, that means they’re mostly blind to what I am from the beginning,” she said, letting her voice cool. “Why would I choose people who can’t even see me as a person until they’re forced to? If it was power I was looking for, it’s still not a good enough reason—how powerful could they be if it turns out that I can actually take them down?”

It should be unsettling how easily she could slip into his worldview and wear it like her own.

(He would lend you his crown when he’s bored—if you would just ask.)

“So, let’s rip this room to pieces?” He asked as they walked to the exact middle of the room.

“Oh yes. Let’s rip this room to pieces.” She nodded firmly.

“When the handkerchief falls, then.”

Tom transfigured a scrap of paper into a handkerchief and then threw it into the air with a quick upward Ventus. Both of their wands were out. Hermione began moving backwards quickly, to Tom’s amusement.

“What? There are no rules on distance. There are no rules but for lack of permanent harm.”
She had the feeling that he would have chased her down if it wouldn’t cause him to lose sight of the drifting handkerchief. He certainly had second thoughts about throwing the handkerchief that high in the first place. The piece of fabric had already floated lower than shoulder level.

*This is it.*

The moment the handkerchief touched the ground, Tom opened with a series of hexes and jinxes, with a good number of *Reducto* and the fireball that is *Confringo* in between to make it harder to simply hold it all back with shield spells. Hermione dodged the first, shielded against the next few while pulling the room’s table in front of her and tipped it to its side as a physical barrier. The marble surface would hold against any number of fire spells and even a *Reducto* wouldn’t take it down quickly if Hermione reinforced it.

She could sense the first powerful cutting spell crash against the table. Hermione cast *Farina* in the air, and when the white powder began to fall, she cast *Consprego* to spread it.

Tom would have avoided the expanding haze of white powder as he had no idea what it was. Hermione cast an invisible bubble-head charm on herself, and then *Confringo* and a *Ventus* in their general direction.

The fireball of the Confringo met the suspension of flour in air and started a thermobaric explosion. From human chest height and higher, the space on the other half of the room was simply filled with *burning air*. The only saving grace was that the wind she called by *Ventus* blew it away from her. Even as she ducked down, she could feel intense heat at her back and Hermione wondered whether it meant she had something a bit worse than a sunburn.

Wait, thermobaric explosions also propagated a shockwave, right? And didn’t an indoor explosion suck out a *lot* of oxygen from the room, increasing the risk of asphyxiation?

“Tom? We need to call this off. I *might* have screwed up.”

“You mean, you didn’t *mean* to burn the upper half of the room in one colossal blast?” His tone was drier than dust and came from right the other side of the tipped table. It was far closer than she’d expected—he’d certainly moved fast.

“How’s your breathing?”

“I used the bubble-head charm the moment I felt lightheaded. It’s supposed to do that, then?”

She could hear him standing up and walking over to her side. How he could still be this relaxed, she had no idea. His clothes looked singed and she could smell burned fabric. The burned skin scent became more obvious as he came closer.

“Um, sucking out a good amount of oxygen in a closed room is a well-known side-effect. You see, I might have not quite remembered it to be that potent. I thought it would simply be a conflagration, which it’s emphatically not. It’s an instantaneous combustion” She ran a diagnostic spell on him at the same time he did the same to her.

“Burns,” they said at the same time. Hermione couldn’t help but chuckle. Tom merely had one of his not-quite-a-smile.

“You didn’t expect to burn yourself either, I gather?” He asked, as she had started removing her jacket.

“Yes,” Hermione said with a sigh as she popped her bubble-head charm and his. “It’s been a while
since I tried anything that deadly, alright? It takes fine control to ensure it doesn’t spread to your own side. I ignited too fast and I certainly didn’t calculate the wind speed properly. Should’ve let it get carried away a bit farther.”

“What spell was that?” He was so interested that he almost forgot about his own burns. She pointed her wand at him.

“Clothes. Off.” She ordered. He followed her directions promptly.

“Well, if you really want to know…”

The brunette trailed away and busied herself with unbuttoning his shirt. She ignored the unamused expression he had.

“Hermione?”

“Hmm?”

“You were saying?” He asked.

“That I needed to treat your burns rather than go to the infirmary? Because Maggie Edelstein is really going to roast us otherwise?” She said, innocently blinking at him. Her insolence gained her a rather intense kiss, probably because he channelled all his annoyance into it. His hands did not go lower than her neck. Since even her shirt rubbing slightly against her back had made her wince, it was a good precaution.

Hermione sighed. “Alright, let’s treat the burns first.”

“What spells did you use?”

“Nothing you didn’t know.” She replied, unbuttoning her shirt.

Hmm, being cryptic and annoying people isn’t so bad after all, she mused, noticing the flicker of a frown passing his forehead. She stared at the burned cover of the grand piano and turned around to see the bed still undestroyed at the other end of the room. Picking up their articles of clothing was something she did without thought. “No, really, I’m sure you know all the spells. Well, the first might be unfamiliar, but simply because it wouldn’t occur to you that it has an offensive use.”

“What’s the first spell?” He asked.

“Farina.”

“Flour?” He asked in disbelief. “That white powder was actually mere flour?”

“Oh yes,” she nodded sagely. “It wasn’t magic that I relied on, it was simple chemistry. Once you know the basic reaction, you can adjust it as you go and improvise with whatever ingredients happened to be at hand. Hmm, it’s a pity I don’t have a muggle chemistry textbook with me so I can’t illustrate what exactly the reaction that happened. It would have worked even with sawdust.”

She was sure that Tom was aware of the jab that she made, he was simply prepared to not take it personally.

“Any reason to choose the bed?” He asked.

“Because I suspect that it’s a lot more extensive than the burns we inflicted on each other after the duel in Defence class, and I’m not going to do that standing up and tiring myself. As for the chairs,
well, they’re on the other side of the room and I don’t think they escaped unscathed, did they?”

He walked slightly ahead of her and turned around, walking backwards now as he gazed at the burnt side of the room.

“No, definitely not.”

“Thought so.”

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*Episkey* truly worked rather well to restore all layers of skin to good health, blood vessels included. Covering the whole back was a tedious but routine work. It was checking for deeper burn damage that was harder, though on the upside, it meant that the wizarding world wouldn’t see a lot of the burn shock that can be regularly seen in a non-magical A&E department.

“I think you know that there are no whitish dead skin areas from the fact that your clothes took the worst of it,” Tom commented when she asked again for the third time about what he saw at her back.

Hermione sighed. “Start pressing gently, then. If something’s tender, then there’s a deeper damage that I need to do something about.”

“That I need to do something about, you mean?”

She huffed but accepted his correction. “Yes, yes. Something you’d need to do something about.”

Considering that she didn’t really find anything that bad on his back, he was probably right. She was farther from the blast than him, not to mention that she was behind a table too. Still, she paid attention to his hands casually checking every inch of her back all the way down to her waist. It was only as she shifted around and finished checking that there also wasn’t anything bad on the backs of her thighs that she realised she was down to her underwear and knee-high socks (and the acromantula silk wand holster, but that never counted). Tom didn’t have more layers on either and her eyes were already trailing down the planes of his chest to the lean lines of his abdomen.

*Tom could certainly model as Theseus for Michelangelo to sculpt.*

Hermione blushed.

He was staring at her with curiosity. “Why only blush now?”

“Because I was being professional and in a straight-up healer mode earlier!” She sputtered. “You just focus on the damage, how much damage is there, and how you can fix it as quickly and painlessly as possible. If I let myself get distracted, someone might die.”

“No one’s dying now.”

“Exactly.” Hermione groused.

The Ravenclaw witch didn’t quite enjoy being the only one flustered between the two of them. She was beginning to suspect that Tom would find a way to maintain his equanimity even if he suddenly found himself on a bed with several undressed veelas. Before she could huff and pick her way out of the bed, he’d already crushed her mouth to his. Suddenly there was all this warm skin against hers, an explosion of sensation that overwhelmed her for the first few seconds before she answered it with her own rising desire. It was only when she found herself sitting on his lap that her
eyes widened at what she’d just felt.

“Oh.” She murmured, surprised. “I thought you were unaffected.”

His huff was halfway a chuckle. “By you, when you were half naked and touching me? If I said that, I’d be lying through my teeth.”

It was a flattering statement, though it also meant that her blush wasn’t going to go away any time soon. Goosebumps rose on her back as she felt his hand skimming her side and trailed up the middle of her back.

“I’m not even wearing my pretty bra.”

“Well, it wouldn’t matter if I’m just going to take it off, is it?” Was his unabashed reply.

She glared at him while she knew that her face was getting redder, but he did prove true his words as he unclasped it with one hand. He slid it oh-so-very carefully off. Seeing the hesitation on her face, he simply leaned back.

“You still have some anger about tonight, don’t you?” He asked. He lightly trailed the back of his hands at the undercurve of her breasts, sometimes straying to the sides and occasionally even brushing past a nipple.

“It’s generally not at you.”

“But there’s still a part of it that is.”

“A small part that doesn’t matter,” she said. “You might be power hungry, but you’re not an actual idiot.”

When he flicked her nipple for the third time, she scored her nails down his spine, not missing his darkening eyes.

“But you blame me for arranging the meeting in the first place, for placing so many fools in one room, for forcing you to bear their company for one evening—”

“Tom,” she warned him.

She could feel her anger prickling to life again at the edge of her sense, and the irrational part of her mind wanted to blame him for everything because it was convenient and he was there.

“You still blame me for forcing you to be nice to them and to act as if their opinions were brilliant wisdoms that would surely be passed on to future generations—”

Hermione silenced him by taking the breath right out of his mouth with hers, her hands gripping his upper arm and the back of his head. She bit his lower lip hard and sank her nails into the back of his shoulder, but it only seemed to burn his heat into a blazing inferno. His hand was on her backside, pulling her tight against his hardness and she gasped at the sudden friction.

That was when she noticed that the bruise she’d left earlier in the night on his neck was turning bluish.

“Do you actually want me to be angry at you?” She asked in a low tone between irregular breaths.

“You are,” he answered. “Denying it would change nothing. Now, pulling it to the surface…”

His left hand was slipping under her panties, over the curve of her ass.

“…is only going to make pissed off at you for no good reason.” She finished.

“Vent it, then. You wish to channel that vehemence? Use me.”

She had noticed then that his hands laid very still over her.

“I can’t, no, I’m not going to treat you like that no matter how much you piss me off!”

Like that amused smirk that Hermione wanted to wipe off his face.

“Do I look like I mind?” He asked back, and before she could answer he snapped his hip upwards right against hers and Hermione completely lost her train of thought. Tom was still solidly beneath her and waiting for her first move. “Would you still say it would be a horrible act for you if it is my natural interest is to have sexual relations with you?”

“I’m still feeling weird,” Hermione muttered.

“I did cause all the unpleasant tension you’re currently feeling,” he reasoned, his tone even. “Why shouldn’t it also be my responsibility to ease you out of it? Really, allow me to correct the wrongs I did to you.”

He had already lifted her hips and she raised herself just to make it more straightforward. He was easing down their final articles of clothing (except for her socks).

“You are such a smooth talker,” Hermione murmured as she kicked her panties away, unsure whether she was actually approving or not. Yet she’d dropped her wand into her hand from its holster and started the motions for the contraceptive charm anyway.

“It did get your knickers off, didn’t it?” He replied easily, dodging the swat she aimed at the side of his head with a move to kiss her sternum. “Unless you wish to rescind your agreement?”

Hermione couldn’t say that she didn’t imagine herself being in this position sooner or later. She was figuring out more from the twists and turns of his mind than she had expected she could, and somehow, he’d begun to see the things that made her tick.

She kissed him hard and fast, before drawing back to make a point.

“Whatever we do would be the result of our choice. I’m not using you,” she just had to say it bluntly. “I don’t do that to my friends. With how much we know of each other, we can never be acquaintances anymore. We can only be close friends or familiar enemies.”

Hermione took another breath, this time picking her words with care.

“As I know the darkness in your soul, you know the flaws of mine.”

It was nothing as nice or sweet as love.

“How many souls have you cracked open in front of their owners, Hermione?”

She didn’t roll her eyes at the shadows in his eyes, merely quirking an eyebrow in disbelief. As if she had much time to make a psychological study of any other people between all the things she wanted to do to change the current (past) world. Admittedly, she did know that he was very bad at sharing. When she sat back down, the tension between them was higher than before. The rapid thump of the heartbeat in her chest was obvious to her.
“You do realise that I scarcely have time for a personal life, don’t you? Much less to peer into anyone else’s damned soul?”

“Yet you stared into and interfered with mine all the same.”

“Because you’re a linchpin to many things, Tom. Your presence, your fall, casts a long shadow over many futures. But everyone else? They’re scarcely that crucial individually, even if they might end up leading or starting important factions in the wizarding world.”

Hermione did roll her eyes this time when his raised eyebrows and lightening mood clearly meant he took it as a compliment. Seriously, ‘you might destroy the world’ was hardly a flattering comment.

“Look, I’m not saying that you’re the most important person in current history or anything. It’s probably just because no one else had turned crazy enough to burn the world down.”

“So, you are using me to change the future. Why the fuss over something similar?”

“Because technically, I’m also using the entire bloody Hogwarts to change the future.” She pointed out, while he was more interested in mapping out the shape of her shoulder blades. “You’re… different. More than that.”

“A soul mate, Hermione?” His tone was almost mocking. She snorted outright and gave him a sarcastic look. Seriously…

“I refuse to use the word ‘lover’ because we’re not even besotted out of all things. I happen to think that Romeo and Juliet are a pair of nitwits.”

“Both very good points.” His hands were sliding down the smooth expanse of her back, to her waist and the upper curve of her ass and then up again. Her eyelashes fluttered and she watched him from under half-lidded eyes.

“You’re already my partner in ‘let’s not get the world destroyed’ project and that’s probably going to take up an entire lifetime. Is anything else strictly necessary?” She really wasn’t up to thinking a lot after everything that happened today. Her hands had minds of their own and had already started wandering, with one following a trail of fine hairs down.

He shrugged, but his eyes were completely focused on her. “Not really.”

“Good. Because I want to shut my brain off for a while as this has been a trying day.”

“I did say I’ll help with that, didn’t I?”

Words became more or less superfluous for some time after that.

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Chapter End Notes

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Thermobaric**: (adj.) (of an explosive device or an explosion) detonated by means of
an explosive substance reacting spontaneously with air. The explosion itself produces a blast front since it occurs in a large enough volume of air, in contrast to a condensed explosive in which oxidation in a confined region produces a blast front emanating from a single source. It accelerates a large front volume, producing pressure fronts both within the mixture of fuel and oxidant and then in the surrounding air.

(Mostly from Wikipedia, because my brain feels like spaghetti right now that the most coherent explanation I can give is 'this entire face of air then goes whoosh!).

Also, I'm not kidding in saying that a cloud of flour in air is extremely flammable due to its dry and energy-rich character (all those long carbon chains, ho) and how it's almost perfectly immersed in another necessary fire fuel (the oxygen in the air) when it's aerosolised like that. Do not start an open fire in the kitchen when you've just accidentally dropped and exploded a bag of flour, for example.
43 Slow Sunday

Chapter Summary

*Breakfast time. Flashback to the first time Hermione intentionally used two dark curses. Hermione is making a grand sketch of the current wizarding world with some help from Emma. Maggie Edelstein gets shanghaied by Madam Álava.*

Chapter Notes

Soooo...catching up on old friends is not always beneficial if you're in the middle of trying to switch career tracks (even if it's not far). An old teammate of mine from uni turns out to be a director (well, directrix, to be accurate) of a tech start-up. Shite.

Sorry for the delayed update. Trying to congeal back from shapeless goo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

43 Slow Sunday

The weirdest thing about the morning was about how completely normal it was.

She wasn’t surprised or regretful; Hermione had scarcely done anything she hadn’t expected and partially planned for.

How this came to be for her was because the older she became and the more she knew, her mind became honed at calculating the odds of events. The more information she had, the more accurate her intuition would be for future possibilities opening and closing (of course, she wouldn’t rely on them for actual forecasts without doing some real calculations with pen and paper to back it up). Ever since she finished her Mastery in Arithmancy, her mind automatically calculated probabilities for simple events at the back of her mind. It was a comforting background hum, almost an afterthought.

It was also why she’d grudgingly accepted that she can’t afford to lie to herself or indulge in denial.

In an arithmancer’s forecast, a blindness that big would easily lead to a lethal mistake. Hermione won’t gamble with her friends’ lives just because she couldn’t face her own weaknesses and human flaws. As such, she always made a reckoning of her own interests no matter how unexpected. She was attracted to Tom and he could actually be a decent friend (if you didn’t threaten his life and you don’t let him walk all over you and treat you like another easily disposable pawn). Ergo, the probability that she would sleep with him was noticeably higher than a random coin toss would come up with heads.

Tom’s lack of concern, on the other hand, really needed no explanation (he was shameless, why would he have any regrets?)
He found her nudity aversion and embarrassment amusing, towards which she simply ignored his reactions. She summoned all her clothes one by one, and before she wore them, she kept the blanket around her. Not being used to being ignored, he ended up distracting her before she’d summoned all her clothes.

“Tom!”

“I’m not stopping you from doing anything,” he murmured to her breasts. How on earth was she supposed to think when his hands were already drifting lower?

Alright, she wasn’t trying as hard as she could to stop him and they ended up getting carried away, but she told herself that it was only once. After that, she was more interested in food—she hadn’t even had breakfast. Her schedule was usually very full on weekdays, and it was why she was determined to use Sunday to the fullest. She certainly couldn’t start thinking properly without first getting a proper meal.

“Clothes.” Hermione’s tone brooked no argument.

“Are they really necessary?”

She ignored his amusement with aplomb.

“Well, we’re not chimpanzees, so I refuse to eat like one.”

“All the people au naturel in classical artworks would disagree with you.” Tom replied, puncturing her argument easily. She gave him an unamused look.

“We’re definitely not in anything like Eden or Arcadia.” Hermione summoned her shirt.

He moved with far less enthusiasm than she did. At least until he saw that she was only wearing her shirt other than her underwear. That raised his brow.

“You’re dressed for breakfast?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t say public breakfast. It would do for a private breakfast.”

His expression wasn’t easily readable, but the part where his gaze drifted to her legs wasn’t hard to understand. There was a table somewhere between the bed and the balcony at the end of the room (goodness, was it really necessary to have this much space for one bedroom?) it seemed convenient enough. This was when she figured out that the Room of Requirement had the same amenities that any of the staff lodgings in Hogwarts has—full room service. Tom had successfully summoned a house elf and requested breakfast to be brought to them. What they did get an arrangement of many dishes laid on the table.

A shirtless Tom openly rolled his eyes when she began asking the House Elf (Melsy) about where the kitchen got the recipe for each of the dishes. Midway, Hermione carelessly summoned for parchments and quills—and she was almost buried under the amount that was flying her way.

Tom reacted faster and stopped all of them with a flick of his wand. He passed a random one to her along with a quill. His look told her she really should know better.

She gave him a sheepish grin. “Um, thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Now, can we actually get on with breakfast?”
“After I wrote all this down.”

Tom made a put-upon sigh but didn’t actually stop her. He merely summoned the scroll that she’d seen him work on last night in the library, quill included, and did his own scribbling as she turned to Melsy and continued the impromptu interview. Hermione found his lack of protest weirdly unnerving.

(Why? Because at this point, Ron would have told her to ‘put the quill down, for Merlin’s sakes, and let’s just eat’.)

“You’re not asking me why I’m doing this?” She finally asked.

“Obviously, you insist on compiling that house elf cookbook you think is important to do, to record their ‘contribution’ that the wizarding world tends to gloss over or even consider as their own creation. Personally, I doubt it would make much of a difference—people see what they wish to see. But you won’t let that stop you at all, would you?” He didn’t even look up from whatever it was he was working on when he gave her the answer effortlessly.

Hermione was stunned.

“You remembered that?”

It was her tone that caught his attention. “You said it yourself when we took our dinner in the kitchen.”

“We’ve talked about so many things,” she said.

“And I’ve yet to become senile. It’s merely a case of listening and remembering—not exactly chasing down the blackmailer to the king of Bohemia, is it?” He replied as easily. That was when he began to watch her expressions carefully. She barely paid any attention to the milk she was drinking, too surprised.

“It’s so elementary, Hermione.”

She sputtered, almost choking on her drink. If he wasn’t so casually involved in spreading marmalade over his toast (which she was almost certain was a façade), she was sure he’d look bloody smug. That was why she bit back the reflex to shout ‘don’t tell me you read Arthur Conan Doyle!’

“Did you happen to have close friends before?” He asked, out of the blue.

“Close friends?”

“Male, female,” he offered without much care about the details. “Someone you can perhaps imagine yourself in a romantic relationship with.”

The brunette witch could’ve said no, but the way her cheeks coloured probably already told him that her answer was yes.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, there’s at least one.”

“At least?”

“Remember the holes in my memories? They’re here to stay. There may be a few more people, but I was sure they’re not really close friends either.” She said. He nodded in understanding.
“Well, your surprise implies that even your closest friends have never quite paid attention to your interests. An observer is lead to conclude that they’ve never really regarded it as important. Perhaps they thought your technical interests were merely academic assignments, as opposed to your actual passion.”

Tom’s gaze met hers. “Am I getting close? Ah, so I am close.”

Hermione had no idea why he needed to even ask the rhetorical question. She knew her face was practically transparent to him.

Yet it was precisely because he’d politely refrained from judging the people she’d known that the difference stood out in stark contrast to her. A wave of his hand floated a cup of tea in her direction. She picked it up out of mid-air. He made it milkier than most people liked and a tad sweet—exactly the way she liked it.

(Ron still overshoots on the sugar all the way to the end, and he’s just as careless with the milk.)

How sad was her life if her friends-with-benefits actually knew who she was better than her first serious boyfriend? (That is, if Ron wasn’t her only serious boyfriend).

“How sad was her life if her friends-with-benefits actually knew who she was better than her first serious boyfriend? (That is, if Ron wasn’t her only serious boyfriend).

“Hermione?”

“Nothing. Just old memories.” She brushed off his questioning glance with a shake of her head. “Anyway, I’d rather stay in the present. Don’t you?”

He raised his cup to her easily. “To the present, then.”

“You know something? I told Eugenie that you came back very late and had left very early this morning.” Lakshmi made a casual comment as Hermione slid next to her just in time to pick out some desserts. The table was half empty, but that was expected on a Sunday because people attend breakfast following a more spread-out schedule (there was no early class everyone needed to rush to in the morning).

As this was Hogwarts and known for good eating, there was no meal of the day that came without dessert. In fact, one can even get some sort of dessert if they were to drop in at the kitchen in the middle of the night.

“You did? Why, how ever will I thank you?” Hermione said with mock surprise.

The other Ravenclaw turned fully to face her. “I think Riddle’s rubbing off you more than you realise.”

“Please. I was sarcastic before I knew him. I simply used to hold myself back more.”

“Still, he’s rubbing off you.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” the brunette mused. “If we’re going by actual examples, most people would think that it’s the other way around, isn’t it? Have you seen him being sarcastic before he met me? I can just see the gossip rags’ headline now, ‘muggleborn doxy corrupts rising talent’.”

“Damn! I’ve been trying to work something like that into a conversation and you just drop it so easily!” Lakshmi cursed. Hermione grinned.
“I’m sure you’d find something more scandalous to speculate about.”

“It’s not that easy,” the dark-haired witch complained. “You’re Hogwarts Nightingale and Riddle’s too good at keeping his appearance of a perfect student.”

Hermione shrugged. “Not my fault. And hey, you do notice that he actually put on less of an act when I’m around, right?”

“And most people who’d accidentally seen that would rather pretend they didn’t. He has more cutting edges in him than a butcher’s convention.” Lakshmi answered dryly.

“I’m sure that’s just because they met him when he’s rather tense.”

Hermione didn’t hide her grin when Lakshmi stared at her in disbelief. “Really? Is that your best excuse?”

“Well, no. My best excuse is, you haven’t given me enough time to ease that tension down.” She replied flippantly as she hid her smile behind a slice of summer pudding.

“Riiiiight,” Lakshmi muttered. “Because just half an hour in a broom closet wouldn’t do.”

“Broom closet, really? How unhygienic!”

The dark-haired witch snorted at Hermione’s faux outrage, before she glared at the transfer student for causing her to make a sound that was definitely not elegant.

“You—! That’s it. You owe me some stories, Hermione.”

“What is it about, now?” Eugenie asked with a tired sigh from Lakshmi’s other side to turn at the brunette. “Did you happen to use a different shortcut that went through a broom closet somewhere?”

“Nope, no shortcuts. I absolutely took the long way back to the dorms,” Hermione said, this morning, she absolutely didn’t add. There was a reason she wasn’t currently wearing last night’s clothes.

“And that long detour involved seeing Tom Riddle,” Lakshmi murmured under her breath. It was Eugenie’s turn to be surprised.

“I did say I was going to fight him last night.”

“What happened?” Eugenie asked.

“Well, we both ended up with rather extensive burns. Some of them might not even be first-degree.” Hermione replied.

“You were at the infirmary last night, right? That would explain everything.” Eugenie said in a horrified tone.

“What? No! I wouldn’t even consider going directly to see Maggie Edelstein like that. We might as well just finish burning ourselves—because she’d absolutely roast us for being that reckless in our fights. I healed most of our wounds and Tom got the rest, of course. I’m not crazy.”

“That is entirely debatable,” Eugenie muttered.

Lakshmi gave her an impressed look while Hermione’s gaze was a betrayed one; ‘Et tu, Eugenie?’
The blonde herself was blushing. Apparently, she hadn’t intended to say her thoughts out loud.

It was Lucretia’s unexpected chuckle from across the table that broke the silence—she’d been talking to a slender witch that nonetheless had a forceful aura.

“A large burned area, you say?” The unknown witch asked.

Her sharp eyes were a yellowish shade of amber and reminded Hermione of a hawk. Even with her Ravenclaw tie, there was a slight something in her tone that made Hermione guess she was one of the Germans.

“Oh, please, a good application of Episkey would do. Of course, you’d need something more specialised if you smell burning fat and not just skin, but it’s nothing beyond what the Hogwarts’ Infirmary can handle.” Hermione replied.

“You make me regret not taking Advanced Defence, Fräulein.” The witch said.

“See, Verena? I told you it was a good idea. Hermione and Tom are really pushing everyone’s duelling standards up.” Julia butted in. Hermione hadn’t even noticed that she was nearby.

“Riddle? Beatrix and Wilhelmina were in his class last year and he is not extraordinary. Too complacent in dealing with his year-mates.” Verena said.

“Oh, that’s not true since his all-out fight with Hermione. He flattened Moorcock and Colliers in less than a minute. You should have seen his duel with Raj too. It was fantastic.” Frankly, Julia’s enthusiasm was bordering on bloodthirsty.

“Perhaps I will.” The German witch did not take her eyes off Hermione. “Lucretia, if you don’t mind…?”

“Not at all. Hermione, this is Verena von Valagust, sixth-year and Ravenclaw seeker. Verena, this is Hermione Curie, fifth-year and also my dormmate.”

“Hogwarts own Nightingale. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

The witch’s smile was very slight, if there was even one at all to begin with. Hermione’s smile was a little awkward, though she doubted the other witch noticed.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too.”

“That nickname is going to follow me everywhere, isn’t it?

’-

Hermione decided that she’d use the convenient free time she had right now to try to chart the current flow of history. Of course, before she would even feel confident to start predicting the direction of the future, she’d have to actually know the present pretty well. That was why she greeted Emma Eccleston without any hesitation right at the Slytherin table—it helped that her general area was empty of other students.

It was clear that the seventh-year prefect had already finished eating and was more occupied in reading. Whether she chose to stay there simply because she wasn’t in the mood to move yet or if she was waiting for someone else, Hermione had no idea.

“Emma! G’morning.”
“Hermione? Good morning. What brings you here?”

The dark-haired witch was only surprised for a second or two before she was back to her level self. She was reading a thick tome on arithmancy, but easily set it aside with Hermione’s presence. Hermione herself was almost distracted by the book. Bridget Wenlock? I thought I’ve read all of her books, but I’m pretty sure I haven’t read this one. What’s the title—

“Hermione?”

She was snapped out of her meandering thoughts by Emma’s voice. She thought the seventh-year’s mouth curved slightly up on one corner. Or, she might just be imagining things—this was the ever-professional Emma that they were talking about.

“I hear that your family is in the Ministry?” Hermione asked.

“My parents are in different departments, but yes, they are. Two of my older brothers are there too.” She answered, moving aside easily. Hermione accepted the implied invitation and took a seat beside her. Hermione shook the left sleeve of her robe loose as she unstuck the sticking charm she cast to a spare scroll there. It fell out with the movement of her arm. She knew she had a verbatim-quill to record this conversation somewhere on her…

“Well, I was trying to map our way forward when I realise that I don’t actually know the conditions in wizarding Britain enough to do that accurately.”

“You wish to know more about the Ministry, then?”

“Yes. I hope it’s not too much of a bother for you?”

“Considering that most people aren’t usually interested, it’s not a bother at all. How much time do you have?”

Hermione thought over her (rough) schedule carefully. “Well, I think I have around an hour for now.”

The seventh-year nodded as her gaze drifted up distractedly, following some invisible organisation chart. “Ah, enough to cover the basics, then.”

“The basics??”

Behind the glasses, the excited gleam in Emma’s usually placid grey eyes was making Hermione a mite worried.

“You already know the minister and his controversial plans for reform, right? There is no limit on the number of undersecretaries that the Minister for Magic can have, though choosing too many would earn the ire of the Wizengamot. Historically, the most anyone ever has without causing an uproar is seven. One has to think about the budget for their appointments too, after all.”

“Alright, seven undersecretaries at most.” Hermione summarised.

“The traditional posts are three, first for the Home Undersecretary, the second for the Undersecretary of Health and Magical Maladies and the third is the Undersecretary of Justice, which is usually responsible for the DMLE as well as the legal system. Not every minister fills all three and sometimes they appoint new undersecretaries for particular purposes…”
Hermione lay on her stomach on her bed, in her dorm, unrolled scrolls and parchments spread around her for her charting project. Lakshmi hadn’t even woken up yet while Eugenie was certainly out and about, perhaps even with other Ravenclaw fifth-years. She had the weird realisation then that she probably knew more Slytherin fifth-years than Ravenclaw ones, thanks to Tom’s minions (friends, Hermione, you should call them friends).

She shook the thought aside and focused back on her chart.

The way Hermione had observed over several years, there were several important pillars within wizarding society in Britain. She needed to understand what they were like and where they were right now to have any chance of forecasting the future.

The first is the most obvious, the *Ministry of Magic*, the bureaucrats that made up the government.

She had a pretty good idea of what the place was like during the 1940s thanks to Emma. The Ministry governs the use of magic through the British Isles and monitors it. There are magics that are undoubtedly dark as well as those that are unquestionably light, but there are far, far more that lay in between. This is where the Ministry comes in with their decrees. A few years out of Hogwarts gave Hermione more than enough field experience to realise that what the Ministry decrees as illegal is not always instantly damaging or dark. Harry’s experienced Auror unit, for one, had many spells in their regular arsenal that was supposed to be illegal due to some rule or another. She was determined that once she became Minister for Magic, those were the first things she’d change.

Hermione’s guideline has always been simple (and Harry agreed with her rule of thumb). Are you inflicting unnecessary pain on another being? Could you reverse the damage you did in a timely manner (say, after the suspects were secured)? If the answer to the first and the second was no and yes, in that order, then the spell could be used.

(Of course, every time a newbie or someone from the more ‘vanilla’ side of Aurors get assigned to their unit, the established members grumble because it meant shelving a good chunk of their spells until the newbie becomes one of them or gets rotated out again).

It did take her a while to pull herself out of her youthful blind trust in the Ministry’s rules. To be exact, she’d resisted until the first time when Harry could’ve easily died.

(It was only three years after the War with Voldemort finished too. It was the first of the serious dark lords that they had to face).

It had been one of their missions that went, as Draco would’ve put it, *tits over arse* (she found it amusing that he overcompensated for his posh background by picking up all the curses he can find every time he was seconded to the DMLE). Someone had cast some sort of blood poisoning curse on Harry. Hermione had cast a strong and rather complex stasis spell on him to stop its progress, knocking him out instantly. Theoretically, all they needed to do was drop him off at St. Mungo’s and let the specialist healers do the work, as he was as stable as he could be under the spell.

(Well, ‘theoretically’ clearly never spoke to their attackers, which had them pinned down and outnumbered three to one, in a small cottage in a village abandoned since World War II. Hermione thought it was appalling that they’d missed an ambush when they knew they were trying to flush out the base of a rising dark lord.

Ron ran through the details of the entire operation over in his head, step-by-step, just like he’d easily run through the steps of any of his chess matches (it wasn’t as if they could do much but plan or try to snipe any fool who extended his head out far enough). The redhead ended up cursing
the scouts which he’d pinpointed as the source of the bad intel in their strategy. *Some newer Aurors were going to get their hide chewed out*, Hermione had thought.

That is, if any of them were left alive to do so afterwards.

After all, they needed Harry’s firepower to even out the odds. Waking Harry up meant allowing the poison to spread rot in his bloodstream once more.

He might be able to get them out…only to drop dead at the end.

It was oh-so-very fortunate that she’d been helping Draco record the books in his family library, and they’d slowed down every time there was a fascinating book. One of those had a blood draining curse. Next to that was a blood *sucking* curse, which takes the blood of the victim into the blood stream of the second target. She and Draco had pored over the book and studied it on Saturday out of sheer morbid curiosity. It was hilarious to see the Harry and Draco’s reaction of mutual disbelief and a general expression of ‘oh-god-tell-me-it-isn’t-true’ when St. Mungo’s test declared that their blood was compatible for transfers to each other, but it was certainly useful in an emergency like then.

“I’m going to drain Harry’s blood from the point of the rot and however far it has spread.” Hermione had said to the room. “I’m going to throw out more than is strictly necessary, just to be safe. To compensate for that, I might take a quarter litre of your blood, Malfoy.”

He went paler, if it was at all possible, but when he spoke, there was no doubt in his voice.

“Do it, Granger.”

Hermione used both curses she’d learned over the weekend. It was indeed as effective as the grimoire said—Harry woke up ready to deal a lot of damage. The team easily fell into their positions, supporting each other’s movements even through improvisations. They were so in sync that observers seeing the memory later on might be fooled into thinking that it was choreographed.

They had all piled in at one of the DMLE’s large pensieves and watched Ron’s memories. The excuse was to use it as a case study (before Ron reamed the scouts that had slipped up). Hermione knew that most of the boys wanted to bask in the admiration of their peers and juniors.

“We’re like the fucking Bolshoi,” Draco had crowed.

“Which would be cool if I had any idea of what in bloody hell that is.” Ron replied.

“Philistine.” Draco snorted.

“Nob.”

“Twat.”

“Gangrene.”

“Gonorrhoea.”

“If the both of you don’t shut up now, you’ll know exactly what gonorrhoea feels like for at least five minutes,” Harry interrupted acerbically as he put on his glasses with his right hand, green unamused eyes staring at them. There was what looked like a black spider web tattoo over his left arm, trailing down to almost his wrist—it was the scar from the curse that hasn’t completely healed yet, the curse’s point of impact being the centre of the web. Even then, his arm was slightly
weak. The Healers told him it wouldn’t be back to full strength for at least a week.

“You can’t do that!” Ron protested. “You don’t even know the spell.”

“Guess how long the check up at St. Mungo’s took? Guess how long it took Hermione to teach me?”

Hermione pretended she didn’t see the looks of betrayal that both Ron and Draco sent in her direction while desperately holding in her laughter. Susan Bones had no compunction laughing out loud, and neither did Tonks.

St. Mungo had declared Harry clear of any curse when they finally made it there. Hermione would find out there and then that she’d managed to pull enough tainted blood with the so-called dark curse.

From that point on, Hermione never looked back.

If she found a new and useful spell in an obscure tome somewhere, if they’d already tested it forwards and backwards for any possible side-effects and they found nothing unexpected, she’d pass it on to Harry and Ron. Draco did the same when he found something from their family library, except he passed it to her so she and Luna could test it in the Unspeakable labs and then passed it to the veteran Aurors. Even Neville got in on it as well—sometimes he came across mysterious old scrolls when he was hunting for exotic plants in far-flung corners of the globe. Ginny did too, though Hermione had no idea where Ginny got the tomes from, considering that she was a reporter covering lifestyle of all things.

(Daphne was…oh, this was before they became closer with Daphne. That was, what, some two more wannabe dark lords down the line? Neither of which was as strong as the first, or as the fourth one that came afterward. Ah, so she still remembered that detail. Not bad.)

So, the Ministry of Magic, Hermione thought to herself as she reread the transcript of her talk with Emma, highlighting parts of it with different coloured inks. The Minister is an idealist. The thing is, the man seems to forget at times that four of his five undersecretaries are from old families. The fifth might have a muggle last name, but he’s still a halfblood, connected to at least one pureblood family. The background profile of his undersecretaries is more-or-less a mirror of the Ministry in general.

Hermione sighed.

It’s still disproportionally dominated by people from old families as well as the well-connected halfbloods, though the muggleborn is a noticeable minority that’s still increasing.

Well, that explained the noise over any suggestions of implementing an entrance exam for Ministry employees. She suspected that Minister Spencer-Moon’s goodwill wasn’t getting him anywhere.

Hermione stared at the chart that Emma had helped her draw, along with footnotes upon footnotes of who was in the same year with who, whose families had historically been together often. She did miss being able to just hand over these stuffs to Draco (even if she can’t remember when exactly she got involved in politics, of all things). But needs must and all that. Add in another talk with Oswin, and she’d probably have enough information on the whole Ministry (or the top and a chunk of the middle tiers). Enough to start calculating their opinion and bearing.

So, where does that leave her now? Ah, the other institutions of wizarding society after the Ministry.
The second pillar would be the Wizengamot. At a glance, it is the wizarding version of the House of Lords, what with the hereditary seats as well as other specially-assigned seats. It also had the capability of the House of Lords old ability to be the final ‘jury of their peers’ for any gentleman disputing the decision of a lower court. Yet the analogy didn’t fit well considering that they also passed laws, which should’ve been the purview of the House of Commons if they’re following the UK’s template.

Basically, the Wizengamot had all the law-making power while they’re also the highest court of the land, the pain-in-the-rear, overbalanced, bastards.

Hermione could feel another headache coming on. It probably meant finding the newest Burke’s Peerage in the Hogwarts library. She needed to see exactly which houses had seats on the Wizengamot. An unaccountable memory of hers remembered well enough that it wasn’t just the Sacred 28 houses that had seats there. In fact, not even all the houses of the Sacred 28 were included, because she remembered that some of the newer ones didn’t make the cut of being old enough a couple of centuries ago.

Then, she needed to figure out who currently held those seats for those families. Usually it was the current head of the house. Sometimes if the head was old and/or bored, it might be passed down to the heir already even before their death.

Alright, what comes after the Wizengamot?

The professional class—they’re the third pillar of wizarding society, and some of them may overlap with the clerical staff of the Ministry. People like Madam Álava and Healer Orpington. They were the people who made the world go ‘round. They may be low profile and pragmatic, and generally dissuaded from messing with politics because they were busier handling real life, but they do have their opinions. They are also perfectly able to passive-aggressively stall, block or even quietly sabotage any ministry decree that they consider as foolish, unnecessary or outright evil.

Technically, they were the hardest to check for her. She probably could start with Nurse Edelstein and her circle of friends, and maybe even Healer Orpington and Madam Álava. She also had no doubt that many Hufflepuffs have contacts that are actually quite capable at working for a living instead of just coasting on the income from their estates.

It might be a good idea to ask Agatha or Andrew about it.

The fourth pillar would be the media, which in the small and unquestionably insular wizarding world, was mainly the Daily Prophet. On paper, it would seem impossible for an orphan student to investigate a privately-held newspaper company of that size. But she was pretty sure that the article about her in the Daily Prophet was made at Tom’s behest, so finding that out was not as difficult as it seems. Especially since she also remembered Lucretia making a similar assertion easily.

The fifth pillar of wizarding society would be Hogwarts.

It may be small and look like just another school, but its importance was reflected in how practically all the heirs of Britain’s pureblood families were educated there. It was also clear that the current generation was unusually filled with almost all the offspring from the major families and even several from neighbouring countries due to the war in the continent. The political shifts and eddies in Hogwarts were, more than ever, a microcosm that precisely mirrored the power balances of the greater wizarding world.

Unlike in her generation, the old families’ power was still more obviously felt. The old wizarding
culture was still proud and dominant as they had not been broken by the fall of Voldemort and the blood-soaked guilt for supporting him. It can be easily seen by how prejudice can still be uttered carelessly among the students with barely any censure given to them. She was sure that neither Hattie Perks’ nor Adrian Smith’s experiences with bullying because of their background was unique.

Hogwarts was also a place where many talented wizards and witches came to teach—Dumbledore’s presence was a good example of that. Considering how Dexter’s past had surprised her, she suspected that other teachers have backgrounds that were just as odd and impressive. She only needed the names of the entire student body as well as all the staff retained. Investigating them personally would certainly be easier than the Ministry or Wizengamot.

She’d also need to formulate the rules currently in effect within wizarding society right now and add that in, which basically meant the norms and culture.

Hermione groaned.

*Oh, for the love of…*

Pureblood etiquette and code of conduct. She had to know them enough to know how to add them in. These were definitely *not* her favourite.

These include the explicit, such as how a wizard may express interest in a witch, and the implicit, which was probably a ton other rules that Hermione had completely missed. She’d probably need to ask Lucretia to be sure, and one of the Slytherin wizards to double check (Pendleton or Starkey came to mind)—just in case there were rules that wizards were more familiar with than witches and vice versa.

Hermione sighed as she wrote her outline down. After that, she rolled up her scrolls and made her way to the library for that *Burke’s Peerage* she’d planned.

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It had been a peaceful morning in the infirmary for Maggie, and she was plotting on where to have a lunch date with her beau. It might not be a good idea to go to Paris until the war is over, but she was pretty sure she could visit London. At least that was her plan until the flash of green lit her fireplace.

Madam Álava stepped out of the fireplace in no time, her all-black outfit giving her the impression of being the Dowager Queen of Crows, though her grey hair was a contrast to that. She’d never liked floo-calling and would rather visit directly altogether.

“Granny?”

“Maggie. Are you free today?”

“Well, there hasn’t been anyone wounded—”

“Good. You’re coming with me to St. Mungo’s.”

“*Granny Álava!*”

“Oh, just send a message to Hermione and ask her to man the infirmary in your place for an hour or so.”
Nurse Edelstein couldn’t help but open her mouth.

“But she’s—”

“Competent enough to take care of any idiocy that a student would see fit to inflict upon themselves and their peers.” Esmeralda Álava. “Though on the downside, they probably wouldn’t learn that way.”

“She’s a student and…”

Madam Álava stared at Maggie without shifting, one of her eyebrows raised. “And who would check, Maggie?”

Maggie threw her hands in the air. “Dippet wouldn’t even know I left until several days. That’s only if one of the teachers say anything.”

“Precisely.”

Madam Álava took a pinch of powder from above the fireplace and called out for St. Mungo’s. The nurse resigned herself to following suit after she’d managed to call on the house elf attending the infirmary and asked her to pass a message to Hermione. They arrived one after the other at one of St. Mungo’s staff lobbies—both Maggie and Madam Álava was wearing the caduceus pin of the healing profession. St. Mungo’s floo terminal was certainly sophisticated enough to sort people to different fireplaces based on whether they were wearing the identifiers of the healing profession or not.

“Now, I want you to see the handiwork of your apprentice.” Madam Álava said. Maggie was feeling like she was suddenly thrown into the middle of a scene in a play, without a script. She quickly ran to catch up with Madam Álava before slowing her strides down again.

“My apprentice?”

“Well, I can’t exactly be Hermione’s Master yet, can’t I?”

“Um, why not?”

“Because she’s still a Hogwarts student, Maggie, and your practice is in Hogwarts. Do try to keep up. She’ll have to be your apprentice for the time being if she’s to improve as a nurse or healer.”

“But-but we don’t even know if she wants to become one!”

They’d turned around at a small office. Maggie knew well enough that it was not Madam Álava’s office—if anyone gave her any, it would have been something far more impressive, and certainly on the third floor and higher.

“The patient files are declassified by my request because the considerations for an apprenticeship are important enough to provide details of a patient’s treatments. The names are of course removed, but if you’re still in Hogwarts, I’m sure it would not be difficult for you to find any one of them.”

Indeed, there was a set of medical records on Madam Álava’s hands. Maggie simply had no idea what that has to do with Hermione suddenly being her apprentice. With a sigh of defeat, she acknowledged that she was moving blind here.

“I…I don’t understand.”
Madam Álava stared at her critically. “Part of your hair is curled and let down instead of completely held up and you’re wearing a brighter lipstick. Your brain is taking a holiday right now, isn’t it? Because you can’t take your mind off your date for even a few minutes?”

Maggie blushed, the colour of her cheeks clashing awkwardly with her copper hair.

“It’s Sunday! It’s officially my day off, or well, half-day!”

“These,” Madam Álava practically dropped the files in Maggie’s hands, “are the victims of the Hogsmeade attack that Hermione stabilised, no, treated before she sent them to St. Mungo’s. Read them, then read the report that she sent in later.”

Nurse Edelstein paused, surprised. Madam Álava was still evaluating her shrewdly, but it was less pointed than before.

“Report?”

“Yes, by verbatim-quill. Now, does that sound like a novice nurse to you?”

“Not really.”

“Read, then tell me your impressions.”

Maggie did exactly as she was told, leaning against the desk while reading one report after another while Madam Álava either stood or walked back and forth. She shook her head when she was done, the reports placed on the desk once more.

“I know she’s good for her age and certainly has had training already. But this is—”

“Not theoretical knowledge at all and at an entirely different level. She kept her head together—I’m sure you saw the prudence in using the Smokescreen Spell mentioned—and managed to save all those people. I’ve even managed to ask Orpheus about what happened and he told me that there was one patient that did not make it to the notes.”

“Because the wound was light?”

“Because he insisted on going back to the field immediately. Orpheus said that he did drop in at the A&E later on to get the bullet taken out.”

“I still can’t believe that you’re stalking Hermione up to her Head of House.”

“Professional interest, Maggie,” Madam Álava scoffed. “She doesn’t have a pureblood family to back her up and support her. Even with all her talent, how far do you think she’ll manage without anyone else’s help? Would you rather that we not help her at all?”

Maggie didn’t say anything, and the older nurse took it as realisation or agreement.

“Now, aren’t you curious about the last patient?”

“Oh, what the hell, tell me, then.”

“Tom Riddle.”

The Hogwarts nurse raised her voice then, pushing herself against the desk to stand upright.

“What? That can’t be true!”
“In fact, he was shot before Hermione triaged the rest of the victims.” Madam Álava had a satisfactory gleam in her eyes, the same one that a crow has after managing to gouge the eyeballs out of a displayed head at the Tower of London in the old days.

“I knew Riddle was stone cold—both in the good and bad ways, I suppose. But Hermione… I just… I can’t imagine she’d be able to go on and professionally give those people help when someone close to her had just been bleeding recently. I know I’d worry. The skill she went through them too, not much hesitation or doubts there…” Maggie trailed away. She could only shake her head at this point.

“She’s had field experience, that’s the only explanation. Add the research proposal that you suggested she sent me, and it proved that her capabilities are far above the first-year trainee healers. She’s certainly already beyond second year too. One starts to wonder about what the British wizarding enclave in Kopervik was like.”

Since Nurse Edelstein didn’t quite understand what Madam Álava was talking about (or what a town in Norway had anything to do with it), she asked the subject that had been on her mind.

“What was the apprenticeship about, then?” Maggie asked.

The question that Madam Álava asked next wasn’t something that the nurse had expected.

“She’s an orphan without any family member claiming her, isn’t that right?”

“…yes.”

“A healing apprenticeship would scarcely pose a difficulty for her. As soon as she became a nurse or a healer, she’d be able to stand on her own two feet in the wizarding world, regardless of what other professions she might choose to pursue afterward. Oh, don’t look so surprised, Maggie. You and I know that she’d never end up in just one—that is, if the wizarding world doesn’t drag her down to its level first.” Her tone was as acerbic as usual.

Yet Madam Álava’s gaze was keen, sharpened by the stones of ages.

“She has too many dreams.”

Maggie closed her mouth. Initially, she’d wanted to complain that Madam Álava had been too heavy-handed. She wanted to say that her old mentor was pushing Hermione in a direction that they didn’t even have any idea whether the fifth-year wanted or not. Only now did it cross her mind that it wasn’t what the senior nurse had been thinking at all. Her forthrightness made it easy to forget that there were at least four generations of difference between them—Esmeralda Álava was literally the product of another century.

If there was anything that Madam Álava knew as a woman who’d travelled often between the muggle and magical worlds in older times, it was how valuable the ability to be independent was. Back then, not many women could easily change the course of their own life when they wish to do so.

It was simply that Esmeralda Álava never wanted to see Hermione be one of the unlucky ones.

Chapter End Notes
**Random note on the future:** In the future that Hermione left behind, Tonks is alive and is a single parent to Teddy because Remus is dead. Why? Well, why does both of them had to be taken out at once? I don’t really feel particular attachment to either of their characters, just that it felt a bit random. So this is a bit of my roll-of-fate's-dice with regards to the difference in Hermione's future compared to canon. It really doesn’t affect the plot in any way if you want to consider her to just be dead, for example (after all, that future is already gone).

One of the Weasley twins being dead, on the other hand, I can understand. The degree of pathos felt by the reader is significant since we’re actually rather familiar with both of them.

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**Additional Notes:**

...both Maggie and Madam Álava was wearing the caduceus pin of the healing profession: this is inspired by the chrysanthemum pin that a practicing lawyer has the right to wear as a badge of his or her profession in Japan. I thought the easy visual recognition is nice, not to mention that if you have magic, you can key the pin to various wards. It’s like the magical version of an access card.
44 I Hate Mondays

Chapter Summary

Breakfast at a new place. Morning newspapers are delivered. Hermione reads unexpected news. Passing by Hermione’s Ancient Runes and Transfigurations class. Lunch at the Ravenclaw table. Pendleton drops by at the library and Hermione realises things.

Chapter Notes

Another long chapter, probably because I got carried away writing all the details in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

44 I Hate Mondays

“Would you like to have breakfast?” Tom asked her.

He had knocked at the Ravenclaw Tower rather early in the morning. He was lucky that Hermione had always been an early riser that she’d seen him the moment one of the younger Ravens opened the door. She paused at her last thought, backtracking. Wait, was it possible that he’d made note of her habits and schedule already? In one week?

She was going to get annoyed as often as she was impressed by his exceptional memory, wasn’t she?

It was this complicated expression of hers that met him at the door. Tom was unfazed, as usual.

“I’d like to have breakfast practically every morning,” she replied, adjusting the strap of her book bag as she determinedly stepped out of the tower (the longer she dawdled, the higher the chance that someone saw him through the doorway and gossip).

“So, that question of yours is rather rhetorical.”

He made a noncommittal hum. “Really?”

“The question is, what are you inviting me for?”

“Breakfast.”

She gave him a flat, jaded look and held back from accepting his arm. There was no way she would ever be taken by his innocent expression, no matter how good it was. There was also no way she was agreeing to anything he was asking without getting the details. Or reading the fine print.

“Tom.”
He understood the impatience in her tone. “Well, breakfast at the Slytherin table, Hermione.”

She sighed. “Must we?”

“There might be something interesting this morning. I say we have much better seats for the spectacle than your House’s table.”

“Might be?”

“Oh, you know how it is with gut feeling. They’re not always that accurate. Perhaps nothing would come to bear today and it would be tomorrow instead. Or perhaps the day after that,” he replied with a self-deprecating smile.

Hermione snorted. *It seemed that his mask was securely fastened this morning.*

She doubted that Tom would follow *any* sort of vague feeling. He’d either started a series of events or could see the outcome of another percolating from a mile away.

“Alright. I suppose I’d do it sooner or later. Why not today?”

She’d sit at the Slytherin table more than once now for casual discussion (well, *meetings*). The witch had no doubt that in the modern, cutthroat corporate world, Tom would be the type of boss who feel no guilt in turning his underlings’ lunchtime into lunch meetings. Visiting the Slytherin table from the beginning of a meal instead of merely dropping in sometime later couldn’t have been that much different, right?

The Ravenclaw took his arm without hesitation and allowed him to escort her to the Great Hall and eventually his own House table.

Tom passed the bowl of strawberries and cream to her without prompting. She’d only been staring at it for a moment or two longer than casual interest.

Alright, she *knew* he could turn on the charm when needed—he had to build his sterling reputation from somewhere. Yet she’d never really imagined what it would be like if he attended to her solicitously like he did now. Why on earth would she even imagine that?

“I can reach for it myself,” she muttered at a low tone.

“I know. I thought it would be more practical if you didn’t have to.” He replied. “Shall I spoon some to your bowl?”

A small ramekin had conveniently appeared in front of her and Tom the moment the bowl of dessert paused nearby. Oh well, she might as well. She *was* wondering about it.

“If it’s not such a bother.”

“Of course not.”

“Thank you.”

The only reason she didn’t say any of that sarcastically was because Abraxas was still watching the two of them with wide eyes from Tom’s other side. Whenever the blond was staring for too long, Melchior corrected it with an elbow to his ribs—otherwise, the Nott heir seemed to be more occupied in talking to the sixth-year prefect on his other side. *The Slytherin Montmorency,*
Hermione would remember sometime later.

Tom returned to his conversation with Gallus who was across the table from him and Oswin who was next to Gallus.

Right now, she was more distracted by Starkey surreptitiously staring at her from across the table every once in a while. He did it between his efforts to demolish his toast, his baked beans, his bacon, his oatmeal and…well, the rest of the food that made up his entire breakfast. At least, Starkey probably thought he was being subtle. From the way Gallus had already accidentally pushed his companion’s plate, or spilled his milk, or bumped Starkey’s shoulders a little too hard with his right shoulder, Gallus probably considered him as being not subtle enough.

Of course, that prompted Starkey to either growl at him, or shove back. It could’ve easily escalated if Starkey didn’t suddenly yelp and pipe down. This was five minutes ago.

Considering it was Pendleton on his other side, she suspected the pale Slytherin had stepped on his housemate’s foot. For all intents and purpose, Pendleton hadn’t even turned around, seemingly more interested in his conversation with Caspar Zabini.

The witch to Hermione’s left scoffed at Starkey’s last scuffle (he lost to coordinated elbow jabs by both Gallus and Pendleton). Blonde and intimidating, Hermione hadn’t expected to see the German witch to sit anywhere near the Knights. Beatrix von Blankenstein had told her frankly that Tom had informed them of his plan to invite Hermione, and she simply did not trust the level of maturity of the Slytherin wizards to keep her company.

It seemed that they continuously proved her accusation right.

“Boys.” Beatrix said.

“I thought that was just Starkey being Starkey?” Hermione asked.

“He might be the most foolish, but he’s not the only tactless one, is he?” She sent a cool glare in Abraxas’ direction, causing the blond to duck all the way behind Tom. “Men can be such idiots.”

“You wound me, Blankenstein.” Tom wryly replied. He’d pulled himself away from his talk with Melchior.

“Certainly not you, Riddle. You’re as civilised as they get. Others, however…I wonder what their mothers would say if they knew how their boys behaved.”

Tom’s apologetic smile was rather distracting. Fortunately, Hermione had strawberries to direct her attention to and distract her better.

“Ah, do have some mercy. It’s not as if many of them are used to seeing beautiful witches closely.” He said.

“Oh, alright.”

The brunette witch saw Beatrix relenting and returning to her plate. It was still a little surprising to see the ease with which Tom’s charisma affected other people.

“Don’t tell me you actually believed that,” Hermione said.

“He’s still right, in a way.” Then, she lowered her voice. “Agreeing was also the fastest way to get him to leave us alone again.”
“Really? Why?”

Beatrix gave an annoyed huff. “He’s too intense.”

That was when she noticed the slight colour on Beatrix’s cheeks as the Slytherin witch channelled her annoyance by practically hacking her bread roll into two. “Really, back in Brandenburg, the men do not try to charm every woman they know, just because the witch gets a little annoyed. Hogwarts is too much sometimes!”

Hermione bit her lower lip to stop her accidental laughter from spilling out. She wasn’t sure if the too-serious Beatrix wouldn’t misunderstand her.

“Oh, I know. That’s exactly how I feel when I first woke up here. Can you imagine still being somewhat lightheaded from painkilling potions, and suddenly Tom arrives to introduce himself at the infirmary! If I hadn’t had enough etiquette practice before, I wouldn’t have managed to say anything.”

She didn’t modulate her voice and Tom turned his head slightly.

“Did I just hear my name mentioned?”

“In passing,” Hermione replied casually. “I think the polite thing to do is to pretend you didn’t hear that.”

“Well, if you were going to give me leave to eavesdrop you, I wouldn’t turn it down.”

She sniffed. “Please. If you were eavesdropping, you wouldn’t announce it at all. That would just warn your targets.”

“But maybe I knew you expected that and chose to double-bluff you.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at that. He must have felt rather pleased this morning, because she didn’t think he’d joke with her frequently when the Knights were around.

Despite his words, Tom turned back to whatever it was he was talking about with Abraxas and Melchior. Beatrix’s cheeks, however, was slightly ruddier than before while Hermione ruefully grinned back. She was sure there were some colour on her face too, but she gamely moved on. This time, she remembered to soften her voice.

“There. We can ignore him. Now, what were we talking about?”

“That I’ve encountered more shameless wizards here?”

“Oh, the charm offensive is just Tom…and well, some of the French wizards. Everyone else is mostly really nice like Andrew the Head Boy.”

Beatrix had pushed Hermione’s shoulders down in a second and Hermione followed without a question. The blonde didn’t seem scared, just wary and really annoyed.

As the two witches pulled themselves up, Hermione saw the embarrassed expression on Starkey’s face. Pendleton’s face was as blank as a murder victim’s—though that impression might just be from the tomato ketchup dripping down his front. Gallus had the worst luck; he was cursing up a storm as a plate of half-eaten omelette was using his robes as the medium for an expressionist painting—*Midnight Sun, in egg and breakfast condiments.*
“I think I’d have to correct you, Hermione,” Beatrix’s voice was frigid now. “Most of the wizards at Hogwarts really are just boys.”

Hermione guessed that they’ve managed to dodge some piece of flying breakfast just now, courtesy of Beatrix’ quidditch-player reflexes. (The brunette was sure she’d seen Beatrix in Defence class too).

“Starkey. I think you owe the ladies an apology, don’t you?” Tom’s voice was eerily polite.

“I’m sorry!”

Hermione sighed. Really, what else could they do but forgive him? It was an honest mistake. She didn’t want to wonder what Tom would come up with if she didn’t forgive the poor sod.

‘-

She wondered why the Daily Prophet was a bit late today.

They didn’t even have the excuse of having to interview and quickly gather firsthand information about an occurring emergency. That would have been yesterday’s issue, what with having to cover the Hogsmeade attack quickly. Hermione didn’t read the paper yesterday because she wasn’t sure if she was up to dealing with the Prophet’s biased language towards muggles.

The three Slytherin wizards about her had finally finished their round of cleaning up—most of which was of course offloaded to Starkey by the other two.

Hermione did wonder a little why no one from the newspaper was trying to contact her or Tom. Sure, she didn’t really enjoy getting interviewed by the Prophet most of the time, but it would have been a sign that the reporters were diligently at work in trying to cover the event. She just had a weird feeling about this.

Sure enough, instead of arriving along with the postal and delivery owls in the morning, the newspaper owls have only arrived just now. She could see one dropping at roughly the location of Lakshmi’s seat on the Ravenclaw table—that would be the delivery of her dormmate’s paper, she supposed. She saw a barn owl drop one to Abraxas and Melchior, and a small snowy owl drop another to Zabini and Pendleton (a rather subdued Starkey seemed to have forgotten his resolution to stay out of trouble and was jostling over Pendleton’s shoulder to read the paper with him).

Abraxas had passed his to Tom without even looking up from his crepes suzette.

It probably only took half a minute of reading the front page before Tom passed the paper to her. It was an unusually fast time to read the paper, even for him (he hasn’t turned to check the inner pages, for one). She put it out of her mind for the moment, with her turn to read the Daily Prophet.

There was an ad for a law firm, a warding firm and an arithmancer who also accepted ‘personal queries’. She passed them by. Then, there was an interview with the Minister of Magic detailing the improvements to the security measures around the Ministry. She saw ‘guards that do not grow weary or bored’ in passing—what could that be? A troop of golems? Where would the ministry even get them, if her guess was right? It might be an interesting read for some other time, but right now, it was the main story that had caught her attention.

“The Mystery of Hogsmeade’s Attack Begins to Be Unveiled!”

The headline was as over-the-top as always.
“As we have heard yesterday, the DMLE insists that they have found the remnants of a temporary ward erected over the Ministry of Magic, stopping incoming floo calls and floo travels as well as apparation. Outgoing traffic was not affected, hence the illusion of those from the inside that ‘nothing was wrong’.”

Well, Hermione thought, that certainly explained the Aurors’ delayed reaction.

Not unexpectedly, there were still a lot of blaming and disbelief to go around. Other departments were called in as well as outside experts to give a verdict that everyone could be ‘absolutely sure about’. She skimmed it quickly, already able to guess what the gist of the talking points of either side would be. Her interest was drawn more by the Prophet’s so-called ‘mystery’ of the Hogsmeade attack.

“Our intrepid reporters—”

She couldn’t help it—she scoffed loudly at that before continuing to read.

“—has interviewed various witnesses and confidential sources around Hogsmeade to bring the unexpected truth behind the Hogsmeade Attack. We know that the muggles could not have acted alone: without magic, they could not have reached Hogsmeade as the village is as unplottable as Hogwarts. Our sources say that the muggle attackers wore anti-magic charms, which explained their apparent invulnerability and why they were not disoriented. Sources from the Ministry have confirmed that some of the muggles have an American accent—clearly, someone must have taken pains to transport them to Britain. This, of course leads to our investigation of a possible squib and muggleborn plot.”

“For the love of—” Hermione hissed. She didn’t finish her vitriol when she felt Tom’s hand over her right arm. This was not merely jumping to conclusions, this was straight out leaping off the cliff of common sense and into the abyss of prejudice! The brunette witch took a deep breath and continued.

“Dissatisfied by our society, it would not be hard for these questionable people to find muggles who envied us of our magic—”

Wait, what? She didn’t know about that at all. Alright, it was probably her fault not to have read yesterday’s newspaper. Still…

“One suspects that it is not difficult to influence these magic-haters. Promising them the opportunity to harm a wizard or a witch would have been enough to move their insipid mind and shrivelled hearts to agree to anything. The envious squibs and powerless muggleborns therefore joined forces. Together, finding the muggles to do their dirty work was not a problem.”

“This is sheer fiction,” Hermione muttered. “Madness.”

“Readers, we invite you to write to the Ministry and ask them to expel these dangerous squibs from our society. It is better for them to envy us from the outside than to give them the chance to stab us from the inside. Clearly, there should also be a tighter control and monitoring of muggleborns to ensure that they display clear Wizarding Values.”

The words after that passed in a blur, mostly statements supporting the section that have come before. As she put the paper down and returned it to Tom again, she met his unaffected dark blue eyes. Whatever his opinion about it was, she would not be able to read it easily right now. She gazed around the Slytherin table and saw Beatrix frowning as she was reading the copy held by the witch on her other side.
Starkey spoke first. “Might’ve bought the one about the squibs, but muggleborns? Not at all. Why would they sour their swag by doin’ somethin’ that would send them to the louse house?”

“Maybe they’re that desperate?” Hermione heard Melchior’s voice from Tom’s other side. He addressed Starkey’s disbelieving expression quickly. “Look, I know it’s stupid, Ves. We all do. There’s still bloody Grindelwald out there. There were muggles in the Ministry and London attacks and now there are also muggles used in this one—the bloody connection isn’t exactly Advanced Arithmancy here. Besides, it’s not as if the squibs agree with one another on everything easily—they squabble as much as any group of wizards. I’m simply saying that this is how it looks like to other people.”

“I haven’t really heard the muggleborns agitating anything at the Ministry either. I doubt it’s them. The Minister’s outrageous reforms, however, are entirely their mess.” Abraxas said. Gallus as well as the others on the other side of the table turned to him, several of them mildly surprised.

“What? My father does know people in high places.” He said with exasperation.

“If someone has commissioned this piece, it would be traceable.” Pendleton added.

“I’m sure you can find out about it quickly,” Abraxas gave his vote of confidence, along with a thoughtful hum from Melchior.

“That is a good idea, if it was the case.” Tom broke the contented atmosphere that had gathered. “The roots of the story might only come from the hushed testimony of an eyewitness, along with hints given by another. In that case, it would be far less obvious as to who exactly decided to use the Daily Prophet as their mouthpiece.”

Starkey shook his head. “None of the old dogs at the game is going to even bite. Melchior had the right of it. I expect there’d be bowin’ and scrapin’ for that bit of grub street news in tomorrow’s edition, or failin’ that, in the next one after.”

“We need to find the leak.”

Hermione saw the Knights turning towards her as she said it. Even when they were surprised, they were still listening. As a muggleborn witch who grew up during Voldemort’s second rise, she still had the occasional feeling of surprise at how surreal her life was turning to be.

“There’s a key piece of ‘eyewitness statement’ that immediately caught my attention. The only people close enough to the attackers to know that they were wearing an anti-magic charm is Tom and I, no one else. The only reason anyone would know about it is if they’d been in the subsequent prefect meeting after that where we exchanged our experiences of the day and had it written down, so the Aurors and the teachers can have the report the moment they ask for it.”

“So, all the prefects are suspects, then,” Pendleton said, already connecting the dots.

The Ravenclaw sighed as she met his pale grey eyes. She really didn’t think it was Eugenie or Julia, for one, but she couldn’t fault his conclusion.

“Well, there’s already one trait that can be used to eliminate people from that list,” Tom said. “Not everyone would have access to a Daily Prophet reporter.”

The mood at the table was still mostly filled with irritation, but it had lessened from the levels that it was previously at. Hermione managed to remember just then the reason why she was at the Slytherin table in the first place. She leaned slightly to the right.
“I don’t think this was the news that you expected.” She said softly, under her breath.

“Not at all. I suppose there’s still tomorrow.”

“Hope springs eternal,” she replied dryly. Somehow, she didn’t have his optimism that something would turn out alright.

“It’s not only blind hope if you plan for it,” he replied. It might not seem like it, but she knew he was casting his glance widely. What he was trying to find out of the entire hall, she didn’t know.

She could only wish him the best of luck about whatever plan he had. It was hard to see how any good news can disentangle itself gracefully from the newer mess the Daily Prophet had just created.

Tom stood up suddenly.

“Excuse me for a moment. There are some people I need to catch.”

Without clarifying further, he set off, walking in long strides. Hermione glanced around the rest of the table. Abraxas’ confusion and Melchior’s shake of his head showed that neither of them had any better idea of what Tom was up to.

“If he said he’ll be back, then he’ll be back,” Pendleton said, unruffled. He was the only one who was unbothered.

“Course he will,” Starkey scoffed. “But I want to know what’s what. Clearly, the game’s afoot!”

“Off you go, then, Tom’s greyhound. Woof. Woof.” Pendleton replied flatly. Hermione couldn’t hide the bark of her laughter and met his pale grey eyes.

Abraxas had it worse, his laughter rang clear. Gallus might have managed his silence, but his shoulders were shaking. She thought she heard badly-disguised coughs and quite sniggers from other parts of the table too. Instead of getting angry, Starkey noticed the reference clearly and raised the stakes with another, eyes gleaming.

“Unlike you lily-livered bastards, I’ll actually follow my spirit. For Tom, England and Saint George!”

Starkey practically leapt up and ran off towards wherever Tom had gone to. Pendleton shook his head.

“Well, he wins this round. I didn’t think he’d actually bring it to the scene’s logical conclusion.”

Hermione was still grinning at the byplay when Abraxas spoke up.

“What does Saint George had anything to do with it?”

Surprisingly, it was Oswin who groaned loudest. “Malfoy, you can’t call yourself a true Englishman if you haven’t seen Henry V.”

“My family has a balcony at the Globe. You can use that next weekend.” Melchior added.

“I thought that place had burned down,” Hermione said, disbelieving. “Well, rebuilt and all that, but it still ended up getting destroyed later on.”

Melchior didn’t seem surprised. “Shakespeare was a squib. His will handed the theatre over to his
magical cousins after his death. Considering that none of his immediate family wanted and was able to run it, anyway, they took over and pulled it into our side of London and staged its apparent destruction in the muggle world. Behold, the Globe.”

“It’s not too close to Diagon,” unusually for him, Oswin spoke up. Perhaps because it was a topic he was enthusiastic about. “It’s in the main Etturn Alley. You can contact me or Emma if you want to know what’s currently showing.”

Classes went on as usual, amidst the pervasive sense of unease that now oozed over Hogwarts after the Hogsmeade attack.

Advanced Ancient Runes proceeded with the next level of ward construction as well as the Professor’s request that they try to start thinking about what they wanted to do for their final project. For Hermione, it wasn’t difficult to just settle for a layered ward design. Tom, on the other hand, seemed to be planning to make some sort of ward-breaking algorithm. It was far from finished (it wouldn’t be his final project if it was), but she could already see the first brush of the outline from what he’d written down.

He’d done the first chapter as an example, and she could see the sharpness of his insight.

“You’re…you’re turning breaking the most common wards from an art form into a procedure.” Hermione said in disbelief as she read his draft. “Anyone who’d taken an Ancient Runes basic would’ve been able to follow it and break through, what, half of the wards out there?”

“Assuming that I managed to write it comprehensively and within the required time.” Tom said. “Otherwise, it would take too much time to be turned in as a final project.”

“Yes, yes. Assuming that.” Hermione said impatiently. She wasn’t really concerned about his capabilities on that front.

Pendleton was also reading it to her left, as he also took Advanced Ancient Runes.

“I’d say around two-thirds to four-fifths of buildings with common wards would be vulnerable. Obviously, this meant excluding ancestral homes and other old places,” the pale blond answered.

“That’s still a lot of places—shops, houses. I don’t think the Ministry is going to let you publish this. If they’re smart, they’d be writing a circular telling people to upgrade their wards.” Hermione muttered.

Pendleton shook his head. “In an ideal world, that would happen. Here? I think Tom’s work would just be suppressed, but there’d be no follow up anything.”

“Why not?” She asked, exasperated. The blond’s reply was pragmatic.

“Too much bother. Just suppressing it is faster.”

“Of all the short-sighted bollocks we have to deal with…” Hermione’s sentence trailed away into a hushed string of barely-audible curses.

Tom shrugged with unconcern.

“Well, it’s not really my fault that the most common wards are not only predictable in their pattern, but many are clearly lazy copies of one another.”
“Designing a unique ward that’s not too complicated to set up quickly isn’t that easy.” Hermione said.

Tom clicked his tongue in disapproval.

“Excuses, excuses.”

He grinned when he saw Hermione’s disbelieving look. “Yet it’s true, Hermione. People should not make excuses for their own incompetence.”

“It’s not incompetence if it had been truly difficult to break. That you can see the flaws in them with ease certainly shows your intelligence, but it’s not their fault that they hadn’t thought of more. The average crook hadn’t been able to think of more.”

“Oh, alright. Pity the poor crooks, if that’s what you wish.” His reply was flippant.

She rolled her eyes. “I certainly didn’t say that. Your work would be an excellent final project. Now, you make me want to change mine into something more impressive.”

Pendleton sighed. “It’s back to drafting another project for me too.”

“What’s wrong with yours? I like the way you incorporated the rivers and ponds of your family grounds into the new ward scheme you’re going to layer on top of the old ones.” Hermione said.

“If Professor Gildenstern reads it after she finishes with Tom’s work, it would look lacklustre. I’d rather improve it.”

He had a point. Hermione remembered what most of their classmates’ projects were like in the class’ last draft presentation.

“Maybe you should ask Lee.”

Pendleton turned to her curiously. “You know Camellia Lee?”

Actually, it was hard not to notice the beautiful Hufflepuff, or her loyal friends and housemates who easily cut away any of her admirers that were taking up too much of her time that she was too polite to turn down outright. It wasn’t why Hermione remembered the witch, though. Her attention to detail was on par with Hermione and the Hufflepuff’s knowledge on wards exceeded hers.

“We have a mutual acquaintance, but that’s about it.”

His lips quirked at the edges, the change almost unnoticeable. She guessed that he knew exactly who the mutual acquaintance was, then. Hermione continued.

“What I do know, is that she’s the Hufflepuff who meticulously incorporated Han dynasty geomantic structure to her planned wards for one of her family homes. Maybe you can pick up something potentially useful to use in your project?” Hermione hazarded.

His expression was genuinely curious when she said that.

“I didn’t even realise that was what she was doing.”

“I only noticed the eight-trigram board on her table and the characters for ‘Han’ along with ‘wind and water’ on some of the books she carries. Otherwise, I don’t think I’d notice it much either.”

Pendleton walked away with lighter steps, and Hermione watched him greet the Hufflepuff witch
with an affability that he didn’t even show her, undaunted by her housemates that had taken up subtly defensive positions around her. She didn’t blame Lee for being surprised for a few seconds, considering that they’d barely interacted before. Camellia did seem to reply with interest once she heard Pendleton finish his explanation about his project. If Hermione was younger, she might have felt slightly grumpy that Pendleton dropped her that fast, but the present her knew that she still wasn’t that into ward-construction as Ms. Lee.

Hermione was beginning to suspect that Camellia Lee’s father might even be a muggle surveyor, based on the detailed topographical map she’d brought to class.

While she was thus distracted, Tom managed to pry Hermione’s work from her hands, dodging her single attempt to take it back.

“Tom!”

“I just need to see it once.”

She huffed and simply sat back down while waiting for him to finish reading. Tom was shaking his head by the time he returned it to her. Hermione took her scroll back without delay.

“I can’t even come up with an easy or quick way to break this. The only method I know leans too much on brute force. Why are you so concerned about it?” He asked.

“Oh, it has some weaknesses alright. Just because you haven’t seen it yet doesn’t mean it’s not there. You’ll find it sooner or later and I’d rather you don’t find it at all.” She said with determination as she started working on it again. Hermione only batted him away when he blew at her ear to distract her from it, in a manner not unlike Crookshanks’ favourite move.

“Tom.”

“I’ll leave you to your musings then.”

And that was Ancient Runes. After that, they parted ways with Pendleton (who didn’t take Advanced Transfiguration). She found that she and Tom weren’t the only ones taking Advanced Transfigurations as well as Advanced Ancient Runes. There were two Gryffindors, a wizard and a witch some ways behind them. Hermione waved when she recognised one of them.

“Rajesh! I did wonder if it was you back in class. I was afraid that I’d be wrong, though. You’re going to Advanced Transfigurations too?”

Rajesh Setalvad chuckled. “Yes, I am. Me and my friend Lysandra are going there.”

The witch walking a step away to his side seemed to have a rather permanent frown on her face, which contrasted with her generally polished appearance. She had big bones and could probably even pass the Gryffindor quidditch team’s selection as beater, and it did not make her unattractive.

“I’m your Housemate, Rajesh. I’m not exactly your best friend.”

Raj took it in a stride. “Oh, don’t mind her. She tends to err on the side of less familiarity than being overly-familiar. We’re friends, honest.”

She harrumphed. “We only stick together for classes.”

“Because you’d rather be alone most of the other time. I do try not to annoy you too much unless it’s necessary.” Raj replied.
“Exactly.” Lysandra’s reply was succinct.

She did not ask to be introduced. It wasn’t until five minutes later that Rajesh remembered Hermione didn’t know the Gryffindor witch and introduced them. She turned out to be Lysandra Burke, whose older brother was a seventh-year in Slytherin. Apparently, her family did not care overly much about the Houses that they end up at.

When the other witch was introduced to Hermione, her reaction was a jaded, ‘yes, I know exactly who you are, Miss Curie. My housemates would not shut up about you.’ For all her brusqueness, she did not seem to do it out of malice, so Hermione didn’t take it personally.

On the way, Raj, Tom and Hermione was debating about how exactly Orabella Nuttley came up with the powerful Mending Charm that was _Reparo_. Mending practically any man-made object around? Without first explicitly marking its ‘initial’ state to guide the spell about what the ‘fixed’ condition looked like? That meant it was able to draw out knowledge of the object’s ‘fixed’ state from the _universe_.

“See? That’s an unbelievably overpowered ability,” Hermione first pointed out. “It’s not that I don’t believe she’s a great spell crafter, it’s just that I can’t believe she constructed something like this from _zero_. She’d have to be working with an older spell as the base, even if she might have improved or added upon it.”

“And you want to see what books she’d read during that time,” Tom said with a knowing look.

She harrumphed. “Of course. Who wouldn’t? I’d give my left kidney for all the books from the Roman period that she has.”

Lysandra had trailed behind them, determined to keep her distance and not be social, and yet she couldn’t help correcting any of them when they had their obscure sources wrong.

“It’s debatable that a library of such books exists,” Lysandra suddenly added. “Other than the occasional book or several, scarcely any survived the Empire’s fall. You’re much better off looking for the Arabic translations of those treatises—the centres of learning such as Baghdad and Damascus preserved many such books very well…”

The three of them turned to her in surprise as the Gryffindor witch griped about just how much knowledge had been lost, even on the wizarding side of things. She started with the classic works referred in other classic works of which there was no surviving copy in the present. It wasn’t as bad as the disappearance of Atlantis, but _still_. Hermione would easily say that Lysandra’s knowledge was encyclopaedic when it comes to literature.

Lysandra didn’t even blink when Hermione complimented her about it.

“I know,” was her nonplussed answer. “My family is in the antique books business and runs the largest private lending library in Britain. Of course, I know my books.”

For all of Lysandra’s nonchalance, there was a distinct spring in her steps after that.

Considering the size her family’s library had to be, to be number one, Hermione assessed that she was probably from an old family—odds are, it was pureblood too. It might explain the incongruity of the fashionable waves of her hair and well-tailored uniform compared to the forbidding frown on her face. For all her grouchiness, Lysandra still adhered to pureblood standards of appearance, perhaps bending to the nagging of her mother and aunts.

The four of them arrived at the transfigurations class with their discussion on the origins of the
Mending Spell in full swing.

Hermione would admit that it was rather satisfying to see Dumbledore’s surprised expression as they walked into his class. It was how the four of them ended up being closely seated. This was why Abraxas had to settle with sitting on the row behind them, next to Shafiq who arrived with Julia and another Ravenclaw that Hermione didn’t know by name (she recognised his face, though). The Malfoy heir was audibly grumbling.

“I still didn’t get a seat next to Tom.”

Lysandra snorted as she glanced back towards him. “Even money can’t buy you everything, Malfoy.”

Abraxas was even more disappointed when he saw that it was Lysandra managed to sit in the same row.

“Oh, it’s you. The uglier Burke.”

“Pretty boy. I’ll tell my brother that you think he’s gorgeous.”

Adil snorted, though he turned it into a polite cough when Abraxas turned to him suspiciously.

“Last I saw, your brother’s still working hard to find a husband for you. Can’t get one without enough bribes, can you?” Abraxas made a solid second sally.

“And I heard the Malfoys were canvassing witches that failed their OWLs on their second try for your wife candidates.”

Oooh, burn! Hermione bit her lip as she stifled her reaction.

“Ha! Better a pretty wife than no husband at all.” Abraxas replied. Rajesh broke out laughing from his previous snorts while Julia rolled her eyes but didn’t reply to the Slytherin.

“What? What did I say?”

“What’s this that I hear about the Mending Spell?” Julia cut in before the bickering started up again.

“Hermione thinks the Mending Spell is actually rather powerful.” Raj said.

“It’s convenient for fixing fine china…” Abraxas said doubtfully.

“But that’s the point, isn’t it? It doesn’t stop at something as small as a teacup. Nutley’s spell reconstructed the Coliseum that was reduced to rubble. Just in that moment, her Mending Spell instantly made obsolete several building restoration and fixing spell. Suddenly anyone who had inherited a house and was satisfied with how it looked will be able to preserve it as it is forever, as long as they kept casting the spell regularly!” Hermione finished.

The magnitude of Reparo’s abilities had only dawned on most of them then.

“I think I’ve heard my grandfather mention something about hearing it from his father the first time the spell was revealed to the public. It was his first visit to England and there was this commotion, this rabble of angry people in front of the Ministry.” Rajesh spoke up. “It turns out that entire lanes of repair shops ended up closing near Knockturn Alley. Clock repair shops, broom repair shops…you name it and I’ll bet it also closed. Nutley ended up having to reroute her mailing...
address due to the howlers and exploding letters she got.”

“Ah, yes! You should see the newspaper coverage during that time. There was even a book titled *Rise of the Repairers* that covered the discontent. Nutley even went into hiding for a while.” Julia helpfully added.

Hermione blinked and stared at Raj. “Your great-grandfather *saw* it?”

“He lived in the 18th century, yes, born from the old Setalvads of Gujarat. My grandfather was the one who was born and raised in England in the 19th century and officially marked the first member of our English branch.”

It occurred to her that it meant his grandfather was around a century or more in age. Sometimes she forgot how old wizards and witches can get, and then something like this would smack her in the face.

“Ah, I sometimes forgot that your family’s presence here is still pretty recent.” Adil commented.

Hermione wouldn’t exactly call *two centuries* recent. Then again, the Shafiqs established themselves in Britain during one of the crusades. It was why they were now part of the Sacred 28.

Rajesh shrugged.

“It’s not as if visiting the old country every other month to see the relatives was difficult. The international floo network was starting to get established widely by then. Sure, the series of jumps took a whole day *at the very least*, two if you didn’t want to get floo-sick and take breaks in between. Yet I can’t imagine taking almost a year that travelling like a muggle would take!”

“If I’m allowed to return our conversation to its primary topic,” Tom spoke up. “You’ll understand better the significance of what Nutley achieved if you recall a recent concept in Advanced Transfigurations class.”

“Permanent transfiguration relies on knowing the nature of the object you’re changing?” Abraxas made a random guess.

“Order is always unravelling into disorder.” Julia suddenly said.

“It’s that thermos-law thing Hermione mentioned.” Adil said while rubbing his forehead, probably trying to recall it.


“Yes! *That*.”

“That’s the whole ‘some processes are irreversible’ thing, isn’t it?” Abraxas said. “You can permanently transfigure wood into ash, but you can’t do the opposite.”

“You can’t reverse the flow of time.” Tom said.

“But we *can* use a time turner.” Julia disagreed.

It was Hermione who shook her head. “No, no. You’re *transporting* an object, a *person* to an earlier point in time, but you’re not *undoing* anything. Isn’t it one of the major warnings given to anyone who managed to get a license to use a time turner? You can’t change events that are already
known and established in your timeline. Cross that at your own peril.” They were following Novikov’s principle, obviously.

Lysandra was eyeing Hermione curiously, even if she did not seem inclined to admit it. Abraxas was half confused while Adil was staring at her with wide eyes.

“Look, it’s one of the laws of magic, albeit not one that’s often mentioned or repeated because it’s just so obvious, isn’t it?” She continued.

Tom stepped in once more.

“Some processes are irreversible, as Abraxas had said, while Julia and Shafiq made a good point on how order is always unravelling. Time cannot be made to flow in reverse, as Hermione had pointed out. Now, wouldn’t the fact that Reparo can restore an object to its condition at an earlier point in time (though obviously not too far into the past), meant that it has some degree of ability to cut through time and space built into it?”

He was too good at keeping track of the conversation’s details and then drawing everyone’s attention, at ensuring they all realised the magnitude of the point he was making.

“Now, you’d have to wonder about the older spells Nutley had read about and integrated into her Mending Spell, isn’t it? My hypothesis is that she’d studied more than one spell or fragments of one that came from Atlantis and used them as the foundation for her spell.”

“Abraxas followed their conversation with wide eyes.

“Why cut through time and space?” Hermione asked curiously.

“To create a copy of the less-broken form of the object from an earlier point in time.” He answered.

“Or, it only has the ability to peer into the past and retrieve the information of what the broken object’s fixed form looked like and recreate that at the present time. It might not even be necessary for the spell to be able to interact with the past as long as it can take the information it needed.”

Abraxas followed their conversation with wide eyes.

Tom nodded slowly. “You’re right. That is also plausible.”

Julia was rubbing her forehead as she spoke up. “Hold up, let’s backtrack for a second, because I’m not sure I followed all of your arguments…”

They continued their discussion until everyone else had walked in and class was about to start.

Tom was actually leading the discussion rather well, managing the eight-person interaction without them breaking up into two groups or more. His attention was taken up with what he was doing that he wouldn’t have noticed much of anything else, but Hermione saw the way Dumbledore’s gaze strayed towards them again and again, observing them with a puzzled look on his face.

Well, well…let’s see him try to categorise Tom now.

He might have been a budding dark lord (still could be one), but he wasn’t exactly hopeless. Hermione still wanted Dumbledore to see that. She found it hard to believe that the wizard who was known for seeing the best in people could be so absolute in his opinion of one student.

As class started and Dumbledore brought up the topic of picking up a final project, she realised that she didn’t have any particular idea about what to make. It might sound odd, considering how transfiguration was another of her specialty, but all the ideas she’d so far came up with would be
several decades too early.

If she ‘came up’ with them while she was a Hogwarts fifth-year, people might start hailing her as the sort of rare genius that came once in a century.

Which was just…no. She wasn’t Isaac Newton, or Leonhardt Euler, or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Hermione might be intelligent enough to already be classified as a genius IQ-wise (which wasn’t as rare as it might seem either), but she wasn’t *inhumanly* so. She didn’t want to mislead people on that front. If she couldn’t find a reasonable Advanced Transfiguration project, she supposed she could just settle for being an Animagus.

(She couldn’t remember whether she was one or not. On the other hand, it might not matter—if her patronus’ form had changed, it was probable that her Animagus form was different too.)

“I suppose I can try for an Animagus transformation?” Hermione said to Dumbledore.

That caused him to raise one eyebrow. “Yet you sound rather uninspired, Hermione.”

“Well, it’s kinda boring,” she blurted out before she could help herself. The brunette sighed when she saw both of Dumbledore’s eyebrows rise. “I know, I know it’s supposed to be hard for most people. It probably wouldn’t for me, though. I’m sorry, I keep having all these other ideas. I know that they’re so complicated that it’s not reasonable to do them in a year or less. But some part of me still want to, you know?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Ah, it’s good to dream high, Hermione.”

“High dreams are one thing, but unreachable daydreams are another.”

“I’ll just put your final project as Animagus transformation, then?”

“I supposed that would be best for now, Professor.”

Lunch began in a way that was not much more pleasant than how breakfast had ended.

She parted ways with Tom and went to the Ravenclaw table with Shafiq and Julia—Eugenie had already saved her a seat and pulled her there quickly, to Julia’s consternation. The sixth-year gracefully took her loss and simply rounded the table to ensure that she was still sitting right across Hermione. Auguste Murat sat at her other side on the Ravenclaw table and she greeted him easily.

Apart from her friends, though, there were all the gossiping people. Hermione would have harrumphed for the hundredth time every time she heard someone parroting the conspiracy theory the Daily Prophet had brought up this morning. It was only Eugenie’s efforts at pulling her back to friendlier conversations that distracted her enough from paying attention to them. Auguste had pulled a pack of cards from somewhere and decided to entertain her with some simple card tricks.

He’d rolled his sleeves up and placed his wand on the table, to show that he truly did not use it to mesmerise. He asked her to pick a card, sign it, and then requested that she returned it among the rest.

A shuffle and draw later, he placed three cards on the table.

“It has to be one of these three. Now, let’s see. Is it this one?”
A queen of hearts. Hermione snorted. “No, absolutely not that one.”

“Ah, well, I still have two more. Let’s see…”

A queen of spade and a king of spade. Eugenie outright giggled at his mistake as he widened his eyes comically.

“Not that one and…no, not that either.” Hermione said. This time, her lips quirked up at the corners. “Maybe you should admit that you’re bad at this.”

“No, no, no, no.” He said with exaggerated worry, before his hazel eyes lit up. “Oh, I know where it is. Stay still, Hermione.”

With a flick of his hand, he pulled a paper rose from her hair. Unfolding it gave him the two of spades, the card she’d picked in the first place, her signature in the middle included.

“There. That’s your card, isn’t it?”

She laughed, while Eugenie clapped with glee from Hermione’s other side. He picked the card again and with only two twists, it was transformed into its rose shape once more. He presented it to Hermione, who accepted it up with a smile.

“That’s very impressive, Auguste.” The brunette said.

Eugenie nodded. “Very. How come you’ve never told us about it before?”

He shrugged, his smile modest. “I’m merely an amateur. It does help to actually have magic at your fingertips. The man I learned it from by the Seine was certainly surprised at how fast I picked it up.”

“Give us another one!” The blonde witch was leaning far against Hermione.

“I’ll certainly oblige such beautiful ladies.”

“You’re certainly a flatterer, Auguste,” Hermione said dryly. “But yes, I’d be happy to see another one. This time, I’ll figure out the trick for sure.”

He chuckled, his voice smooth. “If that is a challenge, I’ll be glad to raise myself to meet it.”

At the end of lunch, Lakshmi located Hermione from wherever she was before, her speed surprising Eugenie. Auguste had gone off earlier because he’d agreed to meet up with his study group from Charms class.

“You’re going to be my Advanced Potions partner today.” Her dormmate proclaimed.

It had the same bullheadedness as Columbus’ insistence that the land he’d landed on now belonged to the Spanish crown, regardless of the tribes living nearby, and that he was damned sure he was in India.

“You’re in Advanced Potions?” Hermione asked, surprised.

Lakshmi huffed. “If Riddle had not been taking over all your time at Potions, you would have noticed. Well, he’d just have to accept today’s change of plans—he has all his followers to choose his brewing partner from. Starkey’s grandmother was a great potioneer and I know his potion-
making education started early. I hear Malfoy is also pretty good; all those tutors have to make a
difference somehow.”

“If you’ve only bothered to find me today…what happened to your usual partner?” She asked.

“Patricia is currently being a twit.”

“A twit?”

“And a ninny, but I suppose that’s rather redundant. She’s been saying that Riddle should’ve
actually considered his career, how he’s carrying the glory of the Slytherin House and mustn’t
squander his opportunity. All that rot. As if I even care. When she starts trying to affect me to get
you to stay away from Riddle, I snapped and told her that if she cared so bloody much, she could
try approaching either of you herself.” Hermione stared at Lakshmi after all that outpouring.

“I’m pretty sure that wasn’t the only thing you said.”

Lakshmi stared back. “That was what I said.”

The brunette nodded back knowingly.

“Riiight. I don’t think that would annoy her enough.”

Amber eyes met brown for five seconds. Lakshmi shrugged as if it wasn’t such a big deal before
telling Hermione the rest of what she said.

“Well, I also told her if Riddle didn’t even seem to know she existed in five years, why did she
think it was going to be any different now? Since Riddle was the one who moved to approach you
first it was clear that he knew who he wanted. And guess what? It wasn’t an ornamental princess.”

Hermione winced.

“That’s harsh.”

“The truth hurts, darling. Now, let’s get to class and finish our potion as soon as possible. I hear
that Slughorn might let the fastest potioners out sooner when he’s in a good mood.”

The brunette let her dormmate chivvy her away from the hall. “So, who’s this Patricia person,
anyway?”

“Oh, I’m sure you don’t know her,” Lakshmi said carelessly. “Patricia Parkinson. One of the
pureblood princesses of Slytherin. She’s not really that bad unless she starts up on the whole
‘upholding the dignity of Slytherin House’ and the rest of the blather again.”

What with Hermione attending Herbology after Potions, she did not see Tom all day. The Knights
of Walpurgis that she knew moved at a faster pace than usual along with the slightly distracted air
of people who had other things in their mind—not a surprise, what with the morning’s unpleasant
realisation that someone else was also trying to play the public.

After class, Hermione decided to finish the rest of her homework this week so she could free up
more time for other things. She had ended up sitting in the library’s study area with mostly other
Ravenclaws without her planning to—many of them decided to join her table when they saw her,
starting a spontaneous study group on the spot. The light of the thousand and one lanterns in the
library lit their parchments and surroundings with a warm glow.

Outside the great windows, the sky was in shades of red, with purple creeping in at the far edge, the sun nowhere to be seen. Thin cirrus clouds streaked the sky. It wasn’t yet six, but the day had been shortening in autumn.

That was where Pendleton found her.

“Curie,” he greeted.

Hermione raised her head from the discussion between Julia, Ackers and a few people whose name she’d forgotten about (they assured her that they were in her Advanced Charms class, which she hadn’t attended at all last week). A witch she didn’t know had raised the question of how to recognise quasi-conjuration spells from pure conjuration ones and it had just started to get interesting.

“Pendleton. What brought you here?”

“I have something to tell you. If we may…?” A slight tilt of his head indicated that he wanted to take her aside. Ackers was staring at the Slytherin with some suspicion until Julia assured him that he’s one of Riddle’s friends and certainly nothing Hermione needed to worry about. Someone else, a Hufflepuff, added that Pendleton really was an upstanding fellow for a Slytherin.

She stood up from her chair.

“Sure.”

They hadn’t even walked out of the area when he began to talk, as if there was something he needed to find out quickly. “You haven’t been threatened by any Slytherin wizards, isn’t that right?”

Hermione stared at him with some incomprehension.

“Um…no? I thought that was something you guys would have had under control.”

She’d almost missed it, but she thought his shoulders relaxed slightly. “I thought so too. You wouldn’t have been as calm if one of your attackers was a wizard.”

Her forehead creased as she thought over it.

“Attacker? Wait, my last attacker was certainly a muggle.”

Pendleton was unfazed. “I was talking about the one before that, Curie. Your ‘fall’ from some stairs?”

She felt like slapping her forehead. There were just too many more important things happening that the incident had slipped her mind recently. She’d even forgotten that Pendleton had said that he’d look into it. When that was said by one of the Knights of Walpurgis to Tom, it was as good as a vow, wasn’t it?

“Oh, that. Come on, it wasn’t that important.” Hermione said dismissively.

He nodded without saying anything. His pale grey eyes were steady when they meet her gaze and he seemed worryingly undeterred from the path he was walking on. Pendleton had this quiet way of watching that was almost as unnerving as Tom’s unreadable mien.
“Your attackers were actually weak.” He stated.

“What brought that on?”

“You’re not the slightest bit concerned about them. I see that you would have taken them down easily in an actual fight.” His eyes flickered slightly in her direction. “Ah, I was right.”

_Dammit_. Hermione realised that her lips had twitched upwards on their own volition before she noticed. They had walked out of the study area by now, disappearing between one of the rows of bookshelves in the library. One of these days she was going to get a better poker face.

(A glimmer of memory flowed in her mind. She could almost see Draco choking himself on his firewhisky as he chuckled mid-drink. _Sure. Keep telling yourself that, Granger_. She thought she could see a Harry nearby too, and he was even outright laughing, his left hand holding his stomach, the berk.)

“I’m glad to hear that it wasn’t an insult against your person and honour.” The blond wizard said.

She didn’t understand why his voice sounded unusually grave. It was only some moments later when she managed to somehow translate his dated choice of words into something she understood. Pendleton had been talking about sexual assault. No wonder he’d looked so serious at the beginning.

Harry couldn’t sleep well until he could teach all the witches he knew his tricks at fighting dirty _physically_, as if all the spells they knew aren’t enough. As a perfectionist, she agreed with his idea.

Hermione’s grin was savage. “Oh! Thank you for worrying, but I assure you, I had _that_ risk under control.”

“Do you have a spare wand?”

“Not yet. It wasn’t as if I had the funds, you know?”

Pendleton searched his pockets for something. He handed her a business card. “Here. Write to the proprietress of the establishment and give her the measurements and details of your current wand. She’ll find a perfectly serviceable spare for your use. Tell her to put it on the Pendleton account.”

The ease that he did this surprised her. _“Pendleton, you can’t just—”_  

“Technically, as the head of my family, I can.” He said, with a calmness that she was beginning to associate with him. “My father’s in St. Mungo’s Mental Ward.”

He didn’t even wince as he said that. She wondered how much time he’d had to come to terms with it, how much time it had taken to accept that the father he knew wasn’t coming back.

“It’s too much.”

He stared at her in mild disbelief. It was the first time she’d seen that emotion on him. “Curie, unless you were going to order a hundred wands, I wouldn’t notice.”

She was still stunned. _Oh. Right. Rich aristocratic families have a completely different sense of scale as to what is ‘pocket money’. I really should already get used to this._

“How about an emergency portkey?” He asked her again.

“Haven’t had time to make one. Ingredients cost money, et cetera.”
He handed her another business card. “Here, for an apothecary as well as a procurer of rare ingredients. I’m sure they can get you anything you need for that.”

“You can’t possibly—”

“Well, if you have issues on putting it on my account, you can use Ves’ account instead. Just be sure to state that it is the personal purchases of Vespasian Starkey, as I’m sure all of his family members have individual accounts. If you decide to use Abraxas’s or Melchor’s account, they’ll be fine with it too—that is, if they even noticed the difference in the first place.” Pendleton’s tone was unconcerned. When she glanced in his direction, she could see the soft glint of humour in his eyes.

She gave up her fight.

“Oh, alright. Just so you know, if I ended up being completely spoiled, it would be your fault. All of you.”

“I think Tom would agree that it’s a good trade-off for your security.”

They were already turning back now, to the direction of the discussion area once more.

“Please promise me something.” Pendleton said.

“What is it?”

“If you know that a wizard is actually after you, give us his name. We’ll sort him out.”

She was going to say that she really could handle herself, but the way his smile had become a cipher and his grey eyes too even told her that there was something more at stake.

“It’s not about taking care of myself anymore, is it?” She asked.

He shook his head. “If anyone is that stupid, then it means we need to create a lesson that will stick. Just in case there’s more than one suicidal ignoramus around.”

“What’s wrong with just reporting him?”

That was the first time she saw him surprised. He closed his half-open mouth.

“Curie, you know that most of the time, an accusation of an attempt wouldn’t be enough to get a pureblood expelled, right? A transgression that would be enough to get one expelled would be one that is too far and too much.”

His words were heavy with meaning.

Pendleton fell into silence, his mien too serious. They paused, with the Slytherin leaning back against a bookshelf.

“Someone who is foolhardy enough to proceed despite what your closeness to us would mean doesn’t seem to be someone who would give up just because of a mere warning. They’ll try and try again, and even if you can guard yourself, it’s a different matter to do it week after week, month after month. Attacking is easier than defending. What comes after that? Do you expect bring it to the Aurors?”

He shook his head. “Just how soon do you think they’d be allowed on Hogwarts grounds? The Board of Governors would be up in arms about such things—no one wants to think that their child
might be the criminal. By the time they actually arrive, it would be too late. The evidence would be destroyed, any possible witness suddenly turned forgetful.”

She cleared her dry throat. It was harsh, but she’d only realised that Pendleton didn’t say anything that wasn’t true. For a moment, she thought she saw a hint of sympathy in his pale eyes.

Hermione was reminded once more that in this day and age, there were still crimes done by people too powerful that the DMLE would only be stymied if they ever tried to investigate it (there was a historical reason that wizarding duels were once the preferred method of settling differences).

Witnesses would fail to recall the event in their memories or misremember attributes. That was if they didn’t disappear or turn uncontactable altogether. The old families still held significant power and the public accepted it easily as it was the way things had always been done. It was unlike her present (future) where Voldemort’s rise was supported by too many pureblood families and the public remembered it all too well. Everyone was all too eager to ensure that the pureblood families no longer wield so much power so outrageously. She vaguely remembered there being at least one other newspaper that was not the Daily Prophet (and wasn’t The Quibbler either).

Pendleton had inadvertently helped her realise that she’d missed a pillar of the current wizarding society simply because they had been so weakened or pushed into irrelevance in the future—the pureblood faction. They were a separate block from the Wizengamot because that body only encompassed the oldest of families as well as several elected officials, but there were many more pureblood families beyond that.

It was probably why her current Hogwarts had subtle distinctions between the students of a more distinguished pedigree from the more common ones.

*The wizarding world still had a de facto nobility at this point.*

Deep in her own thoughts, she forgot that she wasn’t alone. It was why when her companion spoke up again after a while, he almost startled her.

“The defence needs to repel hundreds of attacks to be considered successful—the attacker only needs to find one moment of weakness to succeed once.”

“It’s still much easier to be the attacker,” Hermione said.

“Exactly.” He nodded in agreement.

She observed his calm mien and his nature-toned clothes (currently brown tweed and robes of a darker shade than those). He did not seem to be impatient even when he had to wait to allow her time to think. Being silent suited him.

It was easy to lose track of him when he was quiet—compared to Abraxas or Melchior, he was certainly less eye-catching or impressive. Out of uniform, his clothes were usually serviceable or only that of a country gentleman of the wizarding persuasion. He did not wear the sharply cut coats that flatter the figure, along with other little details that subtly signify the wearer as the upper crust of society, unlike the way the Malfoy and Nott heirs dress themselves. Abraxas and Melchior might even do it unconsciously, as it was as natural to them as swimming was to a fish. Pendleton was thus less noticeable.

Now, she was beginning to think that it was intentional on his part.

“That’s why the best move once you’ve positively identified a threat to you is to move first. Sometimes, offence is indeed the best defence.” Pendleton stated. It wasn’t a bloodthirsty or cruel
conclusion. It was a pragmatic one, born out of the world he grew up in.

Whether she wanted to or not, she would still get pulled into the great game here. She stood out too much from her surroundings, too talented compared to her peers and was too different from the witches from this era (even compared to those from the most privileged backgrounds). She was also aware that she was too active—her conscience would not allow her to sit still instead of doing something.

For her to have enemies was just the logical conclusion to her character.

The first thing that Hermione had to constantly keep in mind here was how not all the modern institutions she was used to were already in their future form (the Aurors, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, the Unspeakable, the entire Ministry). They might have the same name, look the same, but they might not have all the powers she was familiar with, or their reach and professionalism.

Perhaps the converse was even true, like in the Wizengamot. It was far more powerful than the sedate council of the future. This was clear once you considering how powerful the individual oldest families were. Imagine what the collective influence of the heads and heirs of the old houses would be like, and that is the Wizengamot’s power in a nutshell.

Beneath their convenient lifestyle that was more comfortable and civilised than most non-magical society due to the use of magic, at its heart, the wizarding world could be surprisingly medieval. On the other hand, this might be the side-effect of the pureblood faction that was relevant and well-established.

Yes, as if the reflexive and completely serious assessment of the marriage prospects of people from the opposite gender hasn’t tipped you off already, she thought sardonically.

Hermione made a long sigh, ignoring Pendleton’s curious look in her direction.

Oh, alright. I suppose I can plan on modernising the wizarding world. It’s not as if I’m not going to try changing the old things I don’t like, anyway.

She can never go home—she knew that. That was why she was going to turn the 1940s into home, no matter how much effort that was going to take.

“Curie?”

“Yes?”

“Please inform me if you’ve identified a threat.”

“I’ll think about it first.” Hermione smiled at the flicker of disappointment passing his face before disappearing once more. She did not intend to reject his offer outright, though—she was neither naïve nor too idealistic now. At the very least, she did not mind giving small problems to him to see how he would handle it, to learn his style—he struck her as a more careful wizard than most.

“I do prefer to take care of things on my own. But if I think your approach would fit better, then yes, I would.” She said. He didn’t hide the way his shoulder relaxed at her words and she chuckled.

The past, she had only really understood now, is a foreign country.

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End Notes

Additional Notes:

**Beatrix von Blankenstein (OC):** Fifth-year Slytherin and Chaser on the House team. A blonde Prussian-German expatriate and noted member of Sigmund’s faction. She shares ADADA class and Advanced Charms with Tom. An aggressive duellist and a chaser with a similar style, she’s not impressed by her ADADA classmates who aren’t open to actually fighting and merely duels.

...the characters for ‘Han’ along with ‘wind and water’ on some of the books she carries: to be precise, that would be 風水 (traditional), which is literally the characters used to write *feng shui*, the geomantic art whose oldest documented records can be traced back to the Han dynasty (202 BCE – 9 CE, 25 – 220 CE) in ancient China. (For completeness sake, the simplified characters are: 風水). Its design and planning principles are still applied to new buildings in mainland China (and beyond) even today.

The eight-trigram board is also a main instrument of *feng shui*.
Chapter Summary

_Breakfast, with side of déjà vu. In which Hermione socialises a lot more than she actually prefers to. The Knights of Walpurgis dissects the situation. Unexpected announcements. Andrew shows that he is truly a gentleman._

Chapter Notes

Early update because there's a bit of a utilities crisis here. Might not be able to update at the usual time in the next 24 hours otherwise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

45 Troublesome Tuesdays

If Hermione had expected Tuesday to be better than Monday, she was in for a disappointment.

Breakfast started out well enough. She came to the great hall early, as was her habit. There weren’t many people there yet, though she was not surprised to see that Tom was one of them. She could see him already in deep conversation with Abraxas, Melchior and Pendleton—who she had now started to think as the ‘saner’ Knights of Walpurgis. She guessed Starkey wasn’t an early riser.

Auguste’s presence surprised her. He was seated some distance away, but not such that conversation would be impossible (especially on a rather empty table).

“Auguste! I didn’t think you’d already be here this early.”

He chuckled ruefully at that. “And I wish I didn’t have to either. However, this is the perfect time to take up a large space on my own, before everyone else starts to arrive and fill the table.”

“Especially since we’re going to need that space.” A wizard said.

Hermione turned around and saw Bernadotte and Ceres approaching. To her surprise, they sat next to their Ravenclaw compatriot.

“You’re going to have a meeting?”

“Merely mediating discussions in _La Société_. Saturday made it clear that we cannot afford to relax. Yesterday’s foolish news only emphasised the need for actual good news soon to counter baseless rumours. For that to happen, the search needs to start faster,” Auguste said. “Well, Evariste will be the one trying to lay some groundwork—he’ll be here soon. Yet since I’m the actual Ravenclaw out of everyone else involved, I certainly have to host the meeting.”

Something clicked in her mind when he said that.
“Ah, you’d be inviting the Slytherin Germans over, then?”

“Yes. Sigmund would come with Blankenstein, Alsing and Regenstein.”

Other than Beatrix, Hermione wasn’t sure she knew the others by name. No wonder they chose the Ravenclaw table, she thought. She couldn’t imagine the Slytherins agreeing to drop in at the Gryffindor table or vice versa.

“A small meeting, then?” She asked.

“It is only a chat over breakfast. Of course, it can’t be entirely serious.” Auguste answered.

“You’re welcome to join us if you wish.” Ceres offered, her smile as friendly as always.

It was nice of the sixth-year to say that and Hermione was genuinely interested. Yet she still felt rather awkward around Evariste. Auguste had the detachment of the intellectuals at Parisian salons. When he said he wasn’t interested in courting her when they were virtual strangers, she could read it clearly in his collected air. Even when he might pay excessive attention to her in an over-the-top manner in jest, they both recognised it as the lark that it was. Evariste was a tad too genuine, especially because she couldn’t genuinely say that she wasn’t interested in him—just that she didn’t think she’d have time for him.

The same way she didn’t really have the time to sit down and think about what Tom meant to her right now. There’s too much to do to change the future.

“Some other time, maybe,” Hermione said, coming up with an excuse on the spot. “Tom’s calling a convocation of his own right now.”

“And you’re about to go there. I understand.” There was an amused gleam in Auguste’s hazel eyes, not that she knew what it was about.

“I’d love to catch up with you after this to get the rundown, though.”

“See you at lunch, then, Hermione.”

“See you later, Auguste. Bye Ceres, Bernadotte.”

“Please, Hermione, it’s Philippe—”

She smothered her own grin as he complained. Maybe she’d call him Philippe some other time. With a quick exchange of greetings, Hermione made her escape from her own table, as absurd as it sounds. She was already near the Slytherin table when the square-jawed Sigmund von Moritz was making his way to the Ravenclaws’.

“Curie.”

“Auguste is already there. I think the Gryffindor contingent is only missing Evariste.” Hermione said, in lieu of a greeting. Sigmund nodded formally at her reply.

“This looks a little like an exchange of hostages,” the Slytherin witch that wasn’t Beatrix said, her smile sly.

Embarrassingly, Hermione couldn’t recall the name of the other, dark-haired young woman. The main reason she remembered Beatrix was because she’d spent yesterday’s breakfast sitting next to and talking with her.
Beatrix huffed. “If it was, it only showed how pathetic we all are. We’re exchanged for exactly one person! No offence, Hermione.”

“None taken,” Hermione replied, smiling.

“I mean, if this was a real situation, who on earth would you be? The Queen of England?” Beatrix was clearly taking the scenario far more seriously than anyone else. “That’s the only way it would make sense.”

Sigmund von Moritz seemed to be unbothered in standing there to wait for their chat to be done. The other wizard who’d been trailing behind the three of them was starting to catch up now.

“Well, Beatrix, she’s clearly the queen of something.” The other brunette said, her blue eyes alight with good humour.

“I really don’t see it, Mina.”

“I’m sure you will if you just wait long enough.” Mina said, with a shrewdness that was more than a little disconcerting—her name’s Wilhelmina, Hermione recalled at that moment.

“See you later, Hermione.”

Hermione nodded. “Of course, Mina, Beatrix.”

She’d just managed to recollect that they’d agreed to be on first-name basis. Hermione could feel her cheeks warming slightly at the remembrance. If Beatrix didn’t use her friend’s name out loud, she wouldn’t have remembered Wilhelmina’s name. Wilhelmina, Wilhelmina von Alsing. She bid the wizards farewell too and they continued on their separate ways.

-Tom’s eyes widened slightly when he saw her coming over. He’d missed her initial approach, shielded as it was by Sigmund’s group. She didn’t know how she even noticed such a slight difference, merely that she did. Pendleton simply continued to drink his tea while across him, Abraxas was doing that weird rapid blinking thing.

Next to Pendleton, Melchior recovered from his surprise faster and was the one who greeted her first.

“Good morning, Hermione.”

“Morning, Melchior.”

Other greetings followed his and she replied to them absentmindedly. It wasn’t until she sat down and heard Tom’s softly spoken ‘good morning’ did she realise that he’d held back until she was right next to him. She replied in kind, “Morning.”

“What’s today’s topic?” Hermione asked them. Pendleton mulled over it from his position across the table, admittedly for a little too long.

“Clean-up,” Abraxas replied with a sigh from Tom’s other side.

“We need to ameliorate the effects of yesterday’s article, obviously. It would also be more effective if we’re not just using one channel.” Melchior summarised.

She saw Starkey staggering lazily into the hall along with several other students—she’d know that
newsboy cap anywhere. He was probably still half asleep even now. The moment he noticed their little group was actually rather obvious, because he froze for one second before walking as fast as he could without outright running. Gallus was somewhere behind him but he wasn’t half as concerned as Starkey was. He walked at a plodding pace while yawning.

“The first of such efforts will probably be clear today.” Tom stated.

“What is it?” She asked.

“Amelia Bones was so incensed that she went off to call her father about the Prophet directly after breakfast.”

“Floo-called?”

“Yes. Fortunately, I managed to get a hold of her before she did so, assisting her in hammering out the main points of contention with the Daily Prophet article.”

Realisation hit her. “That was the reason you left the table near the end of breakfast.”

He nodded. “I saw her leaving the Hufflepuff table. I’m sure we’ll see an editorial by Chief Auror Amalric Bones in today’s Prophet.”

Even Abraxas was impressed. “That’s going to be quite a blow to yesterday’s rampant speculation.”

“We’ll see,” was Tom’s noncommittal answer. Hermione was watching him carefully.

“That wasn’t the only thing you did, was it?”

“Anyone who only relies on a single plan to achieve his goal is either desperate or foolish.”

Starkey shoved himself in between another wizard and Melchior—the wizard moved without question. The Nott heir sighed loudly before asking Pendleton to switch seats. The blond did it without a second thought. Gallus took up Starkey’s other end, pushing the unfortunate wizard who’d been there before even farther.

For all the thoughts that they threw out periodically at each other, it was clear that none of them were too concerned now. It seemed that they were reassured of how outlandish yesterday’s assertions would seem to most people once they’ve managed to contact home and heard back of their father’s take on it.

This time, Emma was the one who took a seat next to Hermione—apparently, she’d moved from her position farther down the table where the seventh-years were. The witch who’d followed Emma’s move and sat on the seventh-year’s other side was someone the Ravenclaw witch didn’t know, though her face was familiar.

Emma did the introductions; this was the other sixth-year prefect Hermione hadn’t seen much before, Clytemnestra Gamp, Mordred Montmorency’s partner. Her cool attitude clearly said that she was not pleased by the Ravenclaw’s presence but was tolerating it for her friend’s sake. Hermione stuck at the same level of distant civility. Fortunately, they didn’t really have any reason to interact often, as they weren’t seated closely.

The tables started to fill up—Hermione was only too glad that the Hufflepuff table now completely obscured her from most people on the Ravenclaw one. More plates of entrée began to pop up on the table, denoting that the full spread of breakfast had arrived.
When the owls finally descended upon the tables in a whirlwind of feathers, everyone was tense with anticipation.

As before, Tom had first claim to Abraxas’ newspaper.

The first reaction came from Starkey. “That by-blow of mawkish fustiluggs?”

“Language.” Gallus reminded in a half-bored voice. He probably only said it because there were witches around them.

“Bloody hell is right.” Melchior muttered, tossing his copy across the table to Abraxas without regard that good manners would’ve decried such action. He was upset and beyond caring. His other hand ran through his dark hair. “That…that idiot of a Minister…”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions yet.” Pendleton was the voice of reason there. He hadn’t taken his eyes off his paper.

“We can start with what we know is true, and work out a plan from that point,” Tom said. With that, he slid Abraxas’ newspaper to her. He tapped the beginning of a particular column and Hermione’s eyes drifted in that direction, ignoring the picture of a determined-looking Spencer-Moon next to it. (That one was probably a follow-up article to yesterday’s interview on the Ministry’s security upgrades).

“Order of Merlin Considered for Courageous Conduct during Hogsmeade Attack.”

It didn’t exactly sound like bad news. The piece did detail about the bravery of Hogwarts staff and students, as well as several ordinary citizens. It mentioned in passing about the counterattack that Merrythought and the other witches with her had pulled off.

“Home Undersecretary Laius Fudge has graciously given his time for an interview…”

She skipped the lines fawning over the undersecretary with a contemptuous huff she couldn’t restrain. Like forefather like descendant, she supposed.

“…He assures us that the rumours were true. Indeed, some of the brave souls who had risked their lives to defend Hogsmeade are being considered as Order of Merlin recipients. ‘The proposal is on the Minister’s table and I have expedited it. Rest assured that the true heroes will be rewarded.’ …”

It was only when she read further that she understood what caused Starkey to spit and curse as well as irritating Melchior.

“…Undersecretary Fudge continues that the most prominent of these is of undoubtedly Andrew Abbott, Hogwarts Head Boy who has even taken a shot in his efforts to protect other students and the civilians in the area. He was the one who had risked the most during the Sombre Saturday…”

Hermione paused at that section in disbelief. “What the hell?”

It wasn’t as if she wanted to be rewarded for what she did. It was just the sheer untruth told in The Daily Prophet that galled her. She’d never thought that there were people shameless enough to rewrite history within a few days after it happened.

Abraxas’ muttered ‘buggering bollocks!’ was heard only a few moments after that.

There were eyewitness accounts of how brave Andrew had been (of course), and how selfless he
was, enough to give a firsthand account of his heroism and certainly convince the readers just how deserving he was of that Order of Merlin. It was convenient that Slytherin’s table was right next to Hufflepuff’s. Hermione scanned the near end of their table for the Abbotts—it was not hard as Andrew was rather tall, and most of the people in his vicinity was usually looking in his direction.

To his credit, the Head Boy didn’t look the slightest bit pleased either. He seemed to be...arguing with the enthusiastic people around him? Wow, give Andrew some credit for integrity.

“If the brainless cove behind yesterday’s mummer...” Starkey said. Everyone was too pissed off to remind him about his language.

“That would be too easy to trace. It would be nice if it was true, but I doubt we’d be lucky enough to face someone that stupid.” Pendleton spoke up.

Hermione shook her head. “Not that I actually care about the Order of Merlin, but why Andrew? Other than us, the Gryffindor prefects were also there.”

“Abbott’s part of the Sacred 28, Crouch obviously did not get wounded, so Abbott’s a lot more heroic there. As for Bernadotte and Victorinus? No offense, but they’re foreigners. Some factions in the Ministry would have noted that.” Melchior replied bluntly, with the astuteness of a seasoned noble at the king’s court.

Melchior had enough tact not to mention either of them. Hermione was getting a little too good at ignoring her old feelings of rage about this. The only emotion left was just annoyance, in the sense of ‘not this shit again’.

“I bet this is enough for Wizengamot to get an inquiry going against Spencer-Moon.” Abraxas said.

“Regardless of what impression this gossip rag is trying to sell us, we do need to check what the Minister’s actual position in all this is. No matter how highly-ranked Fudge was, he’s still not the Minister himself.”

That was Emma speaking up. To Hermione’s surprise, no one seemed to regard it as odd. She was dead certain that the seventh-year wasn’t a Knight of Walpurgis, and yet here she was, smoothly with them. The future was changing faster than she had thought.

“Yes. Better to have our own first-hand and second-hand sources than rely on the words of others.”

That was Pendleton again. Next to Pendleton, Melchior stared across the table to Abraxas.

“Your call this time, or mine?”

The Malfoy heir mulled over the question carefully. “I think I did enough snooping and writing back and forth to my father for Orion’s beef with the Minister the last time around. Arcturus Black was stalling Spencer-Moon’s reform attempts with my father and some of our traditional allies. Your side can take over this time.”

Melchior nodded. “Right. Time to figure out how the Greengrasses and Zabinis want to play this.”

At times like this, one becomes aware just how high the channels that Abraxas and Melchior could access, or the connections they had.

In the midst of all this, Tom’s chuckle came as a surprise. It drew the attention of everyone in his
vicinity. As she observed him quietly, she could see that he truly was unburdened.

“Ladies, Gentlemen. In spite of all this, there’s one thing that you need to keep in mind.” His blue eyes were bright today. “We have one great advantage compared to them—we are the wronged and our cause is right. Many claimants to a throne have won with less.”

She could see the people around her straightening up, suddenly filled with a relentless spirit. His composure calmed them down, especially Starkey who was chomping at the bit to tear into someone. It would seem that a charismatic leader does make a difference in bringing a people together behind a vision. Hermione shifted a little did a quick glance to the left, to see how the other prefect next to Emma took it. It seemed that she needn’t have worried; the Gamp witch wasn’t even staring at Tom like a love-struck young woman. It was worse—she did it with the zeal of a true believer.

There was something about the preparedness of Tom’s reaction that seemed irregular to her. His followers might not have seen it, because they believed in his greatness.

He was certainly a genius, she knew that. But she also knew that he was human.

“You knew the Order of Merlin award was coming, didn’t you?” Hermione leaned towards him and spoke in a low tone.

“I had my suspicions.” He replied evenly.

“I can’t believe you could’ve seen this…this total train wreck happening.”

His smile was vexingly enigmatic. “As you have your own secrets to read the future with, Hermione, I have mine.”

The brunette witch stared at him flatly, unimpressed.

No, he definitely wasn’t a seer anymore that she was one. No one could predict the future with that degree of accuracy—he clearly had known it would happen within one or two days. It wasn’t as if he had the Minister’s ear either to have inside knowledge of what was about to happen after the Hogsmeade attack.

As Tom gave additional tasks to the Knights, Hermione was too busy thinking to be paying them any attention. (Apparently, he was waiting to see how they’d move on their own initiative, to what purpose she had no time to try to divine).

He was clearly expecting something on Monday. It was the reason behind why he invited her over to the Slytherin table in the first place. The nuisance that was Monday’s news was not something he expected—he’d been in a pleasant mood before, so he certainly was not waiting for that. For all his preparedness today, she couldn’t imagine that it was something to look forward to. A more accurate reflection of his state of mind in the case of that mess would be the thrill of anticipation, perhaps coupled with a slightly vengeful edge.

If he had known, he’d have waited for it with the preparedness of a hunter waiting for the first sign of his prey.

But no, he had been relaxed, laid back. Less of a king on the hunt and more akin to one waiting for his subject to present him with a tribute…

A fragment from today’s Daily Prophet rose in her mind.
... the brave souls... risked their lives to defend Hogsmeade... considered as Order of Merlin recipients...

Recognition flashed and condensed what she knew and all her thoughts into a gem of insight. She turned to him.

“You saw the Order of Merlin coming,” she breathed out softly, too stunned to raise her voice. “But you predicted that it would have fallen in our direction.”

Tom did not seem the slightest bit peeved that Hermione had correctly inferred his foresight. He seemed even more delighted, as if she now shared the joke that he was pulling over the world.

“Well, you know how it is with a gut feeling. They’re not always too accurate, are they?”

She snorted. She knew it was undignified but she couldn’t help it—sometimes his faux-humility was just too over the top. From the mirth in his eyes, it would seem that he knew exactly what he was doing to irk her.

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Truly, it was like watching a train wreck unfolding in slow motion. It was terrible, but at the same time it was also something so grand that it was hard to look away.

Hermione could feel the high spirits of most people in Hogwarts that one of their own—the Head Boy—had managed to earn such a lofty award at such a young age. That the Gryffindors were festive was not a surprise (their roars had been particularly loud). They had always appreciated acts of courage. What might have been odd to the average outsider was the confused tumult the Hufflepuff table was in. It was probably due to how Andrew decisively turned away people who wanted to congratulate and cheer him (she could see him shaking his head from this distance), while most of his house had been all too eager to celebrate.

The Ravenclaws were cool, particularly the upper years, though the younger years were still caught up in the celebration. She might not be able to see her house table clearly with the Hufflepuff between them, but she could still see the difference in the dynamics. The older students were far more still than the younger ones, their heads often bowed together in hurried discussions. If there was a house who would be in favour of gathering more information (more knowledge), the Ravenclaws would be it.

Now, the Slytherins...they were seething.

After the noises and ruckus of the initial shock from the news hit, the table was surprisingly quiet. It would not surprise Hermione if they’d managed to spread the news of what she and Tom actually did throughout the whole house since Saturday. She’d had her own affairs to tend to on Sunday, and she’d seen that Tom’s schedule was no less full. Clearly, he was not lax in doing all the thousand and one little things that a proficient puppet-master ought to, to ensure that all the relevant strings still end up in his hands.

The Hufflepuffs’ table were placed between the Slytherins and the Ravenclaws to keep the peace between the more academically-inclined Slytherin and the determined Ravenclaws. This was to provide a buffer in case their competition heated up.

Now, it was not looking like such a wise idea.

“Please tell me that the prefects can at least hold back their house members from being stupid,” Hermione said. She’d seen more than one dark look from the Slytherin table to the Hufflepuffs’.
“There had been a prefect meeting yesterday on how to mitigate the effects the Daily Prophet’s article might bring on the muggleborns in each house.” Tom answered. “I’m sure it could be adapted to take this into account too.”

Before she could say anything else, she saw Andrew Abbott standing up. He didn’t just climb up to the benches, he took to the table. This was possible because there weren’t many people who were still eating their breakfast at this point. Hermione had to admire how he completely ignored how Headmaster Dippet and some of the teachers were trying to tell him to get down with some weird arm-waving. He turned and twisted his wand around to cast some spell.

“Alright, everyone! Let me make a few things clear.” His voice could be heard to the corners of the hall. “My Housemates have argued with enough evidence and comparison that I really did something heroic. Fine. I’ll leave that be for now. But I have to tell you what had been common knowledge among us prefects since Saturday.”

“The Daily Prophet said that I have been courageous, and that I risked the most in getting shot. But know this. I wasn’t the only one shot that day!” He raised his voice, as strident as Hercules in his conviction. “Tom Riddle was also shot. He was trying to do the same thing I was trying to do, to take one of the attackers down.”

Hermione froze as all the heads in the great hall turned in their direction. Tom was completely at ease with the attention. For all she knew, the blood in his veins might as well have been made of ice. She could feel his hand laid over hers, stroking lightly and carefully easing tension out.

“Hermione Curie saved five people who had been shot as she administered emergency healing to them before escorting them to safety, and then to St. Mungo’s. They had relieved a fellow prefect, Timaeus Crouch who can tell you that he’d been cornered before they arrived.”

“Hear, hear!” Came an indistinct shout from the Gryffindor table. Crouch, she presumed.

“Let’s not forget the other Gryffindors who managed to separate another attacker from the civilian around them—that’s Ceres Victorinus and Philippe Bernadotte.”

“Aww, you’re making me blush here, Andrew!” Philippe hollered from the Gryffindor table. His lungs were powerful enough to be heard even without any spell. “I’m still not going to date you, though!”

Laughter broke out, and Hermione could see that even the tension at the Slytherin table had lessened.

“Oh, and lastly, Tom Riddle actually managed to subdue the attacker he was dealing with. Me? If professors Dumbledore and Dexter hadn’t arrived in time, I’m not so sure whether I’d still be standing here in front of you right now.”

A hush fell over the hall as they realised the seriousness of his statement. Dumbledore only smiled and nodded in acknowledgement, while Dexter seemed distinctly embarrassed.

“Actually,” Tom spoke up, he’d cast a Sonorus before she knew it, “if we’re talking of the critical blow, that would be down to Hermione. I did the initial attack to disable him, but she was faster in reaching him and knocking him out.”

She glared at him, silently mouthing ‘how could you do this to me?’ He was, of course, unrepentant. Tom gestured at her to face everyone who was definitely staring at her now, instead of only her general area, a grin on his face. Surprisingly, Starkey, Pendleton and Melchior had shifted
in their seats so that the rest of the hall had an *unrestricted view* to her sitting spot, where she was currently doing her best deer-in-headlights imitation.

*Oh, bugger.*

Fortunately, Andrew didn’t leave her high and dry.

“And that’s it, people! It was a *team effort.* Whatever happens after all this, I want you all to also know the names of my colleagues, my *friends,* not only mine. For if I was a hero, then it’s clear that I wasn’t the only hero that day. That’s all I have to say.”

With a bow that was soon followed up by a cacophony of applause, Andrew jumped down from the Hufflepuff table.

It was a good thing that Hermione had finished breakfast, because now, the attention of the entire Slytherin table was focused on her.

“Well, that was actually nice.”

As usual, Pendleton had his gift for understatement.

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As nice as it had been to see the *esprit de corps* of the Hogwarts prefects, it didn’t do a *thing* about the Ministry’s position. They had decided that Andrew Abbott was the most heroic of the people who had fought back in Hogsmeade, and that meant they were going to give him an Order of Merlin for his pains. So far, the impression that she got was that, she and Tom (perhaps along with the others), were simply going to be treated as if they weren’t part of the story.

Erased.

The Knights of Walpurgis and The Society (because that was what Emma was from, right? And Oswin, who was now also pitching in?) still continued to plan ways to use their blatant favour to Andrew as a leverage against the Minister, if not the Ministry itself. What exactly they were trying to get still eluded Hermione, but she can figure it out later.

At the very least, Andrew’s announcement had pre-empted the possible friction rising between Hogwarts’ different houses. Hermione really couldn’t give a damn about not being awarded an Order of Merlin, but she firmly believed that Hogwarts didn’t need any more division among them. It was a good thing that Andrew was sensible—she supposed it was one of the underrated traits of the Hufflepuffs. If that was true, then they certainly needed more Hufflepuff to become prefect heads.

“See you in Advanced Charms,” Hermione said. Tom was still watching the flow of the discussion when he turned to her momentarily.

“You’d be going with the Ravenclaws, I take it?”

“This is actually the only class that I share with two of my dormmates. I’m not wasting the opportunity.”

He nodded. “See you later.”

It still surprised her whenever he practically shrugged when her schedule was filled with other things that left no space for him. It just seemed…incongruous? Perhaps it was the way he’d been
sticking closely by her side in the past week, or the way his people followed him completely. Not that she was going to complain that Tom Riddle still had enough working parts to somehow pass as a decent human being. She felt like she was missing something here.

Oh well. She can figure it out later.

Flitwick’s effusive ‘Miss Hermione Curie, we finally meet in my class. Welcome!’ was a little on the embarrassing side, but as the Charms professor rolled full steam into his current lecture without pause, any worries that she might have had disappeared. She already knew that he was a dedicated teacher, and it showed. It did not matter much that his technique is still rough around the edges right now as he was still a new professor right now.

It had been nowhere near as mortifying as Slughorn trying to refer to her or Tom every ten minutes or so in yesterday’s Potion class. She had to hold herself back from telling him that really, whatever it was that she or Tom did on Saturday was nowhere near related to Potions, and can they get back to the effects of the phases of the moon on the magical qualities of potion ingredients? And how they affect the resulting potions? Yes, that one, the one that Starkey’s grandmother was famous for.

It was no surprise that she chose to duck out of the double Advanced Potions class that was scheduled after lunch, choosing Advanced Care of Magical Creatures instead and Advanced Astronomy.

Hermione did find it oddly funny that at lunch, Andrew tried to find Tom to apologise about getting an Order of Merlin when Tom didn’t. Tom, of course, assured the other prefect that it was fine and that he knew it wasn’t Andrew’s fault (she could see from the glimmer in his blue-black eyes that Tom also found it somewhat amusing). She noticed it when she was about to drop by the Slytherin table for a while, just to check what was up. Andrew even felt bad that there was no mention about her. She waved it away as easily as Tom did, and probably with genuine earnestness in her case.

Really, she helped people because, what else was she to do when she knew she was the person with the best healing knowledge in miles at the moment? If anyone else knew as much as she did, she had no doubt that they’d do the same.

Tom and Andrew shared a look that Hermione couldn’t decipher, before the conversation flowed on easily and the head boy took his leave from them.

The rest of her classes went well—not that Hermione ever doubted her ability to get through them. What was interesting was all the times outside that. There were still people in awe of the fact that Andrew was considered for Order of Merlin and overjoyed at the idea. She’d heard enough sarcasm from Harry about how even if individual wizards or witches might be intelligent, the public had the collective intelligence of a bag of drunk pixies. Draco had been no less scathing or dismissive on the topic and added that at least a bag of drunk pixies could agree on a direction to move. The wizarding public would walk in circles until the cows come home if no one was there to hold their hands.

They had both been very bitter, but she didn’t think she could fault them. Hermione had thought that it was simply because both of them had been famous, albeit for different reasons, and experienced the pain of having no personal life firsthand.

It was at breakfast the next day that she caught the drift of the chatter around her (alright, she
cheated by augmenting her hearing a little).

The Daily Prophet had arrived at the tables again, and everyone had gone through it. Hermione saw the correction on page two about their Monday headline, probably because they published the letter by Amalric Bones right then. Today’s headline, however, was filled with the great news that the Home Undersecretary Laius Fudge was planning on visiting Hogwarts today, to talk to the heroic Andrew Abbott, paragon of courage and the ideal that the new generation of British wizards should aspire to. The Prophet also promises their excited readers that they would do their best to secure a winning interview with him.

At the Hufflepuff table, there was the rare discussion about what it meant that Andrew was the only one chosen, but more noticeable were the excitement from others.

“Our head boy is a real hero! It’s unbelievable, isn’t it? I keep expecting to wake up and find that everything’s just a dream.” An unknown witch gushed.

“Exactly! He’s so magnanimous about the other prefects too.”

Elsewhere, another was sharing what he felt about the unexpected blessing with his friends.

“Can you believe that one of us is winning the Order or Merlin before graduating from Hogwarts?”

At the Gryffindor table, she heard Gryffindors proclaiming that Andrew could have been ‘one of us’.

“He’s right brave for a Hufflepuff.”

“I heard from a friend of my sixth-year sister that he told everyone to run while he held the muggle back!”

Another mused out loud. “It would be great if a Hogwarts student’s getting the Order of Merlin, isn’t it?”

On and on the conversations continued to flow around her, and Hermione couldn’t seem to draw herself away from listening in. The strangeness of it all tugged at her sense of morbid curiosity.

Andrew’s statements had managed to mitigate the worst of the inter-house rivalry from breaking out. But there were still people who thought that it was a matter of course that among the prefects that received the award, Andrew was the one best to receive it.

“Well, I know that many people were involved at Hogsmeade,” Hermione overheard the conversation from her own table. It was that snooty seventh-year blonde. Who was she again? Selwyn, with an S-something first name that the time-stuck witch couldn’t recall. “But who else was fitting? Crouch hadn’t been heroic enough—he had to be relieved by Riddle and Curie, imagine that! And the two of them have poor connections, if any at all.”

“Why the nerve of that witch——” Eugenie muttered under her breath, clearly holding back from saying several choice expletives.

“Oh, ignore her, Eugenie. She’s not worth it.” Hermione said.

“There really was no doubt that Andrew deserved it most.” Selwyn finished, several people down on the table from them.
Hermione might have advised Eugenie to let it go, but it was clear that no one did the same to Julia.

“Really, Selwyn? I thought Order of Merlin was given out based on merit, not on whose relations were closer to the Minister of Magic.” Julia replied from around the same direction. “Otherwise, why not call it the Campaign Contribution Awards altogether?”

“Goldstein,” the disapproving tone told much about the Selwyn’s heiress opinion.

“It doesn’t matter whether the families are close or not—whose family doesn’t know each other’s around here? Besides, there was no question that Andrew had done the heroic thing. Alan was there on his side of the street and could testify to that.” A wizard’s voice rose up, possibly trying to mediate.

“I’m not doubting Andrew.” Julia replied. “I’m correcting the view that he’s the only one deserving of an award. He’s a good guy, but he’s not the only one that should’ve gotten it.”

“Please, everyone knows that Andrew is taking it for the rest of the prefect too. He’s the head boy, isn’t he? Then it’s perfectly normal if he represents everyone else too.” Selwyn answered.

“Don’t make excuses for the Prophet, Selwyn. It’s clear they mentioned no one else and doesn’t even care.”

“What does it even matter, anyway?” Selwyn replied with disinterest. “Someone should be awarded, and someone who was a hero did.”

“If that’s true, then it shouldn’t matter to you either if Andrew didn’t get it, right? If no one gets awarded the Order of Merlin. That would have been fair.” Julia jabbed back.

She seemed to have hit something because a surprised quiet rippled out for a moment.

“You dare to drag Andrew down just because your arriviste friend’s feelings were hurt? How dare you?” The seventh-year’s voice was actually quieter and Hermione had to strain to hear it, but the anger colouring it was real. What she couldn’t understand was the apparent tension that was also building up in that direction, as if more than one person was holding their breath.

“I’m only arguing for what is fair. And this isn’t fair for everyone else. Not just Hermione or Tom, but also Ceres and Philippe.”

A pause, of which it cannot be easily said to be long or short.

“At least now we know how much you value the pillars of the community that has sustained us.” Selwyn’s reply was cool, but from the way the tension wasn’t solved and only ratcheted up instead, Hermione caught that things actually got worse.

“This has nothing to do with blood!” Julia answered, frustration clear. The seventh-year only scoffed daintily.

“Please, Goldstein, it has everything to do with blood.”

With those words, Selwyn had unknowingly heralded the new era of turmoil inside Hogwarts.

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Update will slow down after this because:

a) Real life
b) I'm currently stuck in a particular chapter ahead and couldn't progress the story. Wouldn't want the online chapters to overtake the buffer chapters too fast.
Chapter Summary

Undersecretary Laius Fudge visits Hogwarts. The prefects are called to an extraordinary meeting. Talking at cross purposes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

46 The Ministry Man

Hermione knew that today was a special day from the number of house elves she’d seen out and about in Hogwarts, cleaning the higher reaches of nooks and crannies like rock climbers clinging to the underside of a cliff.

“Is the Undersecretary truly visiting today?” She had asked Lakshmi before they split up for their first class. Right now, it was still possible for them to walk together. Eugenie had been pulled away by classmates from her class that was concerned about some group project.

Her dormmate nodded sagely. “Oh, yes. If the overactive house elves are not enough of a clue, did you see the professors today?”

“What about the professors?”

“Professor Dumbledore’s choice of colours dazzle more than usual, while our Head of House was actually wearing colours! He had a blue waistcoat and his robes were not black. Alright, it was night-sky blue, with stars and heavenly objects included, but I was sure I spied the last purples of sunset at the hem—so he does have good taste apart from monochromatic hues. Professor Spore’s colour palette looks like the inside of the tropical greenhouse when the trees are bearing fruit. As for the lecturer of Ancient Runes, her intricately embroidered waistcoat might look like modernist geometric patterns, but I’m pretty sure those were repeated runic diagrams set in silver thread.”

Hermione turned to her friend in amazement. She did wonder why the teachers seemed to put more effort in dressing today, but not to that degree of details.

“You saw that much?”

Lakshmi waved it away. “Please, Hermione. Taking in what everyone wears quickly is something I can do in ten seconds.”

That was just the beginning. At the end of the first of her double Advanced Care of Magical Creatures class, an owl swooped in and perched on Professor Kettleburn’s shoulder to drop him a message. He read it once, grumbled, and then made an announcement.

“Alright, prefects, you’re excused to absent yourselves from the next class. Something about how the Undersecretary wants to meet all of you first before lunch or some such rot.” He said, in stentorian tones.
“You’re all directed to go to the Spring Guest Suite. If you have no idea where that is, ask me at the break between classes. I have the directions right here.”

Lakshmi’s words were still fresh in her mind that Hermione took the moment to see what the professor was wearing. Tweed and robes, as usual. His boots were more polished today, and his jacket does look marginally better, but the difference was not too obvious. She couldn’t help a small smile. Clearly, Professor Kettleburn did not think he would interact much with the undersecretary nor did he care to do so.

It was hard not to be curious about what the meeting was about, even if Hermione did manage to put it out of her mind a minute later. By then, she was more interested in the feeding habits and preferences of hippogriffs.

Tom left after his first Advanced Transfigurations class on time, as Dumbledore was conscientious in following the schedule. It was probably also because both of Gryffindor’s fifth-year prefects were taking the class, and he certainly didn’t want to make their lives more difficult.

“What do you think this is about?” Rajesh asked him.

“The Undersecretary wishes to meet the Hero of Hogsmeade, what else?” Tom’s reply was droll. On Raj’s other side, Augusta Delagardie scoffed. The other fifth-year Gryffindor prefect did not look the slightest bit impressed.

“He’s right, Raj. Didn’t you see the Prophet this morning? He probably wants to make a spectacle out of this.” Her cynicism of the upper echelon bureaucrat was a noticeable difference from the usual Gryffindor optimism or outright lack of awareness about politics.

“Not impressed, Delagardie?” Tom idly threw out.

“Please, Riddle. I’m sure you mingle enough with the Wizengamot heirs that you’re quite aware of the general undercurrent in the Ministry. Fudge is good at keeping his head down and making himself likeable. As for other things that he’s good at, well…I’m sure you’ll see it in action sooner or later.”

To tell the truth, Tom wasn’t aware of Laius Fudge. The undersecretary wasn’t part of the old circle of the Sacred 28 unlike Abraxas, Orion and Melchior’s fathers. His family wasn’t old enough to have a seat in the Wizengamot either, unlike Pendleton or Starkey. His achievements were so banal as to fade in the background. If Delagardie was going to ascribe such well-rounded knowledge of the Ministry to him, who was he to deny her?

“Really? Is he that bad?” Julia asked, from behind them. Augusta dropped back slightly to chat with her better.

“No, not exactly bad. Just mediocre, I suppose.”

Quietness fell as more than one prefect was digesting that.

“So, what are the odds that our lunchtime will be turned into an impromptu award ceremony for Andrew?” Tom cheerfully asked.

“What in fresh hell is that?” Raj exclaimed.

“I’d not stand for this!” Delagardie snapped.
Further expressions of disbelief and disagreement came from the other prefects. Tom nodded sagely and half-listened to their complaints, almost like music to his ears.

“Welcome! I’m so happy to be able to meet so many talented youths today!” The Undersecretary declared. “Please, do take a seat.”

He welcomed the group of prefects that had walked in. Raj met Tom’s gaze; it was clear that the Gryffindor wasn’t too enthusiastic about this. Tom didn’t hide his slight smile at that.

“Yes, yes, that’s right. Choose any table, Gentlemen, unless one of you is Andrew? In that case, he can certainly sit with me.”

Undersecretary Laius Fudge was a wizard whose smile was a tad too wide and his suit a bit too flashy—he was a human version of an overexposed photograph. Fudge was chatting with Headmaster Dippet who was practically vibrating with excitement. He was so thrilled that Tom had the impression he might fall down hyperventilating in five minutes if he didn’t calm his breathing down.

“Well, am I glad that I’m not Andrew,” was Delagardie’s pointed comment.

Tom’s smile had shifted closer to a smirk, but he still didn’t say anything.

“Sitting here or there, what difference does it make?” Raj asked rhetorically. “I don’t really see the difference.”

“The difference being, you’d have to listen to all the formal blather on his table. Among several others.” Delagardie answered. “You’d also have to be on your best behaviour, since you’re representing Hogwarts to the Ministry.”

“Oh, you’re right. That would be annoying.”

Since he’d arrived with the others that had attended Advanced Transfiguration, Tom found himself taking the seat to the left of Augusta Delagardie, with Raj sitting on her other side. Julia sat next to Raj, leaving the next two seats between her and Tom empty.

Some of the Hufflepuffs were arriving, along with the Gryffindor seventh-years, Timaeus Crouch and his partner. It was clear that they were also surprised by the set-up.

A sitting room had been cleaned and aired out for the undersecretary’s visit, brightly decorated with the colours of spring—the pink blooms of flowers and the light green of young leaves and shoots greeted them from the wallpaper, hence the name. It was one of many, long unused guest suites that Hogwarts had—perhaps before the advent of Floo travel made it unnecessary to stay overnight in any destination unless one truly wished to. The small circular tables were set with snow-white linens and the tea service was at hand. Tom could see some of the prefects discomfited with the formality of the table that was laid out, but most swallowed it down.

“Is everyone here yet?”

“Oh, no, not yet.” The Headmaster answered quickly.

The undersecretary came with his own secretary, which was what Tom assessed the young wizard puffed up in his own self-importance. There was another staff that seemed even lower on the totem pole, some sort of general dogsbody, while a witch was talking in low tones to her quill as it
scribbled back and forth across a parchment she’d laid on her table. A reporter, he concluded.

More Ravenclaws came in, at almost the same time with the arrivals of Bernadotte and Victorinus.

“What the hell is this all about?” Bernadotte asked in low tone as he took the seat next to Tom. His question was directed more at the table in general than anyone in particular. Victorinus sat next to him.

“If I have any idea, I would have chosen to stay in class,” Delagardie answered, prompting a huff of laughter that was quickly held back by Victorinus. More than one other prefect had snorted too.

“Obviously, this is Andrew’s preliminary award ceremony among prefects,” Tom answered dryly.

Bernadotte’s hissed out ‘fils de pute’ and Rajesh’s growl was just two expressions of annoyance that can be heard from the Gryffindors at the table. The French wizard was still cursing under his breath even after Victorinus’ not-so-subtle jab to his ribs.

“I can’t believe it. They must have gotten some complaints about it after announcing it yesterday,” Julia said.

“It might not be fast enough for them to have noticed it.” Tom replied.

The Slytherin prefects arrived not long after. Emma and Oswin took the table next to Tom’s, along with the other Ravenclaws once they realised that Tom was seated on one that was already full. Only a few prefects weren’t here now. Andrew was among the last to arrive. Dippet pointed him out to Fudge, and the undersecretary happily pulled him away from his fellow prefects and ushered him forward.

The undersecretary called everyone’s attention, thanking them for being there. He spoke about how Hogwarts were the ‘cradle of future leaders’ its youth representing ‘the best that Britain has to offer’.

“Now, I’m sure no one is truly surprised that they have been called here. You’ve all been expecting it since yesterday. I’m sure those close to Mr. Abbott here have been expecting it for longer, for they’ve seen that such an extraordinary and talented young man could not possibly be destined for an ordinary life.”

He made an expansive gesture.

“Well, here it is, then. Your trust in him as your leader is not misplaced. I will indeed grant Mr. Abbott an Order of Merlin, Second Class, for his heroic efforts at defending Hogsmeade!”

If he’d expected a cheer, the strained quietness would have surprised him, broken only with some polite murmurings.

“Come on, don’t be shy! You can clap for him, I wouldn’t mind!”

Tom made sure his clap was slow and ironic. Delagardie didn’t even bother, neither did Rajesh. He had to hand it to the Gryffindors—if they don’t like you, you’d know that they don’t like you. There was no two ways about it. Bernadotte did the same slow clap that Tom did with a wide and sarcastic grin. Victorinus’ expression was carefully neutral; the blonde’s clapping was light and barely made any sound.

Now that he thought about it, it might as well be on purpose.
He could see that Crouch was gritting his teeth even from this distance, the flexing muscle of his jaw visible at the next table over. Abbott looked reluctant and awkward next to the Undersecretary. In the end, the clapping sound was as half-hearted as he’d expected.

“Excuse me, Sir,” Andrew spoke up. “There has been a mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“I’m not the only student who had thought of doing something in the midst of the attacks. Timaeus and Tom also fought back, as did Ceres and Philippe. Hermione also managed to heal the wounded she’d found.”

Good old chivalric Andrew, Tom thought idly, with more than a little amusement.

“Maybe so, but you’re the leader of your men, your band of brothers! Of course, you’ll be the one receiving it. As expected of someone with your potential—I knew your father when he was still in the DMLE, before he resigned to handle his family estate after your grandfather died. Blood truly will out, eh?” The undersecretary said jovially. It was as if the temperature of the room dropped a few degrees.

“No.” Andrew firmly stated. It confused the undersecretary.

“No?”

“I did not command anything. There was more than one point of attack at Hogsmeade and all of us reacted independently of each other. Therefore, I have no right to be the only one accepting the award in the name of everyone else’s.”

Andrew met the undersecretary’s gaze with the confidence of one who felt that his cause was right. The headmaster was looking back and forth between the two of them, hesitating and yet still incapable of coming into a decision.

Laius Fudge laughed. “That is very gallant of you, Andrew! Yet I’m sure you’re responsible for the training of your—”

“No.” Andrew insisted again. “Any skill anyone else had is purely their own ability without any intervention of mine. If I was shot, others had also been shot. Others had successfully evacuated the civilians around them, something I didn’t quite manage.”

“Well, you’re alone. You can’t evacuate people while also fighting the attacker! Goodness, be reasonable, young man. Humility is all fine and dandy, but at the end of the day, it’s an Order of Merlin! Most wizards and witches would not see it through their entire lives!” Fudge shot back.

“But everyone else—”

“Oh, I’m sure we can get more than one name engraved on the medal. How about that?” The undersecretary cajoled him. Andrew thought for a moment.

“Does it mean that I’m not the only one receiving it?”

“What? Oh, don’t be silly. Who else was going to receive it? You’re the one who’d put in the most effort, who’d risked your life the most.”

The Hufflepuff prefect shook his head.
“No, I’m not the only one. Timaeus also got shot, and the same happened to Tom.”

“No, I’m not the only one. Timaeus also got shot, and the same happened to Tom.”

“Stray bullets, it couldn’t be that bad—”

“If Hermione hadn’t taken Tom’s bullet out quickly, it has the same risk as mine. The wound could’ve easily been fatal.”

Andrew did not waver from his position, while Tom could see that the headmaster was starting to fidget. The undersecretary’s shoulders fell, possibly in a sigh.

“Oh, alright, who are these gentlemen, then?”

“Timaeus Crouch,” Andrew gestured in the direction of the Gryffindor’s table. Crouch nodded briskly, just enough to show perfunctory respect but no more. His expression was tight and was surprisingly almost a forbidding as Verrault, who sat next to him. Seeing the two of them together with stern expressions, one might suspect there was a funeral about to take place.

The undersecretary did not seem to notice the slight at all.

“An excellent gentleman, I’m sure. His father was an undersecretary before my time. Also, a very serious man, Undersecretary Crouch, but he is very good at what he does. Who’s the other one? Longbottom? Oh, wait, Young Longbottom has already graduated and is in the Auror corps now. One of the Carrows?”

“No. The other one is Tom Riddle.”

The undersecretary’s gaze swung, following Andrew’s direction and the general gaze of the others in the room. Tom’s smile was mild as he met Fudge’s gaze.

“Riddle? I don’t think I know any Riddles… Now the Welsh family Richards, I know. There’s the rare Regensburg too…”

Tom didn’t change his expression the slightest, even if annoyance had begun to bubble in his mind. He had been talking to the snake fixtures in the Slytherin common room in Parseltongue to gather the clues of Salazar Slytherin’s final inheritance, dedicated to his descendant with the strongest magic in their blood. Abraxas’ family were filled with many famous amateur historians—it was not unexpected that the Malfoy heir was able to follow the clues to their logical conclusion. Melchior did too. Tom would not be surprised if some rumours had spread to the entire fifth-year from among the Knights of Walpurgis before he’d pulled each of them in and sworn them to secrecy.

Enough Slytherins had an inkling of who the Heir of Slytherin was.

“What’s your mother’s family name?” The undersecretary asked.

Tom knew what it was. Oh, how he had known, and high was the price he’d paid for that knowledge. He’d not had an outburst of anger as swift and destructive as the raging sea as when he found out about his father. Yet he did not feel he owed this buffoon of a bureaucrat the answer and even as he shifted into a light shrug, he did not try to answer. At the corner of his eye, he could see Emma bristling at the question and Oswin looked surprised and appalled.

That amused Tom slightly.

_No one has ever questioned your ancestry as one of the Orpingtons, have they, Oswin? It must be a shock to you how dismissive people could be when your name is unfamiliar to them._
Whatever the personal relationship, Slytherins were always unified outside the house. A careless attack on one of them was an attack on them all.

“Sir, I don’t think that’s relevant. What matters is that Tom managed to bring down an attacker with Hermione, and he was also shot for his efforts.” Emma coolly replied.

“Well, as interesting as that is, I’m sure if I can figure out his family—”

“If you must know, his parents were dead since he was young.” Mordred Montmorency answered from a different table, his tone was short and brusque compared to Emma’s reserved competence.

“Ah, a muggleborn, eh? It’s such a pity.”

From the way Fudge had to suppress the urge to wince, Tom might as well have had both of his legs crippled by childhood polio so severely that not even magical healing could help much—the perfect example of the kind of children too different from average that the pureblood tucked away in distant manors, never to be seen, never to attend Hogwarts either, if they can help it.

“Hogwarts is fine school, excellent even. But your birth isn’t something you can rise beyond, is it? It just…drags you down sometimes.” The undersecretary commented.

Some unhappy whispers and murmurs could be heard in the room if one’s hearing was sharp.

(Abraxas had showed Tom around the Malfoy family cemetery last summer. With a candour that he showed to few people, the blond also took him to the corner of the graveyard where the graves are small, and many of the oldest have no names.

“Even if the Malfoy family tree shows we only have a single heir and not even a spare most of the time, we aren’t cursed to have difficulties in having children.” Abraxas started. “Bone deformities, however, are another matter.”

He curiously wondered if there was a way to determine how the deformity took place. Which part of the blood carried it? He wondered. If he could find a way to fix it, the whole family would be indebted to him for generations.

“It’s lethal, then?” Tom asked.

Abraxas’ smile was bittersweet, his reply a wordplay.

“The disease itself? No, not always. The condition? Always.”)

The unease that was spreading in hushed words was enough to galvanise their normally worrywart and doubtful headmaster.

“Mr. Fudge, I must insist—”

“No worries, Dippet. It can’t be helped, eh? We need ordinary rocks too, to make the emeralds and rubies shine brighter in contrast!”

“Mr. Riddle is a very promising young man.” Dippet said seriously, sticking up for his Slytherin prefect. Fudge was staring back at Tom now.

“Well, if you say so, Headmaster. If you stick to the right crowd and follow the right people, like Andrew here, you’ll be made for life, Riddle. Remember that!” The undersecretary said this in an overly-familiar tone, even winking at him as if he was a favourite uncle dispensing advice to his
adoring nephews and nieces at Christmas.

Andrew cringed visibly, he was halfway to rubbing his face before he realised what he was doing and pulled his hand down again.

At the table next to Tom’s, Crouch was turning red while Oswin was turning white. Verrault placed the glass he was holding on the table very slowly. A crack ran through the middle.

“I’m afraid I prefer to make my own path, Mr. Undersecretary. But I do appreciate the support that my friends give me.”

“At least you do realise your place in life. This is a good thing.”

Yes. Far, far above useless maggots like you.

Tom’s smile was completely relaxed. “Indeed, Mr. Undersecretary.”

Fudge had turned his attention back to Andrew again.

“Raj, you’re growling again,” Delagardie noted at his table. Her prefect partner took a deep breath and sighed.

“Sorry.”

“Oh, no need to apologise. I agree with your sentiment completely. It’s just to remind you, since I’m sure that you don’t want the Undersecretary asking you why you’re growling.” Augusta said easily.

The Undersecretary was now advising Andrew.

“Now, I’m sure we can fit your friends into the award ceremony somehow, Andrew. It’s not impossible. After all, families have traditionally always been invited. It would be no trouble at all to stretch that definition a little, as your peers are your families in Hogwarts, aren’t they?” Fudge began again.

The air was getting slightly electric. More than one person was holding back their opinions, and possibly the beginnings of their accidental magic.

Andrew broke the increasingly awkward quietness.

“Mr. Undersecretary, I think the Minister should rethink the idea of the award.”

“You did defend Hogsmeade, Andrew. I see no reason why you shouldn’t get it.”

“I see no reason why the others who’d also risked their life and limb to help people should not also get it.”

“Well, they can’t exactly compare to you, can they?”

“I didn’t even manage to make it safe enough for the civilians to get away, Philippe and Ceres managed that!” The blond seventh-year finally said in exasperation.

Fudge waved it away. “They’re not exactly, a real Hogwarts denizen, are they? When did they move, again?”

Next to Tom, Bernadotte didn’t bother to tone down his sardonic chuckle, saying something about
how ‘unmitigated cretins truly are everywhere’, at least until Victorinus cleared her throat. The French wizard might still have a slight grin on his face, but his eyes were dark. It made his expression less of a smile and more akin to a wolf baring its fangs.

“Mr. Undersecretary,” Andrew’s voice was noticeably strained now.

“Mr. Abbott, please, this is the opportunity of a lifetime! Calm down, think reasonably about this instead of with the hot-headedness of youth. I’m sure you can see the benefits and necessity of our arrangement? You can always reward your friends for your loyalty later, once you’ve risen far in life—and I’m sure you’ll rise far. You have the potential for it!”

Tom had thought that a Gryffindor would be the first to break away from this farce, but it surprised him that it was Emma who stood up first.

“Pardon me, but I’ve just remembered that I have a highly time-sensitive project brewing in one of the dungeon’s potion labs for Advanced Potions II and I have to check it out now. Excuse my absence, Mr. Undersecretary.”

“Mine too,” Oswin quickly stood up and added. “It was our mutual project.”

“Oh, of course,” was the only words a confused Fudge could say.

After her was Augusta Delagardie, who was, as Abraxas had honestly said to his friends, built like a Spanish galleon. She might be all grand curves, but she would also not hesitate to sink any idiot standing in her way.

“It turns out that it’s my time of the month,” she said without preamble or shyness, ignoring the suddenly awkward-looking wizards nearby. “I need to go to the infirmary.”

“Certainly!” The undersecretary yelped.

Julia had stood up with her and didn’t even bother saying anything. Tom guessed that she was taking advantage of the habit of many witches to go to the bathroom in pairs or groups that no one would even question why she was leaving with Delagardie. Verrault had just stood up when Andrew himself drew the undersecretary’s attention.

“Mr. Fudge,” Andrew started.

“Oh, relax, Andrew. You’re too tense. Everyone is too worried for no reason at all! Alright, I’ll give you time to think about it some more. Well, it seems that I’ve managed to get my message across for now. I think we can all break off for lunch.”

“Thank goodness. Five more minutes of this, and I might walk forward and punch his face.” Rajesh muttered under his breath.

“Don’t,” Tom said dryly. “You might cut your fist on his teeth, and who knows what infection you’d get that way.”

That made the Gryffindor laugh.

“That sounds like something Curie would say.”

The Slytherin nodded. “Oh, absolutely. It’s fascinating to hear her tell of how many ways a common injury can actually kill you if you’re not careful. And no, Episkey does not safeguard against an ongoing infection, only the cuts and damages sustained by the body.”
Mordred Montmorency had gravitated towards his way, and that was how Tom ended up walking out—a Gryffindor to his right and a Slytherin to his left. As the rest of the prefects moved out of the room, the discomfort they’d all felt in varying degrees from yesterday had not been assuaged. Nothing in particular had been settled either.

Hermione had a front row seat to the horrorshow that the prefects experienced first-hand when she found Julia and Eugenie waiting for her outside of Advanced Care of Magical Creatures. That took some effort, since the class was outside the castle located near the pens and stables of Hogwarts, so she knew something important had happened.

“Eugenie, Julia. What brought you all the way out here?”

“You have got to know what we’ve just gone through. It was surreal,” Julia said. Yet her brown eyes were still bright and she still had the excitement of a first-hand witness to a gossip-worthy event. Her long ponytail occasionally swished with her movements.

Eugenie could not be markedly more different. She was actually downcast, her shoulders drooping.

“It was awful, Hermione.” The blonde said quietly.

“The main theme was this, the Undersecretary was insulting people left, right and centre. Anyone that’s not descended from the old families, that is.” Julia frankly said. “British, old families, for that matter.”

Hermione snorted. “As if they don’t marry out to the families outside the UK from time to time.”

“He thinks I’m not a real Hogwarts denizen.” Eugenie murmured.

“Oh, Eugenie, that’s not true,” Hermione had reached out and hugged her fellow Ravenclaw before she realised it, with Eugenie hugging her back easily. Julia was not to be left out and she hugged them both—Hermione adjusted one arm to encompass Julia too.

“Yes, ignore the stupid Ministry man, Eugenie.”

“Julia—”

“What? He is stupid, Hermione.” She had never heard the prefect being so judgmental about anyone before. Fudge Senior must be as grating as the Fudge she knew.

“I was going to advise you to use the word ‘short-sighted’, actually. Don’t want you to accidentally ruin your chances of working in the Ministry if he accidentally overhears and then remembers you years later.” Hermione said.

“He’s not here.” Julia said mulishly.

“True. But nicknames are a habit. It’s too easy to forget where to use it. Better find a safer one altogether.” The brunette insisted.

“Yes, Mother.” Julia said with a long-suffering sigh. Hermione only sniffed at that with a smidgeon of her old self-righteousness while Eugenie giggled at them.

“So, what happened at the prefect meeting?” Hermione asked as they disentangled themselves.

The three witches were walking in the direction of the castle now when Julia started the story from
As they neared the Great Hall for lunch, the lines on Hermione’s brow continued to increase with every description that Julia gave. The sixth-year either had a good memory for dialogues, or she was just so annoyed that she remembered almost everything. Where Julia faltered, Eugenie could easily fill the blanks or correct her. Between the two of them, Hermione had a clear picture of what the prefects’ meeting with Undersecretary Fudge was like, and it was not pleasant.

“He said what?” Hermione’s voice was level—dangerously so.

If she was younger, she might have raised her voice, railed out loud against injustices. As she grew older, she realised that it didn’t always make a difference whether she was shouting or not. If the bureaucrats were deaf to pleas, they simply were. Being louder did not always make her heard more.

She no longer let herself get mad so easily—she gets even.

“That you can’t always rise beyond your birth.” Julia stated without blinking. “You know, because Tom, being a muggleborn, clearly will never surpass Andrew.”

The prefect didn’t skimp on the sarcasm.

Hermione felt like laughing hysterically. Oh, she was still so very angry. Not even Tom Riddle deserved to be passed on for something he truly earned just because of the accident of his birth. It made her want to hex someone to vomit slug for a whole afternoon. Yet she was also caught by the irony that the secret Heir of Slytherin was being treated as another inconvenient muggleborn. She had no doubt that the undersecretary was thinking that Andrew’s Order of Merlin award would’ve been far more straightforward if Tom wasn’t around.

“Right. Obviously,” Hermione replied just as sardonically.

“I could hear Raj cracking his knuckles from where I sit.” Julia said. “Bernadotte’s wand was sparking.”

“Agatha was huffing every three sentences or so. I know since I sat next to her,” Eugenie added.

She raised both of her eyebrows at that. “I’m still surprised that you’re all that annoyed too. I mean, yeah, it sucks, but unlike the Slytherins, your House doesn’t lose out from an opportunity for glory. It’s not as if either Tom or I really cared much about getting an Order of Merlin either.”

Alright, Tom probably would care. But he’d give more or less the same answer as the one she gave when asked, so she didn’t feel she needed to correct it, even when she’d just remembered that.

Julia touched her arm, her gaze sincere.

“Hermione, the Ministry was being an unfair nitwit. None of the Gryffindors would stand for it—and I wouldn’t either. Andrew already said it was unfair. You’re still a Ravenclaw and you were out there, risking your life, and they’d just ignore that because they find your last name unfamiliar?” Julia’s tone was sharp the farther in her speech she went.
Wonder what happened when I wasn’t around? Hermione mused. Without her involvement, she thought Tom wouldn’t even think about interfering, as she could not imagine him truly caring about the civilians. Did Andrew receive the award alone without question, in her old future past? With the Gryffindors only muttering under their breath as their prefects were side-lined, but not having enough ammunition? Crouch would’ve certainly been down for the count if she and Tom hadn’t come across him fast enough, and she knew that Andrew had at least been more successful in attacking from behind cover than Crouch was.

It dawned on her that her interference made the relative heroism of each prefect involved more complicated.

“What happened after that?” She asked.

The prefect huffed. “Tom still answered him calmly. I have no idea how he still manages that.”

“I’m sure he’s had lots and lots of practice,” Hermione replied dryly. She remembered Harry’s story about Dumbledore informing him how as a child, Tom Riddle had an explosive and cruel temperament. The prefect she knew now was a far cry from that, even if it is still possible to glimpse the darkness in his eyes if one knows how to look.

“Do go on, Julia.” The brunette prompted. The sixth-year continued.

“Well, Tom replied by saying…”

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The idea of having more than half of the second class free wasn’t such a bad idea after having to weather the bumbling undersecretary. That was Tom’s initial take on things. Yet he had only left the class for some half hour before a house elf had come looking for him. It was wearing a piece of a thick black curtain as cloak.

“The Undersecretary is looking for me, you say?” Tom asked.

“Yes’m. Says he’s looking for Young Master Riddle, Master Riddle Sir. Ministry Man sits still at the Summer Suite.”

The house elf waited until he waved it away before taking its leave. Again? What could he possibly want? For a moment, a childish pique suggested that he pretended to never get the message, or that he’d gotten it too late to go to the meeting and simply continue on his own merry way. Like all moments, it passed, and Tom had already made his way back to the guest suite wing. He was the dutiful prefect, after all. He had an image to maintain.

When he entered, the circular tables were empty now, though they were still the pristine white of the new tablecloths. It was just the undersecretary and his secretary now.

“Ah, Tom, my boy! Exactly the person that I wish to see! I can call you Tom, right?” The undersecretary said this with excessive cheer. Laius Fudge kept coming closer and closer and at one point the undersecretary even patted his shoulder. Tom wanted to wrench the man’s arm before pinning his tongue on the table with a fillet knife precisely in the centre.

What he did was to smile amiably.

“Of course, Sir, it’s no trouble at all.”

He introduced his secretary. Tom barely remembered the wizard’s name, so lacklustre that it was.
“Good man! Now, I’ve heard from the headmaster that you’re a good prefect, very responsible,” The undersecretary said in that quasi-confidential tone. “You know how to get things done, don’t you, Tom?”

“I do try.” He humbly replied.

“Well, Tom, let’s get this Order of Merlin award settled and done for Andrew in a jiffy, shall we?”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand.” He stated.

Laius Fudge had hair the colour of dead and shrivelled leaves, face too shiny and well-done in a way that spoke of one desperately scrubbed and polished. The bureaucrat was not much more pleasant at close range than he was at a distance.

“Tom, Tom. Come on, you and I know exactly what is needed to get this problem squared away. Come on, Andrew thinks so very well of you. What do you want?”

“Pardon?”

“Andrew keeps saying that he’s not going to accept the award if he was the only one given the honour. While we both know that he’s the one who deserves it most. If you keep stalling, Tom, you’ll just continue to make Andrew feel bad, and then this issue doesn’t get settled at all!”

He never hated his first name, the name he shared with that useless muggle, as much as when he’d heard it repeated by this lickspittle. This pathetic panderer, pristinely powdered to ensure that he will be perfectly photographed from any point.

“I do not affect what Andrew feels or not feels.”

“No, no, no, that’s not it. He considers you a good friend. Now, you do consider him as a good friend too, don’t you?” He waited for Tom’s confirmation, which came in the form of a slight nod.

“Well, relieve him of this dilemma, then! Tell him that you don’t mind if he accepts the Order of Merlin on behalf of everyone. He is the Head Boy, isn’t he?”

“Mr. Fudge, I do not care whether I will receive the award or not.” The words came out carefully, precisely, leaving practically no room to be misheard.

“Yes, you don’t. You’re such a good boy, aren’t you, Tom? A great friend, I’m sure.”

Tom still had the faintest polite smile on his face as he ignored the patronising tone.

“But Andrew doesn’t know. He needs your assurance. Don’t worry, we, at the Ministry, will not forget the consideration you’ve shown for your friend. The moment you graduate, you can have the position to be my secretary right at that moment. How about that?” Fudge smiled wide with generosity, the self-satisfaction of a man who felt that he’d done his good deed of the day.

“It really is no trouble. I can arrange for it quickly,” he snapped his fingers. “Just like that.”

Look at him, being so considerate to this muggleborn orphan who couldn’t possibly have that many opportunities open for him if it was not for the goodness of his heart. Surely the boy would be so pathetically grateful as to be thankful to be able to run errands at his beck and call, Tom thought dryly. The Slytherin prefect was seriously thinking of what would be required to skin this man alive, regardless of how he did not usually like to have the bodily fluids of some random, human-
shaped waste to touch and splatter him.

“That is completely unnecessary, Undersecretary. I would not like to be given any position through anything less than my fair efforts.” Tom said.

“Oh, pish tosh! Everyone says that, but it’s practically impossible! There would always be someone who knows the applicants’ parents, and they’d have much more knowledge of them than other applicants. You might end up as some clerk in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. That would be so very dull for someone of your talents, isn’t it?”

He didn’t think he actually needed to say anything to the undersecretary’s monologue, his expression one of placid politeness.

“Come on, Tom, work with me. Let’s not make our lives more difficult than necessary. You must have some things that are currently bothering you too, right? What is it? Is it some beautiful witch from a good family? I can certainly put in a good word about you to her parents or family!”

Hermione is not one to submit to the opinion of others if she’d made up her own mind.

“I’m afraid I’m more concerned with simply enjoying the Hogwarts experience to the fullest right now, Mr. Fudge.”

The undersecretary’s secretary was a bland young man that Tom found to be forgettable. Yet compared to his boss, it was clear that the clerk held back the urge to fidget as Tom gave his answer and said nothing else, giving his cool gaze only in return. Even as Fudge’s brow furrowed, the Slytherin found no reason he should be anything but calm.

“I don’t understand, Tom. Why would you not help Andrew?”

Tom blinked. The statement was so absurd that he didn’t immediately understand what the undersecretary meant.

“Why would you hold him back from this very important victory in his life? He needs friends that can support him, Tom, not those that would abandon him at their first glimpse of personal glory.”

The undersecretary gave him a look of regret and disappointment. “Assure him, Tom. Get the other prefects together and convince him that this is his fate and fortune. You’d do that, right? You’ll make his life easier rather than more difficult?”

Fudge’s confidence was that of one assured in his victory. Why wouldn’t the responsible prefect be easily guilted into ceding way to his good friend? What was unsaid was how of course he had to cede to his betters. It was a fact of life that a muggleborn orphan was going to have to learn sooner or later, wasn’t it? It was clear in his confidence that the undersecretary felt he was truly doing a favour by teaching him early.

Tom stopped controlling his voice so much to keep it in his usual nice and harmless façade. He let it fall to his more natural, deeper range.

“It’s just an award, Undersecretary. If I don’t think it’s so important, and neither does Andrew, why must we be so desperate about it?”

Of course, he was still polite. It was just that now, there was an edge of something more.

The beautiful thing about the Freezing Spell is that, if you’ve actually gone to the trouble of condensing the water vapour in the air, it takes far less effort to turn it into ice than if you were trying to summon water from the atmosphere, and then turn it into ice. It was also faster and far
subtler. His countless practice with the Condensation Spell was proving itself useful right now.

This was why when he’d realised the tablecloth was getting damp from all the additional water suddenly enriching it, it took barely a blink to freeze it. It was the sort of fine control that you’re forced to learn when you’ve been trying to make clouds artificially.

Its surface did not even seem changed.

The secretary yelped, taking his hands off the table’s surface.

“Harrison! What on earth—”

“Sorry Undersecretary! It’s just so cold.”

Tom sipped his tea without concern. It was a pity that he could not focus on their individual cups easily without his wand yet.

“Nonsense! What coldness? Everything’s perfectly fine.”

While the undersecretary was berating his secretary, he took the opportunity to do the wand movements for the freezing spell. He might not be holding it, but as it was pressed against his forearm, the tip of which was next to skin, it was still conveniently easier than a full wandless magic.

Glacia Maxima.

A layer of frost developed outside the cups and teapot. Rime subtly appeared on the tablecloth as well, giving the impression that Jack Frost had just embroidered the whole surface in a few seconds.

He patiently waited as the undersecretary was surprised by the chill of his cup and the coldness of his tea. Judicious application of Aguamenti under the table sometime during the conversation created a layer of water slowly creeping over the floor. Ten seconds later, all the other chairs at the table but his were frozen in place while he was admiring the painted flowers of his teacup.

“Well, I’ll make sure that Andrew knows about the Ministry’s absolute faith and belief in his heroism.” Tom said idly. Water was still spreading unseen over the floor of the room, while the other two wizards were not ones that paid attention to their environment enough. “If that is all, undersecretary, I’d take my leave now. I have an appointment with Headmaster Dippet.”

He did not. But Dippet would not turn him away if he showed up at the door of the Headmaster’s Office.

Tom met the undersecretary’s gaze, still keeping his pretence of politeness as he waited for Fudge to give him leave. The wizard was unsure about ending his efforts to get Tom to persuade Andrew, but some part of him must have been aware to the increasing frisson of magic gathering in the room that he did not make things even more difficult.

When Tom walked out of the room, all the chairs and tables were stuck to the floor. (He did not need to turn around to know where each table were—he’d memorised it when the prefects were first gathered there). The young secretary tried to stand up first and yelped when he slipped. Luckily for the wizard, he fell back on his chair. The undersecretary did not pay him much notice, too busy murmuring something about how youth nowadays are too prideful to even admit that they need help. He almost slipped as he stood up, but his assistant was helpful and had caught his arm.
Tom did not look back or pause in his steps.

“Why are there ice here? Dippet needs to do something about this room. The heating charm here is faulty.”

“S-sir, I don’t think it’s the heating charm.”

“It certainly is, why else would there be ice here?”

“This only autumn, Sir.”

“And we’re almost in Scotland. It makes perfect sense,” The Undersecretary insisted.

The ice would not melt until at least a quarter of an hour had passed. Not that Laius Fudge would know, as he would have gone out from the room at that time.

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Chapter End Notes

**Additional Notes:**

-Augusta Delagardie: Fifth-year Gryffindor prefect and also a Gryffindor chaser on the house team. Tall, curvaceous, and relentless in Defence class. Her family does raise her the old-fashioned way, to be the mistress of the manor of whichever pureblood she ends up marrying (not that they’re particularly against halfbloods or muggleborn, it just didn’t cross their mind much). Considering how traditional they are, this includes being able to competently defend their home in case of an attack (which is inevitable if they’re involved in a blood feud).

Again, I’ll reiterate that the development of the Aurors as a modern police force is one that I theorised to roughly follow the development of Sir Robert Peel’s police force in the UK (which is only post-Regency 19th century onwards). The French, after all, established the Sûreté first.

Technically she’s not an OC, as she’s my take on the grandmother of one of the canon HP-era characters. You can easily guess who.

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47 The Violence Cycle

Chapter Summary

Lunch, in which the French Gryffindors arrive in droves. Maximilien de Montmorency notices something everyone else had missed. Tom eats lunch with Slytherin sixth-years and seventh-years, headed by Flint. Torquil Travers walks beside Tom Riddle and chats. Something is weird with Tom. Hermione catches up with him after classes.

Chapter Notes

This is actually one of my favourite chapters. Pretty proud of how it turned out.

On a different note, someone got ahold of my CV from somewhere and I'm offered a post at a project that needs to move at double-time before the end of the year. So, other than the whole grad school prep stuff, I have...this. Update's not going to go any faster anytime soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

47 The Violence Cycle

Much later, Hermione would curse the arrival of Fudge in Hogwarts as a bad omen. If Julia and Eugenie said that the meeting with the undersecretary was a real pain in the neck, the rest of the week only went downhill from there.

Right now, she still had no idea of what other problems were about to be dropped in her lap.

The Great Hall wasn’t even half full yet when the three Ravenclaws arrived. As such, Hermione had a clear view not only to the Slytherin table as she walked in, but also to where Tom was sitting. To be honest, she almost missed him. She had been looking for him around the fifth-year segment of the Slytherin table, but he was nowhere to be found among the Walpurgis Knights.

She spotted him near the end, talking to wizards she surmised were seventh-years. The sight of Tom smiling made her stumble.

Julia yelped as Hermione crashed into her back. If Eugenie wasn’t holding her up on her other side, she would’ve tripped as well.

“Hermione!”

“Sorry! Sorry!” She pulled herself upright with a sheepish smile while Julia tried to stay standing with the help of her fellow prefect.

“I know you’re staring at the Slytherin table, but can you do it after we’re all safe and sound, and sitting down?”
Hermione rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t what you think it is.”

“Really?” Julia was sceptical.

“Tom was creeping me out. He’s smiling.” The brunette answered while Eugenie left them for a moment to scout for a nice spot on the Ravenclaw table.

“Don’t tell me you’d be happier if he was frowning.” Julia said.

“It’s just not natural, alright?” Hermione answered as she glanced at the Slytherin table again. She missed the dubious looks Julia and an arriving Eugenie sent each other.

“For Tom to smile…is not natural?” the blonde prefect asked with confusion.

“No, no.” She shook her head as she followed her friends to a spot at the table. “From what you’ve told me about Fudge, the meeting was definitely unpleasant. And now Tom is chatting nicely with a bunch of seventh-years he’s not even that familiar with? It’s worrying.”

Her friends’ gaze was mostly confused. Hermione sighed as she sat down.

“Come on, it’s obvious. Fudge was being a twit. You’re annoyed, right?” She waited for Julia and Eugenie’s nods. “So, what do you do? You find each other and gripe. You find me and complain about him, and I agree with you about how much of a prick he is.”

“Yes, and?” Julia asked.

“But you feel better after that, right?”

“Ah.” Julia nodded with a realisation, her eyebrows rising.

“Exactly,” Hermione said with sigh. “You don’t go on to play nice with people you’re not even friends with. If he doesn’t take a break from whatever pureblood prattle he has to wade through as he socialises, he’s going to blow.”

“You have a point,” the sixth-year replied. “But I don’t think it’s as bad as you think. Tom’s always so patient in explaining things in study groups.”

To that, Hermione couldn’t help but let out a short bark of laughter. There was no humour in it and the sharpness of its edge gave a vague feeling of unease to the listener.

“Oh Julia, you’ve just never seen him beyond his patience. He does have a temper deep down, even if his fuse is long.”

Julia clearly wanted to say that Hermione was being too paranoid, that she wasn’t describing Tom at all, but the words weren’t coming when faced with Hermione’s certainty.

“Don’t you think that’s a harsh thing to say about Tom?” Eugenie asked.

Hermione’s half-smile didn’t change or disappear as she turned to her dormmate, her eyes seem to contain a hundred and one unsaid things. The brunette witch’s calmness was discomfiting, especially when she seemed to shrug the question off as if she hadn’t just slandered the character of one of her close friends.

“I suppose you don’t need to worry at all. You too, Julia. You’re both too nice to ever see it.” She clapped her hands together. “Never mind Tom, I’m sure he knows his own limits. Now, let’s see what the kitchen elves come up with today. All that physical exercise in Care of Magical Creatures
Sometime in the early middle of lunch, the French Gryffindors invaded the Ravenclaw table.

Well, at first, it was Bernadotte who made a casual invitation to Hermione, for ‘Society stuff’, he had said. The last class before lunch that he and Ceres took was rather delayed in finishing, hence why they’d both only arrived when the Great Hall was packed and people had already started eating.

It was Auguste who expressed his exasperation first.

“Please, Philippe. We’re already eating here. What did you expect us to do, to carry our plates over to your House table?” He asked, incredulous.

“Well, sure?” Bernadotte replied guilelessly, his hands in his pockets. “Why not?”

Even if Ceres was also a Gryffindor, she couldn't help but rub her temples at that point while Eugenie merely stared with disbelief at him.

Hermione cleared her throat.

“I think what Auguste is trying to say, is that it would make more sense if you and Ceres were the ones who dropped in at our table. You’ve only just arrived and it wouldn’t be as much of a hassle.” His eyes widened in realisation.

“Of course! Good point, Hermione! Let me invite everyone else.” Bernadotte dashed off before anyone else could get another word in.

“There’s no…need.” Auguste started the sentence in a loud voice but faltered into a sigh at the end as he realised that the Gryffindor wizard certainly wasn’t listening to him. He dropped his face into his hand.

Hermione saw Bernadotte’s long braid whipping a poor, unsuspecting fourth year as he ran past. The kid yelped while Bernadotte shouted a passing ‘pardon me!’ and didn’t slow down the slightest.

On the other hand, Auguste did not stay dumbfounded for long. He had already stood up and talked to the people to his left and right, asking them to shift further and apologising for any inconvenience.

“It seems that I’d be dining at the Ravenclaw table” Ceres said with some consternation. “Sorry about the hassle.”

Julia waved it away. “Oh, it’s fine. There’s enough space for all of us. Anyway, I know how Bernadotte is when he’s enthusiastic about something. It’s easier to just stay out of his way than get bowled over.”

“Yes, we don’t really mind,” Hermione assured.

“It’s times like these that I don’t regret being in a different House from my countrymen.” Auguste remarked from across the table. There was a squeak of laughter from Eugenie before she covered her mouth in embarrassment.
“Oh, I know what you mean, Auguste,” Ceres said with a sigh. “Except it’s the other way around for me. There are times when I wish, I wasn’t in the same House.”

‘-

“Um, is it really alright to have this meeting here?” Hermione asked.

Auguste, Evariste, the Gryffindor Montmorency and the other members of the French contingent was easily talking about where their families were from and where their extended families were located at. The tinkle of silverware were more than enough clues that everyone was enjoying their meal.

Evariste turned to her in slight confusion. He was sitting at the other side of Eugenie, who was at Hermione’s right.

“Everyone ‘as second and third cousins to talk about. There’s nothing unusual about it.”

She was about to say that not everyone kept track of all their second cousins, much less third cousins, but she supposed it was natural in a society that prized blood and bloodlines.

“Yes, it’s nothing too technical,” Auguste added. “We’ll be alright, Hermione.”

Well, if they didn’t think it was going to raise eyebrows or suspicions, she supposed they knew the attitudes of this era’s wizarding world better. So far, nobody had mentioned Grindelwald or even the war, much less something as serious as an operation. There were only shared recollections about visiting a particular aunt in in her chateau.

“Eugenie?” Evariste asked.

“Most of the Delacours are in Aquitaine. You should really visit the vineyards before or after harvest.” She recommended.

Auguste was asking if anyone else other than him had family in Rouen.

“Can’t help there, sorry,” Ceres said with a shake of her head.

“Don’t ask me,” Bernadotte replied. “If you were asking about the banks of Rhône, I could say yes.”

“Yes, we know your family’s mostly in the hills of Provence. Nothing too metropolitan.” Montmorency said. Something about the dismissive way he said it drew a sharp look from Bernadotte. Not that the other wizard seemed to notice. She could see Ceres laying her hand over his arm, and it calmed him slightly.

Hermione herself only realised the veiled jab moments later; was he implying that Bernadotte’s family were provincial country folk? Urgh, she wasn’t that quick at detecting all the hidden meaning in speech. There’s a reason Draco and Daphne handled politics most of the time.

“Well, I have a lot of family in the Paris region, but I think that goes without saying for most people here.” Bernadotte said again.

“True enough,” Montmorency said.

“I might know some people in Flanders. There are still more Bernadottes in Sweden, though, but I don’t think we’re talking about places that far yet.”
For all intents and purposes, they do sound like people exchanging holiday and family stories—or a group of people trying to plan for a grand trip.

Evariste shook his head. “No, not yet. So, let’s see some other places I ‘aven’t checked. What about around the Loire valley?”

“Helene might know.” Ceres added.

One of the other French wizards Hermione didn’t know frowned. “Helene Girard?”

“She did mention something about her family’s farm.” The blonde prefect explained.

That French wizard groaned when he remembered who that was. “Not sure if she’d be interested to help us, though. She’s in Hufflepuff, isn’t she?”

That was when Maximilien de Montmorency spoke up again. “She’s not of the old families. Would she be able to be of much help?”

Bernadotte didn’t disguise his eyeroll.

“Just because a good chunk of her family is non-magical doesn’t mean they’re suddenly incompetent or unhelpful, Maximilien. It doesn’t stop them from being able to look around the area, see if there are any place suitable…for holidaying. Besides, you do remember that we’re not exactly eliminating the muggle places yet, right?”

“Maybe we should,” he muttered.

“Why is that?” Auguste asked. It would seem that he’d noticed Bernadotte’s reddening complexion at the same time and decided to step in before the other wizard blew up.

“Am I the only one who read this morning’s paper?” Maximilien said out loud.

“There’s nothing like that on this morning’s paper,” the other Gryffindor wizard groused. (One of these days, Hermione would remember his name—but that wasn’t today).

“Yes, there is, but clearly only if you weren’t distracted by the front-page circus. Page three, second column,” the blond Montmorency stated. Hermione took a more serious look at him at his exact answer. Unlike his cousin but similar to Abraxas, he was blond, with a distinctly patrician cast to his features. But where Abraxas was gregarious and friendly, his eyes had a cold intellect to it. “A confidential source in the DMLE confirmed that the captured muggles were indeed connected to some of the rabid anti-magical groups in the United States.”

Even Bernadotte was taken aback at the revelation.

“That sort of news shouldn’t be on page three!” He insisted.

Maximilien raised an eyebrow. “It’s plausible if the Ministry tried to bury it.”

Philippe was still shaking his eyebrow. “Why would they even—”

“They might be trying to avoid the increasing tension that would certainly happen if that news leaked out.” Hermione understood the Ministry’s reasoning immediately, even if she wasn’t sure whether she thought it was the best idea right now. “It would’ve been much better if they announced the news after they managed to catch the mastermind. That way, it wouldn’t have been an issue.”
“The public still deserves to know.” Bernadotte said this firmly.

“Can the DMLE stop any reactionary lynch mobs from forming if some angry wizards and witches wanted to strike back at random muggles? Can the DMLE prevent all retaliatory violence against muggles and muggleborns?” Hermione’s answer was sharp as she stared Bernadotte down. “Are those lives that will be at risk worth spreading the news?”

“The Aurors can track any idiots down,” he replied.

“I’m not sure they can do that before it’s too late.” She said. She’d visited enough non-magical houses after some extremist attacks and it always broke her heart. One more family hurt was one family too much. Bernadotte was eyeing her oddly, as if he hadn’t seen her before.

“I didn’t peg you for an authoritarian, Hermione.”

She snorted. “I’m not saying that the news can’t ever spread. I’m saying that the journalists should give the DMLE the opportunity to actually finish the damn case before they raise the hue and cry. The DMLE would probably work faster with that sort of deadline on their tail too. Release the news only after some time has passed.”

When he was still looking at her askance, Hermione huffed.

“Absolute freedom of the press only works when you have strong rule of law and a well-informed citizenry. Do you think people believe that the Aurors are strong enough with Grindelwald still out there and attacking people willy-nilly? Do you think most people are rational instead of afraid and close to panicking already, right now?”

“Now, do you think the Aurors have the sort of force needed to hold back possible riots from breaking out in several places at once, all over Britain?”

To her surprise, Maximilien was staring at her with a measure of respect. It was still cold, but this time, he wasn’t looking down his nose at her.

“Your points are well-reasoned, Miss Curie. I agree with you. The situation right now is a powder keg.”

“And that leak might be the lit match thrown into it.” She muttered.

“Taking into account this most recent news, if I read the Hogsmeade attack correctly,” Auguste spoke up into the tense atmosphere with a neutral tone, “it would seem that our German friend is more creative than people thought.”

Hermione heard more than one sharp intake of breath around. Montmorency even pinned Auguste with a pointed look, probably one that demanded further explanation—it would seem that he hadn’t made the possible connection until then. Good. That meant I didn’t have to raise the point myself, she thought.

“Whether it’s our German friend or not, it does seem strange. Why would a muggle group based in the United States suddenly decide to cross the Atlantic to wreak havoc? It’s not as if there’s a shortage of magical communities that’s easier to hit.” Hermione stated, fully realising that she was ruining everyone’s mood but knowing that it simply had to be said.

“The question then becomes, who pointed them this way?” She asked the table rhetorically.

“Merde.” Bernadotte cursed.
“I do hate it when your enemies get clever.” The other wizard complained.

“Well! Let’s not dwell on such unpleasant topics while we’re eating. That’s a good way to ruin your appetite. That could be done later on, isn’t it, Evariste?” Auguste broke the sombre mood.

Before Evariste could answer, Montmorency had spoken up.

“The problems the Americans clearly have with their muggles should have been a lesson for us.” He hadn’t forgotten their initial topic. “We cannot trust a random muggle so easily and we should not allow such hatred to become widespread. That is why asking Helene’s…muggle contacts should not even be considered.”

“They’d be her family. They are not exactly random muggles, Maximilien,” Bernadotte snapped. Hermione had never seen the prefect that annoyed.

The blond scoffed. “They could be secretly envious of her magic or hated her and she wouldn’t know.”

“They wouldn’t even do that in the first place, you paranoid fool!”

“And you are shockingly naïve to trust strangers so readily—an embarrassment to your family!”

Bernadotte had suddenly gone so still that Hermione was concerned. She didn’t like the highly-alert expression that Ceres had either.

“Take that back,” the sixth-year said slowly and clearly. Montmorency’s expression looked as if it had been carved from granite.

“I see it as it is—”

“Enough!” Evariste’s voice cracked the air like a whip. “Maximilien, you’ve gone too far in presuming the reason behind Philippe’s stance. Philippe, if you cannot reason your opinion without insulting people, then you also need to cool your head right now.”

His glare dared either of them to challenge him, and he didn’t look quite so harmless or angelic right now, unless one was imagining the angel with a flaming sword. When he took a breath to calm himself, Hermione could almost hear the people in their little group doing the same.

“We can dwell about this later. In the meantime, Eugenie, you were saying that some of your family has vineyards?” He smiled his most charming smile. With a few more well-said questions and an easy-going attitude that he pulled forth so easily after his outburst, he succeeded in changing the tone of the conversation completely.

Eugenie began to talk; at first slowly, and later on with more enthusiasm. The rest of lunchtime passed on more pleasantly than the first half with Eugenie’s stories of summer evenings in Aquitaine. She spoke of how the vibrant scent of a healthy vineyard wraps around any casual visitor walking down the fields while the sun warmed their backs. It was enough to make anyone wish they could take a holiday there.

Bernadotte and Montmorency were a lot more reserved this time.

As Hermione almost finished with her dessert, she couldn’t help but turn in the direction of the Slytherin table—occasionally checking on him was becoming a habit now. Tom was still in a very involved conversation with the Slytherin seniors. His expression of good humour and a pleasant smile was rather jarring to see, because for her, ‘nice’ might as well be as far as the moon from
Tom Riddle. Perhaps she was the only one to feel that way, as she had seen the worst excesses of Dark Lord Voldemort.

Which, by the way, does not exist here, she reminded herself of the unexpected strangeness. She had yet to see what Tom would become, but he was shifting farther and farther away from his old path. Whatever slips he was going to make, they were going to be new and different ones.

Still, it was not hard to see that he was still playing a role at the Slytherin table. There goes Tom Riddle, Slytherin prefect, networking with the upper years from the old families. Considering her background, she wasn’t sure whether her presence would mess up whatever bait he was trying to set up to lure them his way, to pull them into his web. She was certainly not up to the challenge of trying her hand at improv acting by going up there and following whatever subtle cues he’d give. Hermione snorted at the idea. A performer she was not.

Well, she supposed he’d be too occupied to walk to the Advanced Arithmancy class and chat with her as usual, then.

‘-

“Tom! Just the person we’re looking for!”

The moment Tom was within shouting distance of Slytherin table, a group of sixth-years and seventh-years called at him. He looked up. The broad-shouldered profile of the quidditch captain was obvious even from a distance.

“Come, do tell us how you’ve managed to show everyone just how capable Slytherin House is.” His booming voice practically announced Tom’s arrival on the Slytherin table to everyone else.

Francis Flint, heir to the Flint family and older brother to Flavius Flint was grinning at him as if they’d always been best friends. There was no way that Tom was stepping away from this—it was a rare opportunity to have them approach him first than the other way around. He smiled easily, in a way that looked completely natural, regardless that his current preference to tear someone apart, limb by limb.

“Yes! We heard that you actually disarmed one of the muggles, not just bleeding harmlessly like Abbott.” A sixth-year next to Flint said—the Parkinson heir, Tom recognised him by his rather flat nose that was similar to one of Abraxas’ stooges. Unlike Parkinson-the-younger, this one seemed to have a more perceptive gleam in his eye.

Parkinson was elbowed a little by a wizard to him. “Priam!”

Priam Parkinson grunted. “Oh, fine. Abbott did his best holding the attacker back. It’s still not that much better than your best, is it?”

“Well, he doesn’t have the good fortune of having the best healer in Hogwarts as his partner.” Tom replied.

“Oh, we’re not talking about that knock-out job, though I’m sure it’s great. After all, no one else seemed to have managed it. What we want to hear, is about the second shooter you hunted down.” Francis lowered his voice conspiratorially. Now, only their immediate circle heard his statement.

Tom took a seat and used the moments of shuffling as an opportunity to think. That event was one he’d ensured did not make it into the prefect’s record, as organised by Emma.

“Really? That’s fascinating. Where did you hear that?” Tom asked blandly.
“When your parent is in the DMLE, you hear interesting things. My father was right proud that a member of Slytherin House managed it and asked me if I knew you. Unfortunately, I have to tell him that we’re in different years. I thought I’d better remedy that now.”

Tom noted that other than Flint, there was also Travers and even the usually reclusive Burke—he looked annoyed that he was dragged out from whatever tome he was currently lost in, but still present here nonetheless.

“Well, what do you want to know?” He asked.

To Tom’s left was Parkinson and next to him was Irwin Avery—his best character traits, as far as Tom was concerned, was that he was entirely unlike his sister Jemima, who was Tom’s sixth year prefect partner. Irwin was quieter and certainly wasn’t clingy. What caught his attention was how here was a good number of pureblood wizards—Sacred 28 and beyond—that Tom did not have easy access to since they were from different years, hanging to his word.

“From the beginning would be great.” Parkinson said. “I’m sure everyone else would like to hear a firsthand account. Don’t we, boys?”

“Hear, hear!”

Tom ducked his head with false modesty. “Well, if you insist…”

Tom Riddle had predicted that the talk would be part retelling his experience and part career advice, as people suddenly saw his potential and try to get him on their side. He wasn’t wrong about the first and he wasn’t exactly wrong on the second, just incomplete. It wasn’t just about whose fathers or uncles (and on rarer occasions, mothers and aunts) were in which departments, or what the environment and atmosphere was like in the different places, it was also about the relatives they have.

Specifically, the female relatives.

“I’m sure you know Irwin’s sister already, she’s a prefect like you, isn’t she?” Priam Parkinson asked.

“Miss Avery? Yes, she’s a fifth-year prefect,” Tom replied.

“Yes. Know her already, don’t you? On the other hand, I’m sure you don’t know about my sister at all. Patricia’s a nice girl. She really knows her responsibilities, you know, not unlike some other girls.” Priam said.

“Isn’t ‘responsible’ just a nicer way to say ‘boring’?” Travers cut in.

Avery was making some rather obvious coughs-that-were-not-coughs into his drink on Parkinson’s other side, while the Parkinson heir gave Travers an annoyed look.

“Try bringing one of the more adventurous girls home to your mother, I dare you.”

“No thanks, I still want to live.” He replied drolly, to the laughter of some of the others. Priam had turned back to Tom at this point.

“I don’t think you’ve truly met her since you don’t interact much with the witches, do you?”
“Well, not much beyond courtesy and what school work entails. I’d hate for it to be misinterpreted.” Tom answered, lying calmly through his teeth. Hermione, after all, was none of their business.

Avery was passing dishes down to their end. He wondered for a moment why the house elves happened to be a bit slow on this side that he needed to do that in the first place. Perhaps the kitchen was a little overwhelmed due to someone’s specific orders. Still, it wasn’t such a big deal.

Parkinson nodded. “That’s good. You already know how to be a gentleman. That’s an important character to have if you were to mingle among the purebloods.”

“Oh, please, Priam. The last thing he needs is your useless lecture. Riddle already has a good reputation of keeping his word and being discreet, I don’t think he needs any lesson on it.” Burke groused from across the table, next to Travers. He was carelessly scruffy and his tie was askew, but there was no mistaking the sharp intelligence in his gaze.

“Well, it’s never a bad idea to learn more, especially if he was going to marry into one!” Priam insisted.

Several strands of thoughts that Tom had been idly running at the back of his mind, from remembering this conversation as it goes to remembering the failures of his cloud-making experiments, halted at that sentence.

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t really have a family to back you up. It would be faster if you have in-laws that can do that for you.”

“Frankly, Priam, your sister is a nag and a shrew. I wouldn’t wish her on my worst enemy, much less Riddle,” Burke said outright.

“And your sister is a misandrist and a shark in human form, Balthazar. How many boys has she scared away, again?” Parkinson jabbed back.

“She’s just really good at weeding them out. No brainless or gutless lout is going to survive Lysandra.” Balthazar said with not a small amount of pride in his voice.

“What’s this I hear about her biting Rosier until she drew blood?”

“They were seven. Merlin, Priam, are you growing senile already? I’ve told you that before.”

“I think I heard she kicked some poor wizard in the balls.” Travers added, pouring more oil into the fire.

“It was Defence class, and he misplaced his hand on her person.” Balthazar shrugged without concern.

“Ha! I knew she was a harridan!” Priam Parkinson crowed.

“Being good at teaching lessons to stupid wizards doesn’t make a witch a harridan.” He insisted. “Would you rather have your sister be a helpless victim instead?”

“I heard Vespasian Starkey always did his damnedest to never get paired up with Jemima Avery in Advanced Potions. He said there’s a limit to the degree of bumbling he was going to put up with. Which makes sense, since his family background means that he’s leaps and bounds beyond most
people in his class,” Torquil Travers idly commented again. To Tom, he was a tad too focused at his ham and peas for it to be real. The food couldn’t be that delicious.

“It’s true. I heard this from Caspar who heard it from Nott who heard it from Pendleton.”

“Aha! She’s a nag and a nincompoop! No wonder you have to talk up her virtues to other people!” Balthazar slammed his fist into his palm with satisfaction, he turned to Tom just as Priam Parkinson sputtered.

“Patricia might be friends with Miss Avery but she’s not*that* much of an embarrassment in class, thank you very much!”

Burke was more interested in Tom, though. “That’s why you can always be assured that I don’t have that agenda when I talk to you, Riddle, because I’m sure my sister can make up her own bloody mind about which wizard she wants to tie herself to, though I’ll answer any questions you might have about her.”

“Now, now, I’m sure we don’t have to get into this argument again,” Francis said as he stepped in. Even as he said this, he was grinning. It was clear that he enjoyed the show.

Inwardly, Tom sighed. The topic seemed to be taking some time before it died down. It didn’t seem as if he could redirect the conversation somewhere else yet.

“Would someone please pass the drink jugs? Ah, thank you, Avery.” Another wizard slightly farther than Tom raised his voice with impatience. Tom helped Avery pass the jug of pumpkin juice, and another of orange juice.

“Service seems to be slow on this end today,” he commented. “I wonder why?”

Burke scoffed. “Some witch was probably trying to order the kitchen to cook venison *exactly* the way the cook at home did it. Add several courses like that, and it bottlenecks things for everyone else who just needs a bloody lunch.”

From the way he was pointedly looking at Parkinson, he made no secret about who he thought that witch was. Priam bristled.

“*Please.* Patricia doesn’t like venison. It’s hard to get right for her delicate palate. She prefers soufflés.”

Balthazar Burke barked in laughter at that, but most wizards didn’t understand what was funny. Irwin hid his laughter in a series of polite coughs as he passed a goblet to Priam, who passed it to Tom.

“I noticed that you don’t have any glass yet.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

Predictably, neither Burke nor Parkinson’s sisters were the last of the female relatives to be mentioned. Tom had almost forgotten the second popular wizarding pastime among the purebloods after quidditch until now, as he sighed inwardly—matchmaking.

The seventh-years were more laid back; most of them had only filled half of their schedule. Unless someone was of the ambitious type, the last year in Hogwarts was traditionally a time of revelry
and relaxation. Tom took his leave from them while they were still debating whether Puddlemere United’s beater really broke the rule when they last played against Chudley Cannons—things he absolutely had no interest in.

He did not fail to notice the steps behind him when he exited the Great Hall and the noise level fell. Tom stepped to the side and waited.

True to his suspicion, Torquil Travers stepped out of the door. He did not seem the slightest bit fazed to see that Tom had expected him.

“Travers. On your way to class too?”

“Somewhat, yes.” Travers replied, walking in step with him. “I thought I’d make sure that you were on the same page.”

“What about?”

“You do know that Parkinson’s family had been declining since his grandfather’s day? Officially, it’s mismanagement of their estate. Unofficially, well, there are several things. His family isn’t what it was a century ago.”

Tom made a vague sound of interest at that. He already knew about it. What use was getting Melchior and Abraxas to keep their eyes and ears open on the affairs of the old houses, if not? Or the use of Melchior quietly slipping into his father’s study and skim through Nott Senior’s correspondence for things of note?

“They only have the house they live in now these days. No holiday homes, no town house. Well, technically, there is a town house, but I wouldn’t even let my house elf stay in it, much less a human. Not exactly fit to live in.” Travers said.

“Down on their luck, aren’t they? It’s such a shame.” Tom said with all appearance of sincerity.

Only Hermione would’ve been able to detect the hint of sarcasm in it, and that was because she was unreasonably paranoid when it came to him. Travers glanced at the fifth-year for a moment, puzzled, though Tom didn’t react at all to that. The seventh-year shook his head, perhaps deciding that he was imagining things.

“Burke is…well, the Burkes have always been eccentrics.”

“Intellectuals, I hear,” Tom mused out loud. Travers snorted.

“What use is keeping to their mouldy tomes when it meant letting power pass them by? They do not use their seat at the Wizengamot to the fullest. All they’ve done is dealt with their damned library and collection. Unchecked, it would lead to the slow decline of their family in another half century or so. Not that I think Balthazar even cares.”

“Well, as long as he’s content with it, I suppose it’s his family to deal with as he sees fit.” Tom said.

“If you think that you’d be entering into the circle of elite if you married into their family, you’re wrong. They’re sad excuses of a pureblood. They’re dregs, Tom.”

Travers’ words were blunt, more than Tom had expected to hear. He turned slightly with curiosity, his eyes half-lidded.
“Would you say that right to their face?”

“Not in those exact words, but yes, I can. Balthazar won’t deny it, Priam would probably argue with me, but he can’t exactly counter the evidence.” He paused and took a breath. “Thing is, Riddle, you just don’t have the connections. Don’t let today’s talks fool you. I don’t think you’d ever get a chance to marry into a pureblood family.”

Travers shrugged casually, with the forthrightness of a man who believed he was stating a fact.

“You’ll never be one of us, not exactly. We can never truly wipe the stench of where we came from.”

Tom eyed Travers sideways, his eyes unreadable even if his smile did not disappear. He stared straight ahead once more.

“Well, considering that even Starkey, Pendleton or Rosier would find it challenging to ask for Lucretia Black’s hand, I certainly don’t delude myself that I have a chance. The lovestruck wizards from mediocre families who forget themselves and mooned her from afar are rather pathetic. Aren’t they?” He asked cheerfully.

*Knowledge is power,* and Tom kept track of even the most hopeless infatuations in Slytherin and outside it. He didn’t let his lips twitch the slightest bit upward even when he knew that Travers was holding back the urge to retort or say anything that would only incriminate himself. The wizard must’ve been gritting his teeth.

“Don’t try to grasp beyond your natural lot, Riddle. It wouldn’t end well. Far better for you to know your place.”

His statement was sharper than the ones before.

“Oh, I know *exactly* where my place is, Travers.” Tom answered. *At the top of your body pile.* He wanted to watch the man gurgle and choke in his own blood.

“After all, you *do* know where your place is, don’t you?”

Tom could see the muscle on his jaw twitch as he said that.

“Watch your words, Riddle.”

“It was rhetorical, Travers. Please, don’t let little old me annoy you.” Tom said with unusual humility, his tone still as pleasant as if they were merely discussing the weather. “I’m sure you wouldn’t think of having ideas far above your station, would you? You still have the prudence to go out of your way to teach me all about knowing my place.”

*Check. Your move,* Tom thought. He made sure his expression hadn’t changed the slightest, even as he held back the urge to cut the other wizard open and make sure that Travers *bleeds,* then pulling back all the spilled blood in again to give him a false sense of security, before repeating the process from the beginning.

If Travers was looking for evidence that Tom had made his statement with the intent to mock, he wouldn’t find it. He blinked harmlessly when Travers sent a long, brooding look his way. He let his not-quite-there smile to slip away at that.

“Travers? Are you alright?” He asked instead.
The seventh-year shook his head and stared at Tom strangely. “What?”

“You don’t look so well. I hope you haven’t caught a cold. There’s a rather nasty one making the rounds among the sixth-years—Mordred has been sniffling since last night,” The prefect said casually, pulling Travers off-balance yet again.

“…No, I don’t think it’s a cold.”

“That’s good to hear. Anyway, I’m sure you’re not taking Arithmancy today. We can part ways here—I’d rather not pull you even farther from your class. I’d hate to be such a bother.” His smile was disarming, his expression guileless. It was a while before Travers stopped staring at him so intently, determined to find something.

The taller Slytherin failed to find anything other than Tom’s unfailing politeness, despite his own vague sense of unease.

“…I’ll see you later, Riddle.”

“Certainly, Travers.”

Tom arrived right before the bell—it was late by his standards. He was also rather quiet during Arithmancy class.

Usually, he would’ve volunteered several answers already, but this time it was Hermione who fielded most of them. Two or three students had gone from the class. She hoped they’d dropped it altogether if they had been taking it for all the wrong reason—like, say, the opportunity to talk to the charming Adele Lagrange in the fourth class of the week (the personal projects and tutoring session). If she had truly been a younger Hermione, she would’ve been more focused on ensuring that yes, she’d read the textbook at least twice as well as the supplemental text, and that she can answer every single question the professor was asking. She couldn’t care less about the other students in class—unless they could answer a question that stumped her. Then, she’d care.

Now, she took the time to check how the whole class was doing (if everyone was still rather behind her in understanding, that meant she could relax a little in this class). This was how she noticed that Tom wasn’t focusing completely on the class.

At times, she was almost sure she felt his eyes on her. Yet when she turned, he was usually doing something else, eyeing her quizzically when she stared at him with a question in her eyes. She only saw him staring at her once, his gaze too deep and unreadable. When he saw that she’d met his gaze, he simply moved closer to ask her how she solved a particularly tricky problem. Not that he ever said anything about why he had been staring in the first place.

Most of the time, his attention wandered.

He still answered any of Professor Lagrange’s direct questions at him easily, without having to think for too long. It meant he was still keeping up with ease. Whatever occupied his mind was probably nothing serious, then, to have scarcely burdened him. That was what Hermione thought, and it was how she convinced herself to stop thinking too much about it.

At the end of class, he asked her which of the two classes she’d took this time, ADADA or Advanced Charms. She said Charms, of course, since she’d missed it completely last week and was trying to catch up. He nodded in understanding.
“Alright. I’ll just be off to Defence class, then.” Tom said.

The feeling that something was off intensified at that point.

He had never intentionally taken a different class from her before, not if he knew beforehand what she’d take next. Not that Hermione wanted him to always shadow her and he could be exasperating at that sometimes, yet by now it had merely become a pattern she’d come to recognise. For him to deviate from it now, there must’ve been a particular reason behind it. Something must have shown on her face, as he smirked in amusement soon after.

“Unless you were missing me so much you’d rather that I take Charms with you too?” He asked.

“What? No! Of course not.” Hermione shook her head with vehemence. “I was just thinking, that’s all.”

“Unlike you, not all of the Slytherins are well-practiced at magical fights already. They’d be even more lax with their standards if I wasn’t around.” Tom said.

“It’s fine. You can go and shepherd your flock there.” She answered, not missing the upward twitch of his lips at that.

“You make it sound as if I was so selfless and caring,” he commented.

“Aren’t you? You’re the Sainted Tom Riddle, after all, whom most teachers think could do no wrong. Always so responsible and so helpful.” Her reply was dry.

“Very well. I’ll do my best to live up to your image of me.” There was humour in his voice. She rolled her eyes.

She did notice that he seemed to be looking at her slightly longer than usual, some unsaid thought still turning in his mind. Since she had no idea how to even begin asking about it, she decided to let it go for now.

They parted ways there as Hermione headed to her Charms class. Eugenie and Lakshmi had already saved her a seat when she arrived, with Eugenie seemingly hyped because they were finally in a class together. Hermione didn’t think it was really such a big deal, but she can admit that it was nice to be together with her dormmates.

Yet as interesting as Flitwick’s class was, she couldn’t keep herself focused for long. There was something Tom wasn’t telling her. Add the unpleasantness of Undersecretary Fudge’s meeting based on Julia’s rants, and Hermione felt as if she was missing something big.

This was why when Julia actually bothered to catch up with her directly after class, Hermione could only give the sixth-year a sheepish smile.

“So! I heard from Eugenie that you’re usually free on Wednesday afternoons,” Julia started, “what about showing us that Patronus Charm you managed the other day?”

“Um, yes, I suppose I can do that, but maybe some time later? An hour before supper?” Hermione asked.

“You have something else scheduled? But Eugenie said that you didn’t have any study groups that you go to!” The other Ravenclaw looked as if she wanted to grab Hermione’s robes and plead her to stay, but she held herself back just enough.
Was Julia desperate or what? Then again, Ravenclaw was the house of the intellectually curious. She might just really, really like mastering more and more spells.

“I’m sorry, it’s just…Tom. There’s something he isn’t telling me and I don’t have a good feeling about it.” Hermione said.

“I thought there are many things he clearly isn’t telling you,” Lakshmi muttered as she caught up with Hermione. She and Eugenie had only walked out of class just then, as they were far more relaxed in packing their bags than Hermione had been.

“Yes, but it doesn’t mean I don’t know about them.” She answered. Like the Walpurgis Knights, for one, or his ambition to collect as much power as he can for himself, the rest of the world be damned. “This is something else.”

Curiously enough, Julia relaxed a fraction with that.

“Oh, yeah. You might want to ask him what he thinks about Fudge’s blather. But I thought you shared a class before now?”

“How did you even know that?” Hermione’s gaze was sharp. Julia only raised an eyebrow at that.

“I’m currently taking Advanced Arithmancy II. I still remember what my schedule was like last year, Hermione.”

She nodded in acceptance. “He was distracted but he didn’t say anything.”

“He’ll be fine,” Lakshmi unexpectedly said.

“And how would you know that?” Eugenie asked.

“Oh, please. Does he look like someone who’s going to get his feelings hurt because he decided to listen to a bumbling idiot? Of course not. Riddle would dismiss the windbag as the useless desk jockey that he is.” She tossed her glossy mane of hair to one side with that statement, her well-manicured hand waving the undersecretary’s importance away.

Julia whistled. “Wow, you really don’t pull your punches, do you? Does your family really doesn’t need the Ministry that much?”

Lakshmi’s grin was sharp. “We Chakravartys have our own support, don’t worry. It’s certainly not from that idiot.”

“Lucky you,” Julia murmured. Her family certainly wasn’t an old pureblood one that can afford to insult undersecretaries left and right so blatantly. “But how would you know what Tom would do, anyway? I don’t think you’re exactly friends with him.”

“Because that’s exactly what I would do. Trust me, soft is the last thing that Riddle is.” She said without preamble, amber eyes unyielding.

“Oh, I agree with you,” Hermione answered, surprising the other Ravenclaws. “There’s still something, though. I’m sorry, but I’ve got to check it out.”

Julia sighed. “Oh, fine. Go and see to your beau. I’ll just be at the library’s common study room.”

“I’ll be there if I can finish this quickly.” She replied, too distracted to notice the exact words Julia had used. “I just hope he’s not going to do something reckless. See you later, everyone.”
Hermione bid her friends goodbye and she marched off, her hands already fiddling with her bag as she tried to find something of Tom’s that she could use to locate him. She wasn’t taking the chance that he’d already set off from ADADA class.

A younger her would be annoyed at the idea that gut feeling could be used as the basis of an important decision, but as she’d accompanied Harry and Ron’s Auror teams often enough, she’d come to realise that gut feeling is simply knowledge so ingrained as to be trained into a reflex. If she sat down and tried to trace at which points of their interaction did her unease grow, she had no doubt that she’d find them and would be able to articulate her reasons well.

Yet as she’d learned on the field, there are times when you can’t get all the information you’d need right then because there was simply not enough time. Do you really need to know in the heat of the moment how exactly your enemy attacked you? Wasn’t it enough that you could duck in time to avoid the hit? After that, there was no space left for anything else other than defending yourself and making sure that everyone got out of there alive. When it was all done, there’d be time enough for analysis.

In the midst of action, you just have to wing it.

"Did she just worry that Tom would be reckless?" Eugenie asked in confusion as they watched Hermione walk away.

“She had also said that he’s two-faced and too ambitious back when we were having tea.” Lakshmi added, showing that when she wasn’t too lazy to do so, her memory was quite sharp.

“Two-faced?” Julia sputtered. “Tom is two-faced? He’s the most responsible wizard I know! He doesn’t toady up to the teachers and then pass on most of the work to other people in prefect assignments! Unlike some people I know… Andrew might be even more responsible, but it’s not by a large margin.”

“They do seem pretty comfortable with each other. It stands to reason that she does know him better than we do,” Lakshmi pointed out. “And if Hermione was so wrong, why is it that he didn’t seem to try to correct her perception of him?”

Eugenie shook her head. “I think she just gets him absurdly wrong on that point that he lets it be because it’s funny.”

Julia nodded. “Yes. Tom does have a subtle sense of humour.”

Lakshmi’s smirk was faint, and it could almost pass for a smile among the uninitiated. For a moment, she seemed to be about to say something else before she changed her mind.

“Ah, alright. Whatever you say, ladies.”

Hermione wondered for a moment why on earth she had one of Tom’s green-and-silver ties in her bag.

Well, there might be that one time she suggested using it as a blindfold and demonstrated how the lack of vision could heighten other senses, but now really wasn’t the time to get distracted by the recollection. She was sure she didn’t remember taking it with her. The brunette witch shook her head and ignored the warmth suffusing her cheeks. It didn’t matter now. She was just too glad that
she had something to find him with.

She followed a winding route through the corridors of the castle, through at least two secret passages and had somehow ended up on the Hogwarts grounds.

It wasn’t a short walk. The Ravenclaw had gone past a few greenhouses now and soon she would be entering the fringes of the Forbidden Forest. The trees weren’t exactly dense enough to block out most of the light falling down to the forest floor, but there was always something wild about the place that raised her goosebumps. Perhaps it was the half-light of the waning day, when shadows at the corner of one’s eyes morph into strange creatures during dusk. Yet she was sure that a part of it wilder magic in the land circling her, fleeting and unknowable. It was something more elusive and untamed than what most wizards and witches could access with their wands.

Hermione didn’t have time to muse further about it, though, since she was here for a specific reason.

It was not far before she heard voices. At first, she simply walked in that direction, slipping her wand into its holster already as the locating spell had clearly fulfilled its purpose.

That was before she saw the scene in the clearing, along with the distinct sound of fist hitting flesh, and Starkey bent over.

Hermione was running before she knew it, pushing Tom and Starkey apart. Tom didn’t resist her interference, and neither did Starkey, which, now that she actually thought about it, was probably the main reason why it worked. It hadn’t occurred to her to draw her wand because none of them was throwing hexes and jinxes against each other. She glared at Pendleton who was simply leaning back against a nearby tree as if he had decided to go for an afternoon stroll in the forest.

“You let him beat up your friend?” She asked in disbelief.

Pendleton only shrugged, unconcerned. “He had a good reason for it.”

“And what could be a good reason for you to beat him black and blue, Tom?”

Tom rolled his eyes, as if she had merely disturbed a talk among a group of friends. His next sentence threw her off.

“Are you going to go back on your word, Hermione?”

“What?”

“Your word, Hermione. You promised not to jump to conclusions, remember?” Tom said, far too relaxed for someone who’d been caught red-handed punching the stuffing out of Starkey. He didn’t fidget. He merely stood there waiting for her answer as she was unconsciously drawn into the depths of his eyes that were darker than usual today.

The predator in him was far closer to the surface than it had been in any other days. In a different world, the amount of dark arts he drenched himself in would’ve pulled Voldemort out right now.

Hermione closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. She took a deep breath, holding back the urge to drag an explanation out of Tom and started breathing slowly as she counted to six. Her eyes opened gradually.

“Alright. Now, will someone tell me what’s going on?”
“He’s just fibbing a bit,” Starkey started, while Hermione simply stared because she had no idea what he was saying.

“Starkey, tell her what punishment this is for.” Tom said. Starkey pulled himself up, his left hand still covering his stomach. His breathing was still a little heavy when he answered.

“Tom had a good reason to hit me. There wasn’t even a jawbreaker among them.”

“Really.” Hermione said sarcastically. She saw that Tom had been making some rather hard hits to the solar plexus.

“Sure. I poisoned him.” Starkey said.

Whatever she had expected, it wasn’t that. At first, she thought it was a joke, but the unchanging expressions of the three wizards in the clearing told her that it was the truth. She gaped.

“You… what? Are you suicidal?” She couldn’t help but yell at him.

“See? It was Ves’ fault.” Pendleton commented from the side.

“I’m not asking you right now.” Hermione’s statement had a warning tone in it as she glared at him. He shrugged.

“Alright. Shutting up.”

“What was the effects again, Ves?” Tom asked calmly.

“Oh, it was nothin’ too bad, you know. Wasn’t tryin’ to snuff ‘im. Just the standard food poisoning or stomach bug sort. Y’know, indigestion? Stomach pains?” Starkey was standing up now, his brown curls a mess without his usual cap. She hadn’t even noticed that he had curls, his hair always slickly gelled down before when he intentionally didn’t wear his cap (well, she supposed they don’t use gel yet in this era, do they?) He looked younger this way.

“Vomiting at least twice in the middle of the night? Emptying your stomach until there’s nothing left to empty but stomach acid that you can feel burning the back of your throat as it goes up?” Tom added casually. Starkey winced.

“Eh, well, yeah… Those are definitely among the possible symptoms.”

“No need to be shy. We know you’re a talented potioneer. Enough that no one had thought it might not have been a real disease at the early days.” Tom’s tone was wry. “What did you say it was at first, to the healer?”

He relaxed.

“Oh, that’s easy. Maybe it was some incompatibilities, allergy-like.”

“I think none of you have addressed the most important question. For goodness’ sakes, Starkey, why?” Hermione asked, disbelieving. Starkey glanced at Tom. Tom’s shrug was completely at ease.

“Go ahead.” Tom replied to his wordless question.

Starkey had his hands in his trouser pockets, leaning casually. Suddenly his swagger was back. “He’s an uppity muggleborn who had the gall to enter Slytherin.”
“And embarrassed all the pureblood who made a poor showing in class in comparison.” Tom added with not a little smugness.

“Sure. That too.”

The answer did and didn’t make sense at the same time. No wonder Tom was out for blood if he’d been poisoned. Yet she couldn’t imagine any Slytherin in their year to ever dare to raise a hand against Tom, much less someone she’d seen as loyal as Starkey (he didn’t even blink at making the document of so-called traces of pureblood ancestry for her). From the amusement in Tom’s eyes, she knew that he knew the conundrum currently going through her head and found it to be entertaining.

It was a puzzle, and Hermione never gave up on those.

“Uppity muggleborn?” Hermione asked, not quite believing what he was saying.

“Yes. He was usin’ pens, I tell you. Pens! Not the fancy, fountain pens either! He’s not trying to live and adapt to the wizarding world when he’s the one entering. Didn’t think we’re good enough for him, did ‘e?”

What? No, Tom had always used quills…well, that was now, wasn’t it? This was in the past. She shook her head and decided to ask for more pertinent facts.

“You said that it was so good the healer couldn’t detect it? What, it only happened for a day or two?”

Starkey winced again, while Tom was almost grinning.

“How many days again was it, Starkey?”

“More than a week,” came the muttered reply.

“Try two weeks,” Pendleton commented from the side.

“Thirteen and a half days. Let’s just make it thirteen because I’m magnanimous like that,” Tom said idly.

“Nurse Edelstein would definitely have noticed.” Hermione insisted.

“Ah, well, I didn’t do it in a row, of course. That would’ve been real stupid, yeah?” Starkey said. He leaned back on his heels as he said this. His grin was fox-like in cunning and a contrast to the innocent-seeming curls of his hair. “A day with issues, then clearing up the next. Give a fortnight or so to rest and then wham! Two days with stomach problems! That’s a pretty shock for any cove, innit?”

He did think it through, she thought with admiration. Hermione didn’t let a word pass her lips as she still felt it was wrong to praise Starkey for successfully using stealth to poison someone, no matter how well-thought out his methods were.

Tom had asked something from Pendleton. It was three crystal balls. At first, it looked as if he casted *Lumos*, yet when he tapped one of the crystal balls with his wand, the light transferred. He did this for all three of them, before casually floating all three in the air. Instant lights. The sky was rapidly darkening above them, and it was even darker here, under the trees—he had a good point with the lights.
“Still, if the allergy tests came back negative, it would’ve been a clue.” She said, slightly distracted with what Tom was doing.

“But before that, it’s a good way to scare you up, eh? What if you were allergic to magical food? Maybe you can’t stay in Hogwarts at all because you can’t even eat properly here!”

Starkey’s voice rang with glee, his expression boyish and joyful.

He truly thought it was a grand idea to ensure that one of his classmates would never learn magic in Hogwarts. Just because the classmate was a muggleborn who didn’t think he should follow everything the wizarding world set as example. If she had been more naïve, bile would’ve rose at her throat, but right now it was just that old, old anger she’d always had at various parts of the wizarding world.

…and disappointment. She’d never thought Starkey would be that close-minded.

“Yes. It’s not a bad plan to drive someone out of Hogwarts, is it?” Tom mused out loud.

“Eh, well,” he seemed slightly awkward when he realised that his victim was right next to him. “It didn’t exactly work.”

“Oh, no need to worry about me, Vespasian. I agree with you, it had been an excellent plan. It would have worked if you were going against anyone but me.” Tom’s voice was smooth, his smile charming. “You might have to keep it a secret from others in case someone tries to…remove you for the crime, but you can tell the details to Hermione. She’ll understand. It’s certainly worth bragging about occasionally.”

It was hard to believe that Tom truly did not seem to mind. She didn’t understand why he said it.

“Really?” Starkey seemed truly excited at the statement. Hermione couldn’t look at the pleased expression on his face, jarring as it was to remember that the joy was there from his success in harming someone.

“Oh, yes. I remembered one of the days of the second month. I had to drag myself from the bathroom. Couldn’t exactly walk out.” Tom said this easily, without care, as if it happened to someone else he knew only in passing.

Starkey shook his head. “Ah, can’t fully take credit for that. I think that was dehydration setting in—it’s actually preventable, you know?”

“Maggie Edelstein missed that?” Hermione asked in disbelief.

That was the first coherent sentence she could ask. Everything else was a jumble of confusion and directionless annoyance (and not a little anger) in her head.

“This was the nurse before Madam Edelstein,” Tom finally answered. “Who left for reasons of family crisis. Said crisis already began some months before her final departure, so you can imagine how distracted she was right then.”

There were several details about the story that had bothered her, but she remembered Tom using a pen the most. It became her equivalent of ‘the dog that didn’t bark in the night-time’.

“When exactly did this poisoning take place?” Hermione finally asked.

By the outright smirk that Tom had, it was the question he had been waiting for.
“Vespasian.”

The other Slytherin answered promptly. “It was during our first year.”

And Hermione remembered again Tom’s words that even as first-years, the Slytherins were good enough not to leave a bruise if they found a child that did not quite fit in. She couldn’t imagine what it was like being a younger Tom.

Well, perhaps she can, but she couldn’t do it without getting very angry. It was the sort of anger that made her want to raze buildings to the ground—the same type of intense emotion that can easily triple her ability to channel magic at its most elemental and destructive. (Yes, she’ll pay for it in terms of exhaustion and even getting knocked out, but it was usually worth it).

“I didn’t figure out the reason for the spontaneous bursts of illnesses until near the end. Mealtimes were rather nerve-wracking for exactly that reason. I even tried keeping track of the various food and see if certain types triggered it. Didn’t quite work, of course.” Tom said.

“You have to admit that the randomness is a very good way of inducing dread.” Starkey added, with the eagerness of an artist pointing out the details of his masterpiece.

“Oh, very. That’s why I promised you that I’ll pay you back for Every. Single. Day. No spells will be involved, because you didn’t use any, and no warning about which day I’d choose to make you suffer, because you gave me none. I can choose any time, of the rest of your life.”

Starkey nodded in agreement. Under the greenish light of Tom’s *Lumos*, the whole scene became even more surreal. It was as if she’d accidentally walked into a convocation of goblins casually trading stories of violence.

“True, true. So, you see, Hermione, Tom’s been very fair. This is what, the fourth day?”

“Fifth,” Tom clarified.

“Fifth. I have eight more days of debt to go.” He finished.

Starkey was grinning. She had no idea why he was grinning, couldn’t really wrap her head around the thought of Tom telling her all this without a change in his inflection, as if he couldn’t care less of being poisoned. She wanted to heal Starkey and then wring his neck. Hermione rubbed her temple because she felt a headache coming up.

Really, she should just get used to it by now, because it seems that it would be a constant companion when you were friends with Tom Riddle.

“What? No. Why should I? Tom made a hash of magical traditions, yes? He’s just askin’ for it. Annabelle Palmer fit in *immediately* when she entered Slytherin, and she’s as muggleborn as they come. Knew how to go with the flow, that one. Also, I got schooled in how to induce terror by a better practitioner than I am.”

Starkey bowed to Tom. It was over the top, but there was nothing mocking in it. The respect and admiration in his eyes were real. It explained why Tom returned it with one as grave, but shallower. Recognition flooded her; it was that of a sovereign to his courtier.
Here stands the king of the goblins, who won his throne with his cunning and violence.

Tom chuckled. “You definitely learned that I was not someone to cross, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yes, I did. Making me feel and see that I’m bricked into one of the class walls? For two whole days? That was inspiring.”

“I thought it would be traumatising,” Hermione cut in. Starkey was unoffended and simply nodded.

“Oh, of course I was when it happened. I was stuck in the wall and I wasn’t dead. No one could hear me scream, even if he left eyeholes so I could see the Potions class taking place in front of me. That was the entire purpose of the exercise, to beget terror. But once enough time had passed and I can think about it carefully, I can see that it was truly great because it was very effective.”

She stared at him blankly.

“The magic I could use were still mere illusions and judicious use of imagination, I assure you. I was still a first-year,” Tom replied with apparent humility.

Starkey shook his head. “How it was done, I couldn’t even tell until I was a third-year. That’s why I’m always looking at your work to improve mine.”

Their expressions were similar, even if Starkey’s grin was far more blatant than Tom’s smirk.

“Well, I do like to stay fresh. Why reuse old staples when a little creativity goes a long way? Why be predictable to your enemies?”

Hermione observed him carefully, observed them, the pattern within the scene only revealing themselves to her just then. Their body language was a mirror to each other. The victim had become the maestro; the bully had become the student, the minion.

**Behold, the Master and the Apprentice.** She had only realised now that Starkey was as much of a psychopath as Tom was. He was just more extroverted and cheerful about it and clearly not as good as Tom was if he ended up as the minion of the pair.

Tom turned to the other member of the Knights who was content to stay at the side.

“Pendleton, do you have more of the punch?”

Pendleton pulled out a glass bottle from a basket he’d just picked up.

“That’s the last one.”

“You did bring extras, didn’t you?”

“I did. But that’s already the third bottle you’re taking, which makes it our last one.” The blond scrutinised Tom for a moment. “If you don’t mind me saying it, you seem thirstier than usual.”

“Probably just the exertion. Well, we’re not really planning to stay here for much longer, anyway.”

Hermione shook her head. They were treating this like a bloody picnic. **Food, friends, the open air, and a little beating as entertainment—what else would you want?** She thought sardonically.

Suddenly she felt very tired. Maybe it was the setting sun and the dying day. **This is already too late for me to deal with this shit.**
“You don’t actually make a habit of doing this, do you, Tom?” Hermione asked wearily.

“What? No! this is only the fifth day.” Starkey said, defending his lord and master. “Look, if you do it too often, it would lose the suspense and become too predictable, yeah? I wouldn’t even be that tense waiting to get hit, or poisoned. Of course not. Others might make that mistake, but Tom is definitely not someone who would. He’s a real connoisseur at this, an artist.”

“When’s the last one before this one?” She asked.

He shrugged carelessly. “Can’t quite remember. Pretty sure it was last year.”

“It was sometime around Easter.” Pendleton spoke up, breaking his silence. He picked up two baskets from the ground before he walked over to them.

“What are those?”

“Herbs. Potion ingredients. We had been gathering them for Slughorn.” It was Starkey who answered. “If we didn’t have a good reason to be here, I would’ve gotten suspicious, right? That’s why I’m telling you that Tom’s really good at this. I’ve never expected any of his attacks.”

She ignored the wonder in his tone, and the self-satisfied smirk she was sure Tom had, somewhere to her side. The four of them had started to walk back out of the forest by some non-verbal agreement. The stars that were beginning to appear were certainly the most obvious reason, and the night that was starting to fall. Tom steadied her arm when she stumbled over a fallen branch she hadn’t seen.

“This might sound obvious to you, but I really had to ask. Why didn’t Tom just report you in, Starkey, when he finally found out what’s happening and who was the culprit? Get you to serve weeks and weeks’ worth of detention?”

Starkey laughed uproariously, probably scaring more than one bird or small creatures nearby. He clearly found her question hilarious, at least until Pendleton nudged him.

“Sorry. It’s just… report me? Are you serious?”

“Hermione wouldn’t ask you the question if she wasn’t, would she?” Tom clarified for her.

Starkey cleared his throat in embarrassment and stood straighter and met Hermione’s gaze head on. “Oh, um, right. I should’ve noticed that. Well, what proof did he have? That he’d seen me do it? That’s just blind accusation, innit? I could protest. Could be, he’s got his back up at me and wanted to drag me down. Could be, people who don’t like me had been feeding ‘im lines. I can even get more Slytherins to pile on him for being a snitch. No.” He shook his head.

“There’s no good evidence. Why’d I agree to his accusations, anyway?” He looked back over his shoulder at her curiously, clearly not understanding why he even had to incriminate himself in the first place. “The weak bark their protests at the strong all the time. You ignore the yapping of the lily-livered. Only useless noise, that. Now, if someone’s strong, they just prove it. No complaints or pullin’ the teachers into it or anything.”

“Took you to heel properly, didn’t I?” Tom idly said.

That earned a bark of surprised laughter from Starkey. Hermione was startled to find that he was genuinely amused.

“Ha! Yes, I supposed you did.”
To think that the best way to get Starkey to back off was to strike back against him and show him who was more powerful—that there was no use in trying to report him at all. He would just duck out from it, perhaps even laugh at Tom for even trying in the first place. It was a worldview that was alien not only to younger Hermione who always had an outsized respect for authority, but also to her older self. She certainly didn’t think that the rule of the jungle was ever a good way to run society.

But hadn’t she made a similar observation before? That Tom probably saw the world through a Hobbesian perspective of it being nasty, brutish and short? Why should she be surprised that the Slytherins had only reinforced that viewpoint for him when it turned out that they (at least a good chunk of them) also hold the same rules? That respect is given primarily due to power, either magical or societal, such as coming from an old pureblood family?

Without it, one was close to nothing.

Tom had no family to speak of, not until he could prove his Slytherin heritage. Before that, what he could do, was to rely on his personal ability and power. Magic. His magic, to be precise.

Was it a surprise he ended up turning towards the dark arts? It promised him the largest amount of power for the least effort, and the quickest too. It took no time for him to end up being the biggest thug in wizarding Britain, didn’t it?

This wasn’t something she could change with just a conversation or several. This was an entire culture. It might take a generation to shift, or three.

(Shew vaguely remembered that it wasn’t that bad in her time—or was that merely selective blindness because she wasn’t in Slytherin and knew no one in there during her Hogwarts days?)

She wondered if she’d ever thought of asking Daphne or Draco about it, or if she was still too blind, too naïve later on.

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. At the same time, she could feel Tom pulling her away to the side. What was—oh. She almost missed a half-rotted log, hidden as it was under leaves and ferns. She ignored Tom’s glance when he heard her muttering incomprehensible half-formed words under her breath, still content to think through this on her own. She simply walked closer to him—if he wanted to be her guide, she might as well benefit from it.

He shook his head and made a comment about absent-minded geniuses. Hermione rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything. She still had things to mull over.

Alright. So, Tom’s assault on Starkey was just... something that came and went. Considering the scarcity of the event, it’s certainly an unusual occasion. Whether Tom realised it or not, this irregular foray into violence might even be somehow connected to his odd behaviour during class today. Otherwise, why choose today, of all days? Especially when so far, he seemed to be very precise in counting out the days of vengeance that he had left? It was another mystery on top of the previous mystery that she needed to dig under.

“Why’re you here, Pendleton, if it had nothing to do with you?” Hermione spoke again. “Just gathering herbs?”

“I’m the spotter. I make sure none of the damage were too far, and nothing affects mobility—a sprained ankle, for example. I heal those, and left the liveable bruises in.” He replied, as if it was completely normal to watch his friend get beaten and not do anything about it.
They’re all nuts. For the first time since she was stuck here, Hermione regretted being underage.

I need a freaking drink before I can even think about untangling this.

Chapter End Notes

I did put the tag that there’s a psychopathic/sociopathic character in the story, didn’t I? What, you thought I was kidding?

What the popular culture considered to be on the sociopathic spectrum (say, the version of Sherlock Holmes in BBC Sherlock) is technically what psychiatrists label to be on the psychopathic spectrum. The definition of the technical term of sociopath, on the other hand, is pretty much the unredeemable people who are violent with poor impulse control and low empathy, and yet this is what most people have in mind when they hear the word psychopath.

If you don’t believe me, check out DSM-IV or DSM 5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). Yeah, pop culture has it the other way around, doesn’t it? Of course, I’m not closing myself to the possibility that the clinical definition is going to be switched in the future to follow the popular understanding.

I mention this to clarify it for most people who might be confused as well as the rare pedants reading. As much as I actually use the popular term to avoid misunderstandings most of the time, I’d be sticking to the DSM term here. This is because I’m writing from Hermione’s perspective, and there’s no doubt that she does know the proper terms to use and would remember to use it.

Regardless of whether Tom Riddle has the empathic capability of a teaspoon, it’s clear that he still has good impulse control. His psychopathy here is not that pathological.

-, Thomas Hobbes: One of the modern founders of political theory. Best known for his 1651 book, Leviathan, ‘nasty, brutish and short’ is the way he describes the sort of anarchy mankind would devolve into if they didn’t manage to band together and create a government. Government, he explains, is necessary to sustain order, commerce, culture and civilisation. Considering that he wrote it while the English Civil War was raging, he had actual experience with the chaos it generates to have personal vendetta against it.

The full famous quote, for anyone too lazy to look it up on the internet, is as such:

“In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all,
continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Additional Notes:

**Torquil Travers (OC):** Seventh-year Slytherin, a pureblood whose family is a member of the Sacred 28. He might not exactly say that he believes in blood purity, but he does think that society is better if people know where they come from and adjusts their ambitions accordingly. He’s sharp-tongued and his observations tend to be on the unkind side of blunt, but never let it be said that he wasn’t realistic about his own marriage prospects or anyone else’s. His name is the Anglicised version of the Scottish name Torcuil, which is in itself derived from Þórketill, “Thor’s cauldron”.

In canon ‘Travers’ was a murderer of Marlene McKinnon and her family, and this resulted in him being sent to Azkaban, but that Travers has no first name. It could either be him or his son.

**Francis Flint (OC):** Slytherin seventh-year and captain of the Slytherin quidditch team. He is also the heir of the Flint family and his family is a member of the Sacred 28. Forefather to the Flint in the canon HP period. Where Orion is more-or-less the head of the lower-years’ largest and most noticeable group, Tom is the head of the middle upper-years’ largest and most noticeable group, Francis Flint is the head of the oldest social tribe of them all. Well-connected, exuberant/extremely extroverted and highly influential.
Chapter Summary

Supper. In which Hermione overhears things again. This time, she’s inspired with a Plan. Days turn. Friday Defence Class—in which Hermione corners some Slytherins for some answers. Unpleasant answers.

48 Disturbances

Hermione did manage to meet up with Julia and the rest of her study group that afternoon.

“Hermione!”

“Sorry I’m late.”

“Oh, it’s fine. Come on, pull a seat—move out and make space, Thompson.” The sixth-year grinned ear-to-ear when she saw her, waving away Hermione’s apologies.

Going through the basics of the Patronus Charm didn’t take long. As with almost all spells, after the initial part of getting the pronunciation and movement right, it all came down to practice. Sure, it was harder than most other spells since there’s the vague ‘find a happy memory’ requirement, but Hermione wasn’t sure if she could help anyone with that.

After that, supper rolled around.

If Hermione hoped that things would be better after the unpleasantness the day begin with, along with the simmering tension the Daily Prophet article caused, it was soon dashed when she saw that Fudge had returned yet again to Hogwarts to dine this evening.

“I thought he’d gone back to London!” Hermione hissed to her left, keeping her voice low.

“He did.” Lakshmi answered dryly. “He came back right before dinner began.”

“What did I miss?” The brunette asked.

She, along with Julia and the rest of the sixth-year’s study group, had arrived late to dinner.

“Oh, the usual. A short speech extolling the virtues of the next generation of leaders that Hogwarts is educating. His appreciation for everyone’s support of their exemplary Head Boy and informing us when the award ceremony for Abbott’s heroism is going to be.” Lakshmi replied in deadpan. Hermione couldn’t help rolling her eyes.

“Laying it on a bit thick, isn’t he?”

She shrugged, the fragrant scent of jasmine wafting in Hermione’s way as her friend did that. “Well, you know what they say about lies and repetition.”

“Say it often enough and people will begin to accept it as the truth,” Hermione said grimly. The
dark-haired witch nodded.

“I suppose it’s as good a plan as any.”

“Not on my watch.” Her reply was nowhere near friendly.

A quick glance around the hall pulled her attention towards one end of the Gryffindor table, where there was a ruckus. Ceres was pulling Bernadotte back, and a few others were keeping him and the Gryffindor Montmorency back. Evariste was planting himself squarely in the middle and trying to get both of them to back off. She might not be able to hear what was said, but everyone’s expressions were rather tense.

So much for having a running start on the search this week.

“Merlin’s beard, what the hell happened? Eugenie?”

“I think Maximilien is saying something about taking things slowly and not just trusting any random muggles out there for the, um, holiday plans. Philippe was saying that family is different. That was the last thing I heard when I was passing their table.” The blonde said this with a worried expression.

Lakshmi laughed at that, her voice too knowing.

“Oh, joy. He doesn’t realise that both Philippe and Ceres have muggle family members they don’t cut off ties with or ignore, does he?”

Eugenie bit her lip. Hermione shook her head with a sigh.

“I guess he just did.”

Not far away from them, she could see that Auguste was distracted by the fracas that his countrymen were involved in. She saw him pull himself back towards his food after jerking back, almost leaving, before changing his mind again. It must’ve been hard to be in a different House from most people you know from home, she thought with sympathy. The French wizard was not as talkative as usual, only offering his opinion when asked, once or twice. Most of the time, he drifted into being a mere bystander in the conversation at the table, his brows furrowed.

She almost chuckled when she saw the number of witches who couldn’t help staring at him when he looked so thoughtful and brooding. She was just thankful that she wasn’t that much at the mercy of her hormones this time around through puberty. Her good humour did not last, though.

Hermione had to admit that it was not easy for her to just focus on her dinner either—he wasn’t the only one distracted and not quite focused on the Ravenclaws around him. The French Gryffindors weren’t the only source of tension. She wasn’t even surprised to hear Eugenie’s warning tone at some of the younger years—she couldn’t catch the sentences, as she didn’t focus on it at all and simply let the sounds wash over her. However, it hadn’t been too hard to make out ‘muggles’ and ‘muggleborn’ somewhere.

A part of her was curious to see how Tom was doing, even if she doubted she could read him well (or at all) if he’d donned his other persona once more like a well-fitted glove. There was a darker undercurrent in his expression when he tanned Starkey’s hide, something she didn’t think she’d seen that…

…hadn’t she? What about that time when he visited the infirmary after she fell down the stairs? She had seen that potential for violence in him surfacing before.
She raised her head in the direction of Tom, only to be blocked by the masses of Hufflepuffs. She harrumphed in annoyance at herself. What had she expected? Half-empty tables? It was the middle of dinner. Hermione shook her head and said that it was nothing when Lakshmi out of all people asked her if she was fine. Her dormmate seemed more weirded out than concerned, but it was still something. The brunette made do with eating as quickly as she can without coming across as a glutton. The faster she could finish and get out of there, the faster she could do something and not feel as restless.

(And useless. She hated feeling useless the most).

Conversations drifted in from the Ravenclaws around her throughout the course of her meal.

“Should we really let muggleborns into Hogwarts?”

“Graham!”

“Look, it’s great for them to be able to learn magic. I have no hard feelings on that front. It’s just, um, don’t you think that it’s not safe for us? Can’t exactly tell which of ‘em would want to kill you and which of ‘em are alright. It’s not like they can’t live without magic—they grew up without magic!”

“Yes. Easier to just not let any of them in, isn’t that right?”

“Oh, not you too, Herb.”

That was a group of sixth or seventh-year Ravenclaws. Hermione rubbed her temples. She could imagine that the conversation in Slytherin would’ve been a lot less polite and more obvious with the prejudice. Maybe it was just morbid curiosity, but she really wanted to listen to what else they were saying. Fortunately for her, one was shrill enough to be heard clearly from her position. The voice was refined, but with a rather jarring undertone of a nag.

“We have the responsibility to the lower orders to teach them about what sort of behaviour is proper and what is not.” Hermione couldn’t really describe why the tone was annoying to hear, but it was. “Otherwise, how would the muggleborns understand what being a witch, or a wizard, is about? If we don’t teach them, they’ll think dragging all things muggle into the wizarding world is alright!”

“You’re right Stephanie,” another witch said.

Stephanie snorted. “There is no question that I am. Now, I think all muggleborns should take mandatory Wizarding Culture classes for several years. If they don’t pass all of them, they can’t graduate Hogwarts. We have to ensure they are all good citizens before they enter wizarding world who respects magic and our long history.”

“But there isn’t such a class.” A puzzled voice noted.

“Not yet, but there should be one. In fact, I’ll write about it to my father right away after this, and I suggest that you do too.”

A chorus of ‘of course Stephanie’ and ‘certainly’ followed.

The brunette witch couldn’t believe she could identify Stephanie Selwyn, seventh-year by her voice now, but really, her pitch and tone was just too distinct (and wince-inducing at times). The pureblood’s opinions also never lost the ability to annoy her.
“Everything’s going to hell in a handbasket,” Hermione cursed.

“Oh, that’s been happening since after lunch,” Eugenie replied blandly. It made the brunette turned to her, as there was just something odd about the blonde prefect not being nice.

“One of these days, I’m going to tie up a dozen second or third-years in a line with one rope and float them all up to their respective Heads of Houses.” The prefect continued. “You don’t know how many arguments I had to break up in the corridors today, with either shouts or shoving.”

“Maybe you should do exactly that tomorrow,” Lakshmi commented. She didn’t seem fazed at the surprised looks her friends sent her.

“What? There’s no need to look at me like that—it would lighten your work load, wouldn’t it? Sometimes, the fastest way to show that you’re serious is to demonstrate exactly where the limit of your patience is. Put the fear of you into them, Eugenie. I know you can be scary if you want—”

Lakshmi turned to Hermione’s curious look and explained.

“I’ve seen her rip into Starkey on the train last year, when he was telling the first-years of how they have to fight the centaurs of the Forbidden Forest to be admitted as a real Hogwarts student. There was even a kid that was so pale he was determined to book a train ticket directly back the moment he arrived.”

That got a snort out of the blonde and she forgot her nervousness.

“Melusine, yes, he’d been such a pain in the backside. I swear he brings out the worst in me.”

“Well, Starkey is a bit of an idiot that way, never mind how good he is at Potions or Astronomy.”

Hermione couldn’t help but continue to restlessly glance around as her friends conversed, seeing more and more disagreements and tension the more she looked.

Stephanie Selwyn is still speaking on and on and on to her friends—or is it minions? She couldn’t help a smile from quirking the corners of her lips. Even if they’re not half as zealous as Tom’s? Hermione found that she had found more things amusing now than they would have been when she was younger (and took everything too seriously).

“Stephanie has a good idea. I think I’m going to talk to her,” Hermione declared out loud.

Eugenie gaped at her, opening and closing her mouth at least twice in the manner of someone who clearly had too many things in her mind and yet couldn’t find the exact words to say. Lakshmi was staring at her as if she suddenly had three heads.

“You can’t mean that,” Lakshmi began.

“Well, the muggleborns should have a wizarding culture class. It helps with the culture shock.” Hermione started. On the other hand, not that many things had helped with her time shock, but she didn’t think it was a common affliction anyway.

“You want them to learn from Stephanie ‘don’t touch my robes, you plebeian’ Selwyn? What would they learn? The right way for muggleborns kiss her feet properly?” Lakshmi asked. Julia guffawed from across the table, because Lakshmi’s voice had a way of cutting through other chatter when she wanted to. Lucretia gazed at Lakshmi questioningly and the other witch raised her shoulders.
“You know as well as I do that the Selwyns are almost as old as the Blacks. If their main line actually had a son, there’s good odds that he’d end up as your husband,” Lakshmi pointed out.

Lucretia was mulling over something, seemingly lost in her mind for a few moments.

“Hmm, you may be right. There had been no Selwyn that married into the Black family within the last five generations.”

Julia shook her head, Hermione caught her muttered, “I can’t believe you actually remember that.”

“Do you think she’d actually get her hands dirty and actually write a lesson plan herself, or even the outline of the curriculum?” Hermione asked Lakshmi. “Can you imagine any of Hogwarts’ current professors letting anything too outrageous pass?”

Lucretia nodded, while Lakshmi still looked incredulous.

“You have a point, Hermione.” The Black heiress said.

“Thanks. Now, let’s see how much sense she has.” Hermione stood up and made her way to Selwyn’s part of the Ravenclaw table. She had finished dinner, anyway.

She didn’t mind the gasped ‘Hermione!’ said by some of her friends, already moving before any of them could even stop her or realise what she was up to. She ignored the curious eyes following her and as she focused on one particular shade of honey-brown hair, there were more people who started watching while wondering what she was about to do.

“Miss Selwyn,” Hermione greeted her with utmost formality.

Stephanie was eyeing her oddly, but not with distaste yet. Perhaps Hermione had unsettled her that much. If so, she might as well press her advantage while she had it.

“Miss Curie.” Selwyn nodded in reply.

“I can’t help but overhear what you were talking about with your friends. I happen to agree with you.”

There were murmurs of disbelief and one ‘you agree with her?’

“You agree with me?” She asked, warily.

“Oh, yes, I do,” Hermione nodded firmly. “I do think that Hogwarts should have a class that introduces the wizarding world to its muggleborn students, and perhaps it should also be open to others if they’re curious to know more about wizarding culture and tradition. Anything is better than the utter nothing that we have right now, leaving the muggleborns to sink or swim as they’re forced to adapt without any clue whatsoever.”

There were many things she’d like to say, but it was best not to push too much on their first meeting. After all, she still had the tendency to ramble.

“If you’re seriously considering of how to plan such class or to create a plan to contact the Hogwarts’ Board of Governors about it, I’m always willing to assist. I’m sure you will have no problem contacting me if you find it necessary. Good evening, Miss Selwyn.”

“Very well. Good evening, Miss Curie.”

With a firm nod, Hermione was soon on her way out of the hall, ignoring the flabbergasted looks
of Stephanie Selwyn’s minions—ahem—friends.

It might be cheating a little, but Hermione did the spell to augment her hearing just as she walked away.

“I can’t believe she did that!”

“Maybe she was just joking?”

“No, I don’t think so. She is intelligent and industrious and is interested in the wider goings-on in the wizarding world—I hear it from Julia, you know. Everyone knows what her class load is, right? And yet she doesn’t even blink about managing the Society’s meeting.”

“What’s this Society that you’re talking about?” That was Stephanie’s voice.

“Oh, the usual ambitious pureblood gathering, I hear. It’s not hard to describe. But more importantly, I’ve just never thought…”

“Never thought…?”

“That Curie actually has respect for tradition.”

Hermione smiled as she walked away. What about this, Draco, Daphne? I didn’t do too bad, did I? She did not miss another sentence of Stephanie’s either. It was not an absolute success, but it was an opportunity, and she could work with opportunities.

“I see that Lucretia has certainly seen more of her character than I can. Possibly, she might have even enlightened Curie further about the way the wizarding world works. Perhaps she can be an appropriate wife to a halfblood wizard, after all.”

Regardless of whether Hermione herself even wanted that in the first place, that Stephanie Selwyn had begun to see her favourably could certainly be useful (no matter how weird or alien the perspective might be to herself). For all of the Selwyn heiress’ snobbishness, Hermione had heard enough to notice that she’d never thought that muggleborns should be pushed out of the wizarding world at all, or that they have no place here.

As negative sentiment rose against muggles and muggleborns, her unchanging position on it marked Stephanie as a possible ally, or at the very least someone she could work with. So, Hermione moved. It was a very reasonable decision, she thought.

The devil is in the details, as Draco would say. For a moment she had a flash of images after a diplomatic party, where she and Draco sat down for coffee as he challenged her to describe the people she’d met, their identities, as well as what their political positions are based on conversations, whether it was the one she had, the ones she’d listened to in passing, or the ones based on the more verifiable rumours. He’d point out where she got things wrong and why, and she had a feeling that they’d start all over again in the next meet-and-greet she had to go to.

(She tried to ignore the gut feeling she had that Draco might not be among the living, whenever it was that she left the future. Even if she had no memory anywhere close to that time).

Who cares that Stephanie thought Hermione was not good enough to marry into the oldest of the families? That Stephanie thought muggleborns should know their place and defer to the purebloods? Hermione certainly didn’t.

She’d long stopped caring about what other people think—what matters is what they do and what
she could do about it. Luna would be proud with how comfortable she was with her own skin now. Hermione felt her throat tighten with a momentary pang of sadness at the thought of her blonde Ravenclaw friend and fellow Unspeakable. She shook it away quickly.

(Wonder what Luna would’ve made of me entering her House?)

Hermione still didn’t think that she was good at politics, not to the level of smoothness she’d seen Draco, and now Tom, operate. She wondered whether it was a Slytherin thing. She dismissed it just as quickly because their house had Crabbe and Goyle, not to mention the Three Stooges who’d confronted her to ‘stay away from Tom’ and ended up pushing her down a flight of stairs without thinking of the consequences, the idiots. But she had an eye for details, and a prodigious memory. It was all about paying attention to the right things and keeping them in mind at important times.

It was undoubtedly hard work compared to being able to instinctively charm people with a natural charisma like Tom, to be naturally likeable. Then again, Hermione was no stranger to hard work. She had decided to stay here after all, to drag the wizarding world kicking and screaming to the twenty-first century. In for a penny, in for a pound.

‘-

It surprised Hermione how quickly she adjusted to the rhythm of life in this strange version of Hogwarts.

Alright, she had to pay a touch more attention to grooming than she used to, but it was a minor hassle she could do half-awake in the morning. Everyone is almost always well turned out; how the hell Selwyn could stand curling all her hair every damn morning, I have no idea. The heiress might have one of the most carefully-tended coiffure, but she certainly wasn’t the only one. Emma Eccleston always looked like she stepped out of one of those 1950s ads that portrayed the archetype of the Hyper-Efficient Secretary, albeit the wizarding version. Let’s not even start on Eugenie and Lakshmi. Eugenie, she understood, it was probably her Veela heritage taking every advantage she had and dialling it up to eleven, but for Lakshmi she had far less explanation of how she exudes sensuality with every step. If she ever tried her hand at being an exotic dancer, she could probably rank up there with Mata Hari and Josephine Baker. Lucretia Black could easily pass as an ethereally elegant vampire with her traditionally long and straight black hair.

At that point, kicking up her grooming routine a notch was a matter of self-preservation even if she only wanted to look okay. She might not be beautiful, but she didn’t want to look that dowdy either when she was most often in the company of witches that could distract wizards to crash into things on a daily basis.

Yet other than that, everything was the same. The stairs still moved, the corridors less so. People memorise at least two routes to go to any particular class or location by necessity. The old stones and tapestries smelled of home to her now, and that hadn’t changed.

Hermione saw Selwyn at breakfast—she was heading out while Stephanie had just arrived. She gave a formal ‘good morning’. Selwyn returned it perfectly, even if there was an obvious touch of wariness in her eyes, and they continued on their own business like two ships passing each other in the night.

Wake up, go to classes, have lunch, have more classes, and return to dorm. Get a Restricted Section Pass from your very nice and trusting Head of House and binge read to your heart’s contents the books you know you can’t find anywhere else—she’d know, she’d tried that in the future.

Hermione had had cursed more than once the idiots who’d thought it was a good idea to use fire
spells in the *freaking library* (not that she could recall precise memories of the event the memory referred to). It was a knowledge backed by memories as well as a gut feeling that she had with books—she always knew whether she’d read them or not, even if it was only a few pages. With the knowledge she had that Hogwarts’ library *does* have connections to the Occult Bodleian, she could even start requesting books she knew the Oxford library had. Hermione can easily lose weeks holing up in the library afterwards.

She held back the urge to do so and merely focused on what she wanted to present in front of the Herbology class tomorrow. *Hello, new day. Move.*

Rinse, repeat.

After lunch, she was sitting in the Ancient Runes class with Rajesh Setalvad and debating over the runes he’d chosen for his wards. She even unexpectedly had Verrault drift in her direction and argue about some of her choice runes and phrasings (she was getting exasperated at his hovering that she’d snapped ‘oh for God’s sakes, just grab a chair and *sit down*, Verrault’). They were getting pretty loud that she’d managed to pique Camellia Lee’s curiosity that she took the time to walk out of her circle of Hufflepuffs clamouring for her assistance to take a look, listen to their arguments and join in.

Camellia’s gaggle of Hufflepuffs belatedly followed behind her when it seemed that she wasn’t moving anywhere else any time soon.

Hermione had only realised much later why it all felt so *normal*.

She was once more only focused on studying for class with people she was sure she can call friends or at least friendly classmates, and *there was no looming sense of wariness*. What had she been doing that made those sensations bizarrely normal so far? Oh, right. *Watching Tom Riddle*. Tom, I-bet-your-shadow-is-jealous-of-how-close-I-am, Riddle.

He hadn’t even tried to talk to her for long periods yesterday and they shared Ancient Runes too.

This was how she realised he hadn’t even tried walking to class with her today. At all. It was how she ended meeting the two Gryffindor fifth-years by accident and sitting with them. She should’ve remembered that the only times Verrault felt comfortable approaching her was when Tom was not nearby.

“Curie?”

Curious grey eyes met hers-- Rajesh had a crease on his forehead. She shook her head.

“Oh, sorry. My mind wandered. It’s alright. What were you saying about the north part, again?”

Her gaze swept across the room as he begun explaining again. She found Tom easily, heads bent over a parchment, the pale head next to his easily identified as Pendleton’s. It’s not as if she wanted him to always stick to her, but something about the last few days did not sit right with her.

It was a good thing that the next class was ADADA. She could corner a few of his minions and find out what was up.

‘-

“But we’ve duelled before, Hermione,” Gallus Rosier stated.

She didn’t miss the way his eyes darted to his surroundings, the preparations of a man looking for
an escape. His wand arm was positively twitchy. Her lips quirked at the left corner.

“This is Defence class. We’d have duelling practice all year round. Is it strange if I choose to fight you again? You’d need the practice, right?”

“Well, yes, but…”

“And I’m one of the better opponents you’ve faced?”

He could do nothing else but nod with apprehension.

“Then facing me is a good way to get better, isn’t it?”

His sigh was the long and dramatic.

“Oh, come on. It’s not going to be that bad. “

“If you say so,” he said under his breath, moving with the desultory finality of a condemned man.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Maybe Slytherins weren’t chosen for cunning as much as their dramatics. But if she was casting aspersions that way, a lot of Gryffindors were just as guilty. Harry was certainly a champion brooder if he put his mind to it. (But didn’t he say he was almost placed in Slytherin too? Huh, there might something to this). They paced to the required distance, bowed, and started slinging hexes.

The third spell Hermione cast was Oleumenti and with the widening pool of oil over the wooden floor, it was only a matter of time before Gallus lost his footing. He had the quick wit to copy what she did, but she transfigured the oil around her to soil in the next second and didn’t lose her tempo the slightest. Gallus didn’t last long afterwards, rapidly raised shield spells or not. She walked over to his side.

“Yield! I yield!”

“Of course,” she said, offering a hand to help him up. “Want to try for two out of three?”

“Um.” He froze with a distinct deer-in-the-headlights expression. It was as if all the muscles in his body had tensed up. It was a contrasting difference compared to Harry’s obsession with honing his edge. She couldn’t help but laugh at that.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Sheesh, no need to be that tense.”

“You’re not the one who’d just got flattened,” he muttered.

“I just thought about talking for a while.”

“Really?” Hermione was sure she detected sarcasm in his disbelief, not that his face showed it when she turned to him suspiciously.

“What’s up with Tom?”

“I thought you know more about all his projects than I do?” Gallus’ expression was odd. “I’m certainly not in the Society thing. I’m sure it’s way over my head. You’re better off asking Melchior or Abraxas.”

“It’s not that. It’s just…”
For all intents and purposes, Tom seemed to have gotten through his classes just fine. He had breakfast with the Knights, had ended up having lunch with the upper-years yet again in the last few days, but he didn’t exactly go out of his way to find her.

The witch shrugged helplessly, annoyed at being unable to find the exact words she wanted.

“Distracted. Tom’s being distracted.” She finally settled.

“I thought your job was to distract him with your charms,” Gallus commented, raising both hands in surrender when Hermione looked nonplussed. “Look, you’re both already dancing around each other with all your discussions and arguments. Not that I know everything you talk about, but it’s clear that you’re, err, going to be in each other’s life for a while? So, you have his attention the same way he has yours, and it’s not strange to see Tom spend less time on studying and planning to find time with you.”

“Nice save,” her voice was dry. “But that’s it. There’s something else. We didn’t exactly talk much recently.”

He shrugged helplessly. “If you don’t know, then I certainly know less. Maybe it’s Society stuff? Others? Look, there’s Melchior and Abraxas! You can ask them!”

The thin Slytherin had already dashed off before she could reply. Sure enough, she could identify Melchior from his smooth steps and Abraxas by his easy strides. Melchior quickened his speed the moment he saw her, seemingly with a greater need to meet than she did.

“Hermione! It’s good to see you.” He greeted.

“Uh, it’s good to see you too?”

“I know you’ve got your own homework and things to do, but I’d really appreciate it if you can write a basic report explaining why we don’t need a bureaucratic reform in the middle of a war.” Melchior suddenly said. His eyes were bright and his black hair stuck out a little on his left side—she guessed that he’d been running his hand through it.

“Let me guess, this is back to the Minister’s efforts to put a general civil service examination in place?”

“And several others. We’d be so lucky if it was just one. Mordred spoke to me about it, said that it doesn’t need to be that polished yet, since some Ministry clerk is certainly going to rewrite it into the final version. Also, I have a scroll right here,” he pulled one out of his robes and handed it to her, “that explains all the stuff that’s been pushed around back and forth in the Wizengamot. See if you can find some newer, more incisive arguments against them other than the ones scribbled in.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Ask me about it again next week.” She said, making no promises. The relieved expression on Melchior’s face was noticeable.

“Thank you.”

Hermione hoped she had enough memories of the Ministry to make her work more accurate. Then again, she had no idea how similar the Ministry fifty years from now would be.

“I think it would be easier if we could actually meet his muggleborn aides and knock some sense into them,” Abraxas said from his left.

“That one’s still an ongoing process.” His friend jabbed back. “In the meantime, we go through all
“I thought this was something brought to the Wizengamot instead of something that was already about to be enacted in the Ministry and has to be stopped bureaucratically?” She asked curiously. It was Abraxas who answered.

“Well, yes. But that annoying work is going to fall to our fathers’. We get the more boring task of getting together with the Policy Swots and do the drudge work. I hate drudge work. I don’t need to learn about all these regulations. Isn’t that what secretaries and assistants for? All purebloods always have secretaries when they enter the Ministry. It’s tradition!” The blond ranted at the end.

“I never thought you knew that much about licenses required for floo addresses.” Melchior said.

Abraxas merely looked tired. “Father forced me to set up the connections to several of the country homes. You wouldn’t believe how many forms you need to go through to set up more than one calling address to a house for different chimneys.”

“You mean, you’re both working with the Wizarding Society for Better Governance, now?” She asked.

All three wizards turned to her. Abraxas was the one who shook his head.

“Hermione, you’re probably the only person who remembered that tedious name. We just call the group the Policy Swots.”

“Right,” Hermione drawled. “As long as you realised that you’re also calling yourself that.”

Abraxas huffed. “We’re not, we’re just helping them.”

Gallus broke into laughter as he realised what Hermione meant. “Oh yes, you are. Hermione’s right. You’re both Policy Swots right now.”

“We’re bloody well not! We’re the Knights.” The blond shot back. Gallus only shook his head, glancing at the taller wizard with a knowing grin.

“Do you really think what you’re doing could be done by next week? That’s it? Do you really think that you can walk away from them by then, or would you still be neck deep in this Ministry mess for weeks and maybe all the way up to Christmas?” the leaner, smaller wizard asked his two peers. “Please. If Tom placed you there for exactly this problem, that means you are being told to join and mingle. You’re both Policy Swots right now as well as Knights.”

Melchior was the one who realised it first as he stared at his blond friend in horror. The same realisation was dawning in Abraxas’ face.

“Oh bugger.” Abraxas muttered.


“I thought I was going to work less with Tom, not more! I didn’t sign up for this!” He complained. Not even his handsome looks were going to make Hermione sympathise with his whining. She only rolled her eyes.

There was something ironic about Abraxas joining a rising dark lord with the prospect of coasting
through life, only to get buried neck deep with work. It must’ve been galling for someone who’d probably never needed to lift a finger for anything in his life before.

*Schadenfreude*. Hermione laughed. It was so free that soon Gallus’ sniggers turned into laughter too. The Ravenclaw ignored the put-upon expression of the heirs of the Malfoy and Nott families.

“Come on, it’s not that bad. You’re all working harder now so you can relax later on in life. Get through the hard parts, first, you know?” She said, when she finally came to.

Abraxas was still grumpy and sulking a little at that. Melchior had the weirdly-relaxed-but-annoyed expression of someone who was glad that the other shoe had dropped, and yet didn’t much enjoy said consequences.

“I knew it couldn’t be that simple. ‘Just help the Ministry kids’, he said. ‘It’s only for this issue’ he said. Seems like we’re both dragooned into this for the long haul.” He muttered.

“Anyway, does either of you know what Tom was up to recently?” Gallus asked before Melchior started his own rant to rival Abraxas’.

The confused looks they exchanged each other and the blank ones that met hers told her the answer. Hermione sighed. Alright, it was a good idea to delegate as much as you possibly can, and then compartmentalise tasks and information on a need-to-know basis in an organisation. It was doubly true for a questionable organisation whose roots clearly lay in applying dark arts to intractable, people-shaped problems, preferably through violent means. Yet it didn’t mean she had to be happy to be stumped by it.

She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Right. All of you can keep practicing while I try to find Pendleton or Starkey.”

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Hermione should’ve known that something was up when Starkey hadn’t found her the moment the duelling session started and challenged her.

Starkey was one of those people you can’t keep down for long; he had more energy in him most of the time than a squirrel hopped on caffeine while mainlining meth. The first Defence class that he attended again after his reprimand hadn’t had a practical component, to his chagrin. He swore to her that they’d have their day, and she had amusedly agreed to him. The next had her taking Arithmancy instead, making him miss her. Today should’ve been the day he ran over anyone in the way and asked for a duel.

She’d walked around, ending up at the other end of the class from the blackboard. A section had a rather large bubble of *Protego Maxima*. Sections of the floor were on fire (why are they on fire?), while she was sure that the thrown desks and chairs that suddenly turned into stabbing rain of pointy sticks was a bit of an overkill.

That was until she saw Tom had no trouble repelling them with his version of *Protego Maxima*, before starting the flame whip again to cut through the next barrage of improvised projectiles. A wide splash of water was met with a snap of a freezing spell while he ducked a simultaneous hex of dark red.

*Wait, two attacks at once?*

Hermione finally realised that the duel was two versus one. Pendleton and Starkey against Tom.
They made a good team. Pendleton calculated ahead and had a strong grounding in the basics; he could keep up the pressure easily while behind him, Starkey can keep building up his preferred flashier and higher-damage spells to gamble for a great hit.

That was until Tom sent what looked like splashes of water—before it turned out to be not. She recognised that he’d included Oleumenti to his combat spells from observing her. The next fireball he sent might have been shielded perfectly by both wizards, and even sent back. Several more spells were exchanged, with Tom always on the move. Yet what most didn’t realise, it only took an ember or two to have fallen from the fireball to light the oil on the floor. At one point, an errant flame started a conflagration towards them before they knew it, setting parts of their clothes on fire.

Starkey yelped. Pendleton had a cool enough head to surrender then even as he tried out several spells to put the fire out.

“I yield.”

“Shit. Bugger. F—”

“Ves.” Pendleton called out.

“Oh, fine! I yield.” Starkey snapped, completely ungraceful in defeat.

“I accept.” Tom said it with a level voice, as if his left trouser leg wasn’t burnt, or his robes marked and torn with the slashes of passing hexes with blood seeping through some of them.

He casually cast another spell, a sandy wind blew in the direction of spluttering Starkey, but all fires were soon smothered down. Even if it did leave the two wizards as if they’d just walked back from the Sahara.

No wonder Hermione didn’t see Professor Merrythought before; she was watching this fight.

“Two versus one?” She asked the professor.

“It was a good idea. The boys didn’t want to be held back on their spells as well, so the shield has to be put up.”

Hermione didn’t correct her teacher’s perspective on the spells. She was sure that Tom was still holding back his repertoire of spells, as did Starkey and Pendleton. As the fighting wizards walked or dragged their feet towards them—and in Starkey’s case, dragged his left tentacle instead of leg—she saw that the damage they inflicted on each other wasn’t small. She ran through her diagnostic spells on instinct, on the three of them. Professor Merrythought congratulated them all on the good fight and did a good work with Episkey.

Tom’s eyes had been unerringly following hers the moment he finished—they were darker than she was used to seeing with nary a hint of blue in sight. If she hadn’t been so used to casting healing spells that she could do it half asleep, she suspected she would’ve faltered out of performance anxiety. His gaze had been that intense.

“Professor Merrythought?” Tom suddenly spoke up, his eyes still locked with hers.

“Yes?”

“I think I’d like to rest at the infirmary for a while. I feel slightly more drained than usual.”
Galatea Merrythought huffed. “I did remind you not to go overboard, young man. What did you think would happen after three straight fights against more than one opponent?”

He glanced at the teacher and shook his head, “the first was barely one minute.”

“Due to your foe’s carelessness, yes,” Merrythought’s voice carried a tone of disapproval—certainly not at Tom, probably directed at whoever he’d been fighting with. “But you expended not a little effort for that fight, and the rest only become harder from that point on.”

“I miscalculated, yes, I admit it. Still, if you wouldn’t mind…” his tone was slightly sheepish.

“Oh, alright. Yes, you can go to the infirmary for fatigue. *Just this once*, do you hear me?”

“Certainly, Professor. I’ll keep that in mind.”

He could sound contrite a lot better than Hermione could, or Harry, for that matter. Yet when his gaze found hers so quickly told her that whatever the reason he wished to withdraw from class, it wasn’t fatigue, but it wasn’t something he’d share in public. Soon, with a polite nod, he took his leave.

Hermione was shaking her head. It couldn’t have been his wounds either. He trusted her to be able to heal anything, and to know when to refer to a better healer if she couldn’t.

Just now, he didn’t even wait for her to go beyond a mere *Episkey*.

She shook her head. It would be too fishy if she went out just now. *Two or maybe three more duels*, she thought to herself. *That’s it. After that, find an excuse to leave. Go to the bathroom, or something.*

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When Hermione faced the teacher again, Merrythought’s reply was blunt.

“You wanted to check on Tom,” she stated. Hermione winced.

“Was it that obvious?”

Professor Merrythought grinned. “Not really, no. Not if you weren’t looking for it. On the other hand, I *am* looking for it, so I saw it. You’re both among my stellar students, you know?”

Her grin was a bit thin and awkward at this point. She was reminded again that popularity had its upsides and downsides. One of the effects of having all the teachers knowing *exactly* who you are meant that they’re even more aware of all the rumours that might possibly be attached to you.

“I’m sorry. He’s just been off since yesterday. If you mind, I guess I can stay in class—”

“Oh no, it’s alright. You can go and see him. I’m not that heartless, you know? I remember being young too.”

*Alright, that knowing smile was too much.* On the other hand, if it wasn’t for her grades, she probably wouldn’t get this understanding treatment either.

“Besides, Tom had been rather uncharacteristic today.” Merrythought had a serious expression this time. “I’ve never seen him that…driven in a duel or a fight before.”

She had the feeling the teacher almost used a different word there. For the first time there was not
only worry when Tom was spoken of, but also doubt, which was more dangerous. What had she thought of first when she watched the duel? Was it unusual ruthlessness? A distinct lack of mercy? Hermione’s gut feeling led to just one thing at this point: his mask slipped.

Tom doesn’t let his mask slip. He just...doesn’t. It was probably one of the first things he learned to create and maintain very quickly in his life to blend in among normal people.

The anomalies keep adding up.

“He’d been unfocused in these last few days,” Hermione said quickly, covering up for Tom without another thought. “He’s distracted. It’s why I’m concerned right now—it’s more than just the wounds he has now. There’s something else.”

“Well, I hope whatever it is, you can find out about it. Hopefully it’s nothing too serious.”

“Thanks, Professor. I hope so too.”

Really, what’s so great about the upper-years, anyway? Most of ‘em are just flashy coves with nothin’ to show,” Starkey complained as Hermione healed him. “Their time is done. There’s nothing they can do that we can’t. If we need a man in the Wizengamot, we’ve Melchior and Brax. If we need a man who listens to things, Pendleton or Gallus could’ve done it.”

The more she thought about it, the more he sounded like a bratty younger brother whose elder sibling had managed to successfully evade his efforts to tail him and had gone to hang out with his cooler friends.

“So, Tom dining with them for several days isn’t usual, then?” The brunette asked the Slytherins.

“Actually, he’d done that before,” Pendleton started.

“No, he hasn’t!” Starkey protested.

“He did. It was with the third-years—well, they’d be the fourth-years now, don’t they? That was when he’d started talking to Orion and his people.”

Starkey’s complaints subsided to inaudible grumbling as he yanked his newsboy cap over his mass of curls.

“Just routine talks, then?”

“Not exactly that often. It’s not as if there’s a lot of sizeable factions in Slytherin.” Gallus added. Somehow, he’d found Hermione and his fellow knights in no time. “We’re the largest group in fifth and sixth year, while Orion’s noticeable in the fourth year and third. Seventh is dominated by Flint’s—it’s not strange at all for him to wish to suss them out.”


Hermione moved on to Pendleton. If she wasn’t so close to him, she wouldn’t have noticed the moment he gazed heavenward before his expression cleared again like the calmest of lakes. She started her diagnostic spells again. It was a good thing that Merrythought trusted her to heal whoever she can in class—because she doubted that these wounds would pass muster with the Professor. She detected at least one snake venom in Pendleton’s wounds and one of Starkey’s had an outright infection earlier if she didn’t start cleaning it. Also, there’s something worrying about
that limb-to-tentacle spell…

She frowned. This wasn’t Tom’s usual repertoire of ‘safe’ spells. Too risky if it was caught.

“Oh, I know, what, you should come to the Slytherin table tomorrow at lunch, Curie! Tom would definitely eat with us if you’re around!”

There was a glimmer of Pendleton almost-smile before it disappeared again.

Hermione wanted to disillusion him about the amount of influence he thought she had on the leader of their little cult—he was weirdly staying away from her right now with no problem, for example. Yet Starkey’s blue eyes looked so hopeful and young that she just couldn’t do it. It felt too much like kicking a puppy. Well, a rabid puppy who is all too happy to bite other puppies it thinks as weaker, but still…

Well, he’d still have to accept Tom’s decision tomorrow, whatever it would be. No need for her to say anything to ruin it right now. Let him dream a bit.

“It’s Saturday,” Gallus pointed out.

“So?”

“The lunch schedule is more flexible on Saturday. Who’s to say that she wouldn’t be having lunch too early, or Tom taking it too late?”

“Well, make it into a part study group. More reason to stay around for more than an hour.”

“I did want to ask you about several possible ward schemes and their weaknesses,” Pendleton mused.

“Not all of us take Advanced Ancient Runes, Pendleton!”

“Which is such a shame,” the pale Slytherin replied blandly. “Because it’s such an interesting subject.”

“As an excuse, it wouldn’t make sense. It should be something we’re all taking.” Starkey commented.

“Who said it was an excuse? I do want to break down several ward schemes to their components. You could just sit at the table staring at the wood grain for all I care.”

Other people might be intimidated by how easily Pendleton wrote him off. Starkey had no such problem or blessed with remarkably thick skin. He’d already ploughed on.

“It should be Advanced Potions. We’re all in Advanced Potions, right?” Starkey said. The other two Slytherins stared at him incredulously.

“Who’s supposed to believe that you of all people needed Potions tutoring?” Gallus asked. “Why don’t we ask for cooking lessons from Hermione while we’re at it? It’s that bizarre. If your grandmother heard this, she’d be so appalled that she’s not going to let you out of the house until she’s sure you can pass NEWTS with an Outstanding that’s at least the highest in twenty years.”

Starkey shivered involuntarily at the thought. “You’re right. That’s a bad idea.”

“You know what? Let’s stick with the most obvious.” Hermione said. They all turned to her. “This.”
“What?”

She pointed at the floor. Starkey was seriously following her finger down before Pendleton snapped his fingers in realisation, his eyebrows rising. “Defence.”

“Yes. Defence. So, see you tomorrow at half past eleven, at the Slytherin table.”

“Yesss!”

“If this doesn’t work, it’s not my fault. Be warned, I’d still end up taking space and studying on your table. It would be too much of a hassle for me to move somewhere else at that point.” Hermione shook her head, pitying. It was only when she picked her bags up that the wizards realised she wasn’t just going off to look for another duel.

“Um, class isn’t over yet,” Gallus said.

“Thank you for informing me, but I do have eyes, Gallus,” Hermione said dryly. She saw his cheeks reddened slightly as he realised how stupid it had sounded.

“And you’re…?” Starkey began, hoping she’d finish it.

“Going out,” Hermione replied with cheerful smile and a wave, not bothering to give them any explanation. “See you later.”

Their dumbfounded and curious looks were admittedly rather entertaining to see.

That took you some time.”

Tom replied as if they’d actually made any sort of promise to meet up in the infirmary. He was lying down on the mattress with his hands behind his head, ostensibly resting. Hermione rolled her eyes at his impudence and just walked towards his bed. It was the one at the end of the ward, which was also the where she’d stayed in when she hadn’t recovered yet after her arrival.

“Where’s Maggie?” She asked.

“Madame Edelstein’s out at the Headmaster’s office. She received an important guest this afternoon and they had things to talk about with the headmaster.”

“Oh, who was it?”

“A witch of advanced age with not an insignificant amount of power. I saw the caduceus pin on her robes—Madame Álava, I presume?”

“You would presume correctly.” Hermione answered.

“What did she say about your visit?”

“That I’m free to rest in the infirmary as long as I wish and to not wait up for her if I wish to leave.”

“Hmm,” Hermione nodded sagely. “Sounds like she has important business alright.”

He didn’t move. Other than the initial glance when he heard her enter, he was back to his earlier position of staring at the ceiling. She didn’t even know that any water stains could be that interesting. She was about to turn around and glance up from beside the bed to see what he was
seeing when he suddenly pulled her down. Hermione yelped and fell on top of him.

Hermione tried to scramble up at the same time that he rolled them over and she was now under him, their bodies pressed against each other from knee to shoulder. The sudden intimacy startled her. Before she knew it, his lips covered hers in a kiss that was white-hot instead of gentle and her mind blanked out from all the cascading sparks, from the one in her head to the smaller ones that seem to light up everywhere they touch. If he had taken complete initiative and unexpectedly pulled the rug out from under her with his speed, she hadn’t been too gentle either in yanking his hair when he overwhelmed her completely with sensations at the beginning. She bit his shoulder to stifle a moan as their hips connected, even with all the layers of clothes still between them. The moment he pulled away slightly to observe her, she raised her left hand to caress his face.

That was when she realised that his temperature was running high.

A crease formed on her forehead. “You’re warm, no, perhaps even running a little on the hot side. Do you have the beginnings of a fever?”

“Physical exertion would do that, wouldn’t it?”

Even as he asked this, he was deftly pulling her robe open. His other hand was lightly drawing pictures in the inside of her thigh, stroking up.

“Yes, but I didn’t exactly come here immediately after you left. You would’ve rested for a while and—” she hissed, before she gave him a look for that particular pinch, her cheeks warm. Tom looked as unrepentant as always, which made her want to teach him a lesson and pulled him down to kiss him hard. For a while, they both lost themselves to the kiss.

Hermione drew back because she remembered she wasn’t done yet.

“You would’ve rested for a bit and started to cool down. Yet you’re still not cooler.” She said.

“Wouldn’t that be because you’re here?”

He spoke softly because his mouth was right next to her ear, just before he started to kiss down following her jugular. Her eyes helplessly fluttered close at that even as she wondered what got into him.

“Not…that fast.” She muttered. “Tom, I’m trying to say something!”

“Say it, then.”

Not when he was mouthing her breast over her clothes. Even with all the fabric between them, it really made most thoughts to vanish from her mind.

“Someone might step in anytime.” She murmured.

“I had asked the house elf attending the infirmary to inform us if anyone is heading here.”

“Even so…” she pulled his face up, her hand over his neck confirming her that yes, he was warmer than she’d expected. Is it a fever? Something else? She wondered. Hermione would’ve been more distracted with his tousled hair if she wasn’t staring into his dark eyes. “Look, just stay still for a moment? Please? I want to check something, especially since you just walked out like that from Defence class.”

“If I didn’t leave then, I would’ve kissed you right there and then.”
She blushed, even as she tried to stay serious. “Really? Why?”

He shrugged, un Concerned. “My blood was up, I suppose. I can’t exactly tear into Pendleton or Starkey when it was clear that they’ve lost and the fight was over. But then, there’s you.”

“Just…please give me a minute?” She asked, trying hard not to think about his hands that were still drifting up and down her thighs.

“If you actually want me to pause, I don’t think you should bite your lip.” He said dryly. “It’s rather distracting.”

Hermione snorted, before the heat in her cheeks increased when she realised that his gaze was wandering to her lips again. She did as he said.

There was something about his dark eyes, pupils blown wide that nagged her at the back of her mind. Something about the time she walked back with him from the Forbidden Forest, the crystal ball filled with light levitated at head height for her to be able to see his face clearly. Her wand slid into her hand from its holster.

“Lumos.”

She brought the wand tip up, to the side of their faces. He blinked at the sudden presence of the bright light. Hermione felt all her concerns in the last few days suddenly rising up and crashing on her in that moment.

Tom didn’t miss her sharp inhale.

“Hermione.”

His pupils didn’t contract from the light. No wonder his eyes had seemed so dark for a while. But hadn’t she had the same thought yesterday as well? Had this been going on for a while, or was that just because they had been in low light?

“Was your blood also up yesterday? Maybe the day before?” She asked. “Was that why you beat the tar out of Starkey?”

“Perhaps. What is it, Hermione? You’re stalling.”

“I don’t know for sure. There’s still more specific tests I’d like to run and—” he cut off her babbling with a kiss. This time, she threw herself into it. Yet it wasn’t difficult to notice the desperate edge in the way she clutched him tight, in the way she kissed him with complete abandon to forget her fear, even if only for a moment. Tom was certainly far from unobservant. He drew away and waited for her to collect her thoughts together, saying nothing except for a raised eyebrow.

She exhaled harshly.

“I think you might have been poisoned.”
Chapter Summary

Conversations in the infirmary. Tom Riddle speaks of what crosses his mind under lessened inhibition. Hermione realises a particular quirk of Tom’s psyche.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

49 The Monster Inside

Tom was not the slightest bit worried with her assessment. He had laughed at her information.

“If this is poisoning, then someone is rather incompetent. I can still perform at my usual level.”

He’d sat up on the bed and she sat up next to him.

“But your judgement is impaired.”

“Is it?” He only seemed amused.

“You used Python’s Bite against Starkey and Pendleton. It would not have ended well if Professor Merrythought found out! Also, what the hell was that tentacle-limb hex? I think you’re lucky the Professor thought it was just another Jelly-legs Jinx instead of something stranger, not to mention that I was there to heal them.” She insisted.

“I know you were there, Hermione, and that I can rely on you.”

Her reply was tart, her worry gnawing the back of her mind. “That would have been more flattering if you’re not under the influence. I’m going to run some basic toxicology tests and you’re going to stay still.”

“Go ahead.”

Tom said this to her throat, as he was already nuzzling her neck. Only her discipline allowed her to finish the spells she’d wanted to cast.

“Your dosed with some sort of stimulant. I don’t know how bad it is.” She concluded.

Hermione moved his hand to her shoulder when it was moving too low. “You’re either going to sleep now, or I’m going to knock you out. And I mean it.”

That was exactly what she did a few moments later. If she waited much longer, she might not have cared enough to refuse him. It was discomfiting.

She didn’t think he would have been caught off-guard that easily.

The brunette sighed and slipped down on the bed, pulling the covers over him. Time to run that test again and note down the results—several things had raised the alarm for Hermione. If Nurse
Edelstein can get the antidote for most of them soon, she’d be able to rest easier.

The infirmary office was washed in the orange glow of the setting sun. The bare stone castle walls and the simple aged furniture reminded Hermione of some monasteries she’d visited in Italy.

“Thank you. I mean, it’s great! I’m sure no one has ever had an apprenticeship while they’re still in Hogwarts.” Even Hermione could feel her smile wasn’t real, she dreaded to know how it looked like to Nurse Edelstein and Madam Álava.

“Hermione?” Maggie asked, her voice tentative, concerned. It only made her feel worse.

“I’m sorry. I should be happier about this, but I can’t get my heart into it right now.”

“It’s that Riddle boy, isn’t it?” Madam Álava said this with an unamused look.

“He’s been poisoned,” the Ravenclaw witch answered outright, and a gasp escaped Nurse Edelstein. Hermione handed her the notes she’d jotted down on the last round of blood tests she took on him. “Yes, I know Slytherin House could be rather cutthroat, I just didn’t realise it was this bad. He’s hit with a cocktail of things that can’t be easy to unravel.”

Madam Álava’s expression was more understanding.

“I see. Symptoms?”

“Dilated pupils. I think he’s on his way to running a slight fever before that, barely noticeable. If I consider the changes in his behaviour in the last few days, I’d say reduced inhibition, increased aggression and reduced impulse control. So, at least one type of stimulant was in the mix.” She was actually rather proud of the way she’d managed to say it calmly even when she could feel her cheeks warming. Madam Álava raised one knowing eyebrow, but she didn’t say anything and Hermione was grateful for it.

Nurse Edelstein made a sarcastic sound—she’d just finished reading.

“Oh, I know exactly what he’s been poisoned with.”

“Maggie?”

The Nurse was still rechecking the levels Hermione had jotted down. “You’re right on the complexity, though. I can reduce some of the effects and attenuate some symptoms, but it’s safer to let the body metabolise the rest. Overshooting the antidotes will just create new problems.”

It has to be one of the Slytherins, Hermione thought.

She knew that Tom hadn’t eaten at any other tables in the last several days. Considering the outright hero-worship that Starkey had for Tom, she doubted that he had anything to do with it—not this time. Maggie had outright laughed at the idea that it would be put on delayed release, so people from any other house didn’t exactly have the opportunity to dose him during a meal. Tom was more careful about food and drinks he received from other people outside that.

“Delayed release is plausible, but it takes too much finesse and patience, dear. Not exactly something I’d credit desperate and careless Hogwarts students with.” The Nurse had told her.
“Considering the average potion scores for the upper years, the odds are greater that it was simply poured into food, with the effects kicking in immediately afterwards.”

Madam Álava was more disbelieving at what she considered outright carelessness and idiocy of some Hogwarts students. Nurse Edelstein couldn’t help making light jibes about how she’d probably forgot how being young felt already.

“Dose the culprit in return if you ever found out whom,” Madam Álava suddenly said at one point, to Nurse Edelstein’s shock and Hermione’s surprise.

“Granny!”

“Make sure the target of the infatuation is you.” Esmeralda Álava said with a sharp smile. “String them along for a while.”

Hermione had to appreciate the elder witch’s creative sense of revenge.

The Ravenclaw witch was sitting on Tom’s bed, next to his sleeping form. She’d gone back to the Ravenclaw Tower, had dinner, and fended her friends off with the simple statement of ‘Tom’s unwell and he’s sleeping due to some medication in the infirmary’. Nurse Edelstein was out to dinner with Madam Álava, and she trusted that Hermione could man the infirmary for the time being. It was already after the nurse’s work hours. Usually, there was a house elf that would watch out for any emergency cases and, and now Hermione took over for a while—not that she minded.

Her mind couldn’t let go of this mystery for now and she wanted to unravel this first. She’d used up some of her time to start a few essays and outline some others and she was already done with them for now. She wondered if she could get Tom to tell her about his experience in these last few days without telling him what happened. There was the discomfiting realisation that if he figured out the culprit before her, someone might end up dead. As much as she felt like sending several good hexes at them, she didn’t really wish for their death.

He shifted under the hand that was playing with his hair.

“What time is it?” He pulled himself up.

Hermione was impressed. Maggie had given her an estimate of how long he’d be out based on the potion she gave him and his body weight. It was good to the nearest ten minutes.

“Eight something. I didn’t check. How’s your head?”

“It feels as if it’s been used as a bludger. Are you sure that was the antidote instead of a different poison?” Tom asked. Nurse Edelstein had brought him half-awake only to get him to drink several concoctions before telling him to sleep again. He pulled one of the pillows up and leaned back on the headboard.

“Very funny,” Hermione murmured. She picked up a scroll, a thin but wide book to support it and a quill from the bedside table. “Do you at least notice that you’ve been…odd these last few days?”

His eyes were closed while another hand was rubbing his temples. She decided to give him time and wait.

“You got all of Vespasian and Pendleton’s injuries, didn’t you?”

“I did.”
“Good. Thank you. That was reckless of me.” His voice was slightly rough around the edge, probably because he’d just woken up. She reminded herself that there were more important things that she ought to be doing right now than paying attention to him.

She started noting that down. *Realises the recklessness of recent ADADA duel with Starkey and Pendleton.*

“I *knew* that was unusual of you.” She leaned to him when he slipped an arm around her waist.

“It’s not that it was unusual. I had thought that I’ve outgrown it already at this point.” He answered.

“Outgrown?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. I always get the urge to destroy people who made a pest of themselves from time to time. I just don’t follow them these days, not when it makes a mess of my long-term plans.”

His voice was too calm.

Hermione was belatedly reminded of the kids he’d bullied or attacked in the orphanage, the root of Dumbledore’s distrust in him. She made a note that yes, Tom noticed the reduced inhibition towards violence, even as she tried not to dwell on his words.

“That was why you beat the hell out of Starkey.”

“Maybe. Or maybe it had been an unusually frustrating day and I was looking forward to have it out with him. After all, that was not the first time I did it.” Tom said. “It does not have to be the result of something I ate.”

He sent her a sideways glance. It was dark and knowing, and she knew what he was doing. He didn’t want her to make excuses for him. He knew what he was and he wanted her to see it, to admit that she’d chosen his company even with that knowledge.

She sighed. “I get it. If you beat someone else when you’re drunk, it does not completely absolve you from that beating—but it is a mitigating circumstance. Moving on, did you notice anything else unusual in these last few days?”

“Unusual?”

“I’m trying to inventory the effects, or as near to it as possible. One of the most dominant components of the cocktail that you’re dosed with is stimulant, among other mood-and-behaviour-altering potions. Perhaps someone’s trying to get you to lose control.”

He shook his head, calmer now after hearing it. It was clear that he was a lot less concerned about it than when she’d said it was poison.

“How do you even separate what acts are influenced by something else and what had been my choice in the first place?”

“Let’s just take seventy or eighty percent of the things you can tell me, then.” She said.

He thought over it for a few moments.

“I do regret trying to find some other way to distract myself.”
“Some other way?”

Tom took the scroll and quill from her hands and placed it aside.

“If I had found you last night, at least we would have been very entertained.” His breath tickled her ear and she realised he was half over her right now. There was no mistaking what the promise in his voice meant and she ignored her blush. He seemed to be rather content to stay where they are at the moment, and it was the only reason Hermione didn’t go off to find Nurse Edelstein and ask for another dose of the antidote.

“And we would’ve missed the night Astronomy class at the same time. Not exactly subtle, is it?” She asked.

“Good point. Yet I wouldn’t have cared last night.”

“Alright. I’ll put that down as one of the signs. You were aggressive towards Pendleton and Starkey, or possibly just Starkey. You were more interested in me than usual. What about other people? What did you feel about Melchior and Abraxas? Oswin?”

“Mmm, yes. Increased predisposition towards violence.”

His lips touched hers with the lightest of kisses.

“Torquil Travers.” He spoke softly.

“What about him?”

Tom kissed her again, his light exhale of breath was a ghostly caress to the inside of her lower lip. It was gentle, but she found her thoughts scattering faster than the more direct ministrations he’d taken before. She shivered—he was still holding himself up with an arm instead of falling on her completely.

“He annoyed me so much I was thinking of cutting him open while I was talking to him. I wanted to make him bleed. Just when he’s gasping what he thought was his last, I’d like to reverse the flow and pull all that blood in again, so I can do it as many times as I like.”

Then his tongue was sliding behind her teeth and she gasped. Hermione reached up towards him, almost by reflex. Their kisses were oddly sweet now, since he seemed to be taking his time and she had no trouble losing herself in them. It did not mean she forgot what they were talking about. I’m really getting too used to him threatening bodily harm against other people, she mused.

“Only Travers?” She asked.

He pulled himself aside, and she did not know whether she was happy or annoyed at that. She decided to go with being happy that he could actually keep track of their topic.

“I was not much pleased this morning either. I dislike you having too much power over me.”

Hermione didn’t know how to take that. Was he saying that she had power over him right now? That he disliked her for it? Or was he trying to prevent it from happening?

“I didn’t know that was one of the effects of whatever stimulant I was under. I would’ve been less concerned if I’d known that.” He idly replied.

“Ah, the increased…” libido. She bit her lip and found a different word. “…attraction. Right.”
“I spent potions class trying to watch various Slytherin witches. To see if I can redirect some of that attraction.”

She only raised her eyebrows at that and picked up the scroll, quill and book again from the bedside table and wrote all that down.

“Jemima Avery has a truly small and pale neck. Delicate, vulnerable—as swanlike as some of the boys had insisted. She thinks I might want her even the slightest, and she’s only waiting for a sign or two to approach me. I can see that from the way she secretly steals glances in my direction when she thinks I’m not looking, eyes filled with infatuation. Well, I suppose I have to admit that something about her draws the eye once I’ve spent enough time watching her in return.”

Hermione was a professional. It meant she could write his words down verbatim while holding back the atavistic urge to hex Jemima to keep her hands off him. Even when she knew that Tom wasn’t interested in beautiful but airheaded pureblood girls, the urge to throttle does not disappear. She took a deep breath and let out a huff.

“Go on.”

He had a slight smile of amusement, which she ignored. She knew she was transparent on this topic.

“The more I see her blue cow-eyed gaze, the more I wanted to wrap my hands lovingly around her throat and choke her. Would she still be desperately in love when she struggles to draw in air? Would her love be worth more than her life, or would fear finally overwhelm her as it takes everyone else? She had wanted a token of my affection—would she accept it, if it is in the form of pain?” The tranquillity of his voice only made the violence within his words stand out more.

“She’s so proud of her beauty, and for once I could see it. Yes, she is beautiful, and yes, I’d preserve it. I’d do her a favour and inflict pain without mussing up that well-proportioned body of hers. The Cruciatius is only the beginning of pain spells. There are many subtler ones as well as those with a local effect.”

“Maybe I wanted a doll like her after all, to have and to hurt.” His tone echoed and mocked the usual marriage vows.

“But you didn’t do it.” Hermione said, with a firmness that was convincing. She linked her hands with his, holding it, anchoring him to her.

It wasn’t his fault. Tom had never tried to hide the monster he was once he knew she could see him. She was the one who tended to forget sometimes.

“I am lucky that the potion was not more, then.” There was dark humour in his voice.

She knew what he meant. They were lucky that he was not drugged with a higher dosage, or that he was drugged with something that had stronger effect that would overcome his inhibitions completely to follow his darkness’ drives. He didn’t seem half as concerned as she was, perhaps because he’d never really cared much about other people in the first place. But Hermione was angry, the cold anger an unfamiliar burn in her chest. Oh, the protectiveness was old news—she always had that towards all her friends. But the urge for payback was not. Still, someone had almost broke Tom Riddle again and rouse Lord Voldemort instead.

Someone would pay for that.

“Only Jemima?” Hermione asked, lightly.
“Well, for all her beauty Patricia Parkinson is a little too noisy for my taste. She talks too much, and not about interesting things like you do. Trifles. I did wonder if it would be better if I were to remove her mouth—no, no, that’s too over the top. However would she eat? That would make her too difficult to care for. Perhaps her vocal chords, then.” He mused.

“Still too similar to Jemima, though. Why keep two identical dolls? Her good point is that she’s not as smitten as Jemima and has a bit more sense to her, so there’s less mooning and foolishness to deal with. There is perhaps...ah, Carrow. Violetta Carrow. Her dark hair reminds me of yours, but simply a little too dark. I was wondering if I could colour it, add some curls to her hair.”

It was almost flattering if it wasn’t creepy. Wait, she wasn’t going to lie to herself. It was still flattering even if it was creepy.

She glanced at him under her lashes. “So, it would look like mine?”

“It can never look like yours,” his answer was easy and quick, as if he’d found it all too obvious. “But it might be close and I might forgive her for not being you because of it. She’s not as beautiful as Jemima, but she has some intelligence. My thoughts strayed during potions when I look at her; I keep wondering if I can break her down into something less annoying.”

“Break her down.” Hermione repeated slowly, almost afraid to hear his reply but couldn’t find it in her to stop now. She wanted, no, needed to hear of what the monster inside him thought.

“Yes, train her properly like you do a good hunting dog. Reward and punishment. I would give her what she thinks love should be when she’s behaving well and I will also make her fear me when she is not. I’ll shape her into a shadow of you. My kiss she would salivate after as if it’s her salvation. She would learn to fear the same thing if she did wrong, for the bite marks on her flesh will be a good reminder of her mistakes. Every time she displeases me after that, all I have to do is lay my hand over one of the marks and squeeze.”

“You wanted to make my replacement?” She said this with mock-offence.

It was not hard to exaggerate her expressions when she knew he hadn’t been thinking of replacing her at all. It was better than letting the numbness inside her out. Something was aching but she didn’t even know what. Tom hadn’t hurt anyone after all—if he had, they wouldn’t be talking over this calmly. She would be fighting him, trying to drag him to the DMLE. One of them might even end up dead.

The Slytherin chuckled, shaking his head. He was oblivious to the conflict going on in her mind. “Of course not. You’re irreplaceable, Hermione. She’d just be another plaything. Entertaining, but not real.”

How could she ever forget that? His strange words had been etched in her mind.

You, Hermione, are real.

She wasn’t a doll to him. He saw her as the only other actor in a stage of the world that was filled with puppets and props. Perhaps he did not quite see Dumbledore as a mere puppet either, and neither did he underestimate Grindelwald. Perhaps there were other similar, notable exceptions, yet she was certainly the only one he cared about as well as the only one close to his age. Hermione took a deep breath before she asked him.

“How do you feel about it now?”
“Now?”

She swallowed the unease she felt about his id’s perspective.

“About all of those ideas of making them your puppets?” She asked.

“Now? Now I wonder why I wanted to bother so much with getting living dolls. It would take too much time for something so trivial—a mere toy.” He shook his head, sounding displeased.

“Time is something I don’t have in abundance right now. We still have to gain enough political power and magical power. For the first, I’m sure it’s not too difficult to consolidate the purebloods behind us with the right incentive, but it would require many hours of talking and…discussions. As for the second, I’m sure Grindelwald has an interesting collection of books. The sooner we can kill him, the better.”

Hermione laughed, freely and easily. She ignored his surprised and mildly amused expression. It was hard to imagine that there would be a day that she’d be happy to see Tom Riddle’s usual power-hungry self again, but there she is right now. The brunette tried to blink away her tears, but Tom had already seen them even when she’d managed to shake them away. His hand caressed her cheek, holding her gently.

“Hermione?”

She didn’t know how genuine his concern was. His eyes were drawn to hers, the dark blue of his iris actually visible now.

“What’s wrong? Tell me.”

Her lips quirked up slightly at the corners. Whenever he said that, she could almost hear the unsaid ‘tell me who needs to be killed’ following behind. Perhaps he cared for her good mood because he could not enjoy himself when she was in ill humour, as she understood that he found her company to be entertaining. As such, his concern might be motivated out of his own self-interest. Yet the fact that he wished to see her untroubled, that he’d do many, many things to alleviate her concerns, was beyond doubt.

“I’m happy. I’m…I don’t know.” She turned towards him and slid her arms around him, leaning against his shoulder. As puzzled as he was, he hugged her back, revelling in the feel of her curves against him. He pulled her closer at one point.

“I’m just glad you’re back.” She said.

The warmth in his voice was clear in his reply. “Well, if you had been that worried, then I suppose I am too.”

“Oh, you should,” she murmured. “Your carelessness was making me nervous. I keep thinking that sooner or later, Dumbledore would find something on you if you keep up like that.”

….or even worse, that it would fall to her to stop him.

Tom made a neutral-sounding hum of agreement, one of his hands running through her hair. His fingers idly entangled themselves in her brown curls over and over again. She let her hands trail up and down his side while the touch of his lips was light on her temple. He started asking her about what she chose for her transfiguration final project. She told him that she still didn’t have a better idea other than an Animagus transformation right now while he mused out loud about making a chimera, ignoring her snort of disbelief at how plausible it was to do it within a year. They talked
for a while without altering their closeness.

That was how Maggie Edelstein found them when she got back—sitting side-by-side on the bed and asleep, curled up around each other.

Tom Riddle had been discharged on Saturday night with an order to rest for at least a day and not be too active yet, at around the same time that the nurse woke both of them up. Hermione told Tom that there was a couple of things she wanted to ask Nurse Edelstein first, and she didn’t mind if he were to go back on his own. He chose to wait.

“It might take some time.” She warned him.

“Then, if you don’t see me by the door, just take it to mean that I’m bored and I’ve left already. Simple.”

Well, that’s on his head now. She went through the infirmary door once more, walking down the double rows of bed.

Hermione cornered Maggie Edelstein in the head nurse’s office as she tidied up.

That astringent hospital smell lessened slightly, covered by the scent of archived paper and the potpourri Nurse Edelstein placed above the fireplace. The moon was round and bright, its pale light shone down the window, adding cool highlights to the warm lantern lights of the room.

“What exactly does Amortentia do?” The brunette witch asked.

“Hermione?”

“Magic cannot create love. That’s one of the fundamental laws of magic,” Hermione said quickly. “So, what does Amortentia actually do?”

And why does it have a completely unexpected effect on Tom?

“Well, take a seat, then. This is not going to be simple.”

“Alright.”

Both of them took a seat at the old but inelegant desk. The surface had been worn smooth by countless hands touching and writing on it.

“Why are you suddenly asking about it? Isn’t he on the mend already?” Nurse Edelstein asked. This late in the night, her usually bright lipstick had faded slightly.

“Yes, he is. It’s just…the effects seem different in him.”

The nurse smirked. “It didn’t stop him from kissing the daylights out of you?”

“Maggie!”

“The sheets were rather messed up. Not the sort of mess that would happen if you were only snuggling to each other.”

She huffed, letting the nurse get a jab in and ignoring her heated face. “Alright, yes, that too.”
“I’m always glad to see that most people tend to forget that. It increases interest in a new subject, but it does not erase or decrease interest that’s already there. That would take another potion altogether. It imitates love very well especially when used against people who have no serious subject of affections at the moment, or those who haven’t been deeply in love before to realise the shades of difference in affection.”

*Well, that’s interesting to know, she thought.*

“Yet if magic cannot create love, how does it create something similar to love?”

“Remember the most obvious component you found?”

“It has at least one stimulant? Ah, lust, reduced inhibition…almost like drunkenness.”

“Yes. Well, it also increases lust towards a new target, usually the brewer of Amortentia itself, far more than the naturally-occurring levels. That’s the primary reason of its success. It also increases interest and curiosity—because love is more complex than lust, and that’s why Amortentia’s effects are layered too. Now this potent combination why it almost always succeeds.”

Maggie Edelstein was fiddling with a quill behind her table, red nails occasionally tapping the desk while Hermione thought over Tom’s perspective on his experience in the last few days. She didn’t see him suddenly paying attention towards any other girls, and his words only confirmed that. There was just the noticeably increased interest in her…and a sudden sadistic interest in some of the other girls around him. A glimpse into his Voldemort side.

She was shaking her head when the realisation hit her like a bolt of lightning out of the blue.

“*Shit.*”

“Hermione?”

“Sorry! Um, I mean, could it be used to make your victim fall in love with a, say, ‘unusual’ target?”

Maggie’s brows creased. A strand of hair dangled over her forehead and she pushed it way. “What do you mean by ‘unusual’?”

“Suppose that you want to humiliate someone and you choose a…a beautiful statue. You want to make your rival fall in love with a beautiful statue and make a fool of himself.” It was the best analogy she could find.

“Playing Pygmalion, eh?”

The brunette witch nodded. “Yes. If that rival that you drugged simply doesn’t see statues ‘that way’, like most people, would Amortentia work?”

The nurse laughed.

“Well, he’d be the most obsessed art collector, but only for that statue. Perhaps digging up its history and staring to observe it for ages, try to get people to marvel over it, trying to arrange exhibitions for it…the works. But he wouldn’t really look ‘in love’ to most people. I don’t think Amortentia can create something out of nothing like that. The effort is probably beyond the capabilities of the potion.”

Hermione nodded slowly, digesting. Maggie’s gaze had found Hermione’s again, and this time it
was sharp with interest.

“Is that what you suspected had happened, that someone had targeted an inanimate object with Tom’s potion? Because you didn’t see Tom obsessing over another girl?” Nurse Edelstein was intelligent, but Hermione was sure even she couldn’t guess all the cracks in Tom’s mind.

Her laugh was sharp, like the tinkle of a hundred shards of glass falling. She was the only one who noticed it, though.

“When he woke up after drinking all the potion you gave him and sleeping it off,” Hermione began. “Tom told me that he had no idea why he’d been so obsessed with some dolls.”

Nurse Edelstein’s smile was easier now.

“Oh, just some dolls, is it? Well, that’s a relief! The effects wouldn’t have been as bad as if he’d tried to sleep with some other girl, right?”

She didn’t know whether it was better to hear from the part of Tom that still thinks of other human beings as toys and yet he thinks the world of her, or to see him do something as normal as flirting with another girl and yet with that proves that he does not have a monster inside him. It was probably better for the world if the second was true, but her ego was happier that it was the first that was real.

Hermione only gave the nurse her best smile since she had no easy answer to give.

But what is there to worry about? That Unspeakable part of her mused. He’s our monster now. He can’t even envision anyone else but us to wish as his partner under Amortentia. If that’s not love, it’s a very close reflection of it, no matter how strange or dark its roots are. It’s something that not even most people have.

After thanking Maggie Edelstein for the enlightening conversation, she walked out of the head nurse’s office, the sound of the tall wooden door shutting echoing slightly in the large and rather empty ward.

It was with some embarrassment that Hermione realised she’d never felt so secure with anyone’s attentions as she did now. Not that she can recall many boyfriends beyond Ron (she can vaguely remember at least two others now). Yet even with him she’d wonder, because the other witches that Ron had walked with when they were on one of their breaks were always glamorously beautiful, a far cry from her.

Hermione knew she cared for Tom; he was one of her best friends. At this point she was having a hard time stopping herself from caring even more. Yet there was still one last hurdle that helped her from losing her entire heart to him, even though he’d been diligently chipping away piece by piece and winning an increasingly larger share. The knowledge that she’d been doing the same to him was only a cold comfort with her last thought weighing heavily in her mind.

Could she guarantee that there wouldn’t be a day in the future where she would have to fight him? That perhaps at one point, he’d be such a danger that she was the only person capable of killing him?

Chapter End Notes
I was going to say that I’m very happy with how this chapter turned out until I realise that this is another one where Tom shows his psychopathic side yet again. So, I’ll refrain from doing that because I’m not sure I want to know what that says about me...

Remember two chapters back when I said that Tom’s a psychopath? This is just Hermione seeing that side of him more and more. If you think that this is implausible, that he’s a tad too civilised with a good self-control to be one, my return argument against it consists of two points.

The first is *Hare’s Psychopathy Checklist-Revised*. The PCL-R is the definitive method in diagnosing a person’s psychopathic and antisocial tendencies, consisting to 20 factors to assess and mark down according to their concentration in the person (you need to be trained to use it, but the training isn’t exactly that long either). If you observe it carefully, around half of the factors actually relate to poor impulse control (impulsivity, lack of reasonable long-term goals, need for stimulation, etc) and destructive behaviour towards society (anti-social behaviour*), rather than sadism or lack of empathy.

(*Note that the psychological definition of antisocial personality disorder is not someone who doesn’t want to meet someone else—it’s people who are outright breaking social norms and harming other members of society in the process. Being violent to the people around you is one example.*)

You could be someone with the most sadistic hobby in the world, totally uncaring to feeling of others except yourself, but if you have very good control and planning ability (think Hannibal Lecter), you wouldn’t be recommended to be institutionalised. You’re on the psychopathy spectrum, but whatever it is you have is not pathological; it doesn’t create trouble for most people (Note that I say *most*, not *all*).

The second is actually an example of a high-functioning psychopath, someone who is pretty far on the psychopathic spectrum but is not actually pathological. Allow me to introduce you to James Fallon, PhD, neuroscientist and nonviolent psychopath. In 2005, he was working on two projects at once—one was about Alzheimer and the other about murderous psychopaths. In the fMRIs of healthy brains used as control was one that looked like a psychopath’s**. He thought it was just a sample from the murderous psychopaths that accidentally got mixed with the brains of family members he used as the healthy brain control for the Alzheimer study. The tech double-checked the code (to break the anonymity), just to be sure.

Even after that, there was no mistake. The scans are his. When he spoke to many psychiatrists he knew personally about it, they actually told him “we’ve all been telling you this for ages” and could actually give specific examples of behaviour indicating psychopathy over the years. Really, go read the *Atlantic* article about it titled “Life as a Nonviolent Psychopath” from 2014 if you’re interested (you can use any search engine to find it). There are also some of his interviews on YouTube too. Very fascinating. If I was in neurology, I’d have tried to join whatever institute he’s in to get him to mentor me, since he’s living proof that your neural structure and chemistry does not have to define your destiny. (Yeah, it’s clear that I sort-of identify with him).
Based on the scans, the prefrontal cortex was too quiet/had less activity than the usual normal brain.

^If you don’t believe me, check the scans yourself in the Atlantic article.

For anyone interested to go further, there’s the Levenson Self-Reported Psychopathy Scale you can take online (with the usual caveats on accuracy, don’t try to self-diagnose, yada yada):

https://openpsychometrics.org/tests/LSRP.php

(And no, I’m not telling you my score).

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Chapter Summary

*It’s Hermione’s turn to choose. An interesting chat on some pureblood mores in a Ravenclaw dorm. Saturday morning at the Great Hall. Breakfast at the Slytherin table (this place is not big enough for both of us).

(Summary applies to both chapters titled ‘Friends, Rivals’)*

Chapter Notes

If the client-side boss didn't take a day or two off to go to the temple before New Year, I wouldn't have time to write an stuff. So you sort of owe it to her, sort of. I barely have enough time on Sunday since I mostly use it catch up on sleep. Man, was I that much of a workaholic back then to work on this kind of schedule? Wait, no, don't answer that...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

50 Friends, Rivals I

Hermione hadn’t bothered wearing her blazer again, merely carrying it over her left arm. It wasn’t as if anyone would notice much under the reduced lighting of night-time Hogwarts beyond the robe she’d carelessly put on. The last thing she cared about right now was keeping uniform regulations when it was hours past school time.

The Ravenclaw had been quiet as she and Tom walked away from the infirmary. No words escaped her lips two hallways and one staircase down later, which was unusual of her. Tom was the first to break their silence.

“It’s still troubling you.” He remarked.

She sighed. “And I’m surprised that it’s *not* troubling you.”

The witch was walking without her arm in his, which was uncharacteristic of her these days. Yet Tom had seen how her hands were restless. She’d fiddled more than once with her wand that he gave her the space to fidget.

His expression was completely relaxed when he answered. “Whatever it was they’re trying to achieve, it’s clear that they’ve utterly failed to gain it. I did not act in ways that would be uncharacteristic of me. I’m merely more *me*. Anyone that idiotic or sloppy in their plans are not going to relax with this failure and try for another, possibly even more foolish, plan. Once that one blows up, I can neatly cut off the head of their little cabal and destroy them.”

To turn their sloppy attempts at harm into a trap for them was something that hadn’t crossed her
mind at all. The act occurred to her as something elegant yet deadly—and as such, distinctly Tom.

“A cabal, really?”

“As you’ve inferred, they adulterated my food. No one with a modicum of brain would dare to do it alone. Anyone stupid enough to dare to do it alone would not have the brains to come up with the concoction of stimulants to use, much less find the perfect opportunity that would not make them instantly spotted. It takes at least two people.” Tom concluded.

“That still assumes a little too much on the courage and intelligence of the average Hogwarts denizen. It’s more probable that it takes three people or even more.”

The back of his left hand rapped hers lightly, alerting her to the fact that she was clenching her wand a tad too tight and was trailing sparks besides. She loosened her hold and stopped herself from unconsciously gathering magic there. The corridors were dark, with the dimmed-down lantern or even torches lighting the way, but neither of them was uncomfortable. She, because she’d snuck out of Hogwarts during the night often enough with Harry and Ron, while Tom’s unconcern was probably because he had a prefect badge he could flash at anyone questioning them.

Now that she thought about it again, the leeway one gets from the prefect badge was rather convenient, wasn’t it? Why she and Ron didn’t end up abusing their position too much back when they were both prefects were something she had no idea about.

“Maybe you’re right,” she started, before falling into silence once more.

This wasn’t her business, was it?

Apparently, this was what life in Hogwarts in this era was like, spiked food and drinks included. Tom was unexpectedly more laidback about this effort to influence and alter his judgement and behaviour. Of course, it was probably due to how he considered the perpetrators to be rather inept than anything else, and how he expected them to only bumble further in the future.

All that was left was to wait for them to slip. Then, he’d strike.

There was no need for her to even worry that he’d immediately try to find who did it and violently retaliate against them. It would seem that they were beneath his current notice.

Yet her problem was that she couldn’t just let it go and forget about it.

Hermione had never looked forward to the prospect of fighting (and possibly killing) Tom as he ascended on the path of Dark Lord Voldemort. It did not matter if he was only an acquaintance who’d visited her in the infirmary when she first arrived. A life was a life. Now that they were actually close friends (for a given value of ‘friends’, she thought dryly), the fact that someone could have forced her to such violence against him pissed her off.

Never mind that it was probably accidental. Never mind that she was sure most people had no idea that beyond the layers of intellect, wit and courtesy, the talented Mr. Riddle was a psychopath. To loosen his inhibitions and impulse control was as good as letting Mr. Hyde to overrule Dr Jekyll…

Well, the analogy isn’t perfect, considering that the polite Tom and his unconstrained side are still part of the same personality, she thought.

“Hermione?”
“Mmm.”

She barely noticed him calling her name.

“You’re drifting off again.”

“I know. I’m still thinking of those idiots that dosed you.”

“They’ll either try again or they won’t.” He replied, philosophical. His voice was oddly close to content. “Either way, they will not be trouble for me at the time being. Besides, if the best they could do was use stimulants, they’re rather inept at actually inconveniencing me. Ignorable in the grand scheme of things.”

He had a point. Sooner or later they were going to try it again. Even if they somehow didn’t, some other party might have the ‘bright idea’ to try a similar plan, if not exactly the same one. It wasn’t exactly rocket science. Not to mention that it looked so easy on the surface, especially if no one had heard of the previous failed attempts. Exactly how inept they are, however, was something she took a different perspective on.

She huffed. “Somehow, I’m not as blasé about the possibility as you are.”

“Why not?”

The brunette witch could not find an immediate answer to that.

To her surprise, he’d picked up her hand. Not to slip her arm inside his, no, but to take it in his. Admittedly, that only lasted for a minute or so before he was more interested in observing the back in detail—she wondered just what exactly had caught his interest. It would seem that she wasn’t the only one in the mood to fidget.

Her problem was, it’s not as if she could just find the culprit, get some evidence and then report them to the school authorities, could she? Lakshmi had outright laughed the first time she asked about reporting things for something she considered banal in Hogwarts (someone causing her to ‘accidentally fall’ down some stairs), and Pendleton did not think it would deter anyone effectively either.

Hermione could feel his thumb tracing lines on the back of her hand, probably following some veins there. A glance to her right told her that her guess was correct. Why he found the little bumps of her metacarpals fascinating, she had no idea. She barely spared another thought to the sensation once she knew what tickled her palm.

As far as she knew, an act that most would see as a failed Amortentia—for Tom really didn’t exhibit what most people would consider significant attraction to anyone else—would probably just get a slap on the wrist as punishment. Who else apart from her knew of the huge risk that a strong stimulant would be to him, because he had a darker side that he usually regulated with his reason and self-restraint? Without it, his venal id and reckless ego came to the fore.

She suppressed a shiver when the fingers of his right hand trailed up the inside of her arm and down again. When she gave him an irked look, he replied with an innocent expression that she didn’t buy at all. No matter—she was very good at blocking distractions when she was deep in thought and there were many things to think about.

His right hand lingered at the inner curve of her elbow.

Hermione could not imagine that many people would actually be understanding if she told them
that deep inside, his morality was practically non-existent. In her mind’s eye, she could just see Dumbledore’s increased wariness mixed with satisfaction—for wouldn’t he have felt that he was proven right?

Was reporting this mild poisoning attempt worth revealing what Tom was?

\[Two	ext{ roads diverged in a yellow wood.}\]

\textbf{No.} Telling people of what she strongly suspected of Tom’s psychological makeup definitely wouldn’t help. This was certainly not an era enlightened enough to understand.

Who would realise the strange and peculiar construction of his mind, except perhaps the pioneers of psychology alive in this era? Even then, not all of them would be able to see the person he is instead of merely focused on the psychopathology. Perhaps many would only see a startling case that can make or break their career, instead of a young man in the bloom of youth who was both monster and mastermind. His diligence and keen intelligence she knew could not be separated from his ruthlessness and rapacious ambition.

They were two sides of the same coin.

It was not as if his interests could not be shifted little by little, his course subtly altered. Yet how many people would try that than to simply give up and pronounce their judgement on him now? To deny that his identity is still changing (is always changing) and take the easy way out, to stop trying and brand him as hopeless instead? How many was even \textit{able} to try, considering the danger that Tom Riddle posed to most people he considered a threat or in his way?

Not many, no, as he was already dangerous even now. And Tom hadn’t even reached the peak of his power yet.

Most people would think that to allow him his freedom as a considerable risk if they knew what he is, what he’d done and what he could still do. It was easier to just lock him away or declared him as a lost cause. The wizarding world would probably settle on Azkaban as a solution yet again. God knows how fast it took them to consign Sirius there without investigating his case properly because they were only too happy to find a scapegoat for the deaths of the Potters without actually going all out against Voldemort. Hadn’t Fudge ordered for Crouch Jr.’s soul-sucking so easily and without trial either? She shivered. Right now, she was almost half a century before that.

The wizarding legal system was even farther from the one she knew.

\textbf{“Hermione?”}

Tom had let her mull her thoughts over for halfway down the hallway, but not further. His firm hold on her hand kept her from walking on.

She looked up from her apparent contemplation of Hogwarts’ stone floor (this part has corridors tiled with pentagons). She did not know why she was still occasionally surprised at the depth of his dark eyes. Did she still somehow expect them to be flat and cold? Just because he would be (could be) Voldemort? But she already knew that he had a range of emotions, from cold anger to amusement.

\textit{He’s still human.}

Tom had raised her hand to his lips. It surprised her slightly, since he had never shown himself to be impetuous or romantic—nothing that did not cause her to immediately expect that he was putting on a show for someone else. She furrowed her brows. \textit{What is he up to now?}
“What are you thinking?” He asked.

_Two roads diverged in a yellow wood._
_I took_ a

_road—_

“I can’t let them go.” Hermione stated with surprise.

She was astonished at the path she chose but did not second-guess her own mind. It rang with truth. No doubt remained in her breast when she heard her own words and that was how she knew.

“Excuse me?” He asked.

“I can’t let them go just like that. I’m going to track them down and do something.” Her voice was firmer now as her doubts evaporate, her decision more certain.

Tom took a step closer, her hand still in his.

“Why?”

It was a question that was not exactly one.

She could see it in his eyes; he had a prediction of what the answer would be, but he still needed to be certain. This was too important to just guess.

“Why what? Why I won’t let them get away with poisoning another student willy-nilly?”

“Some mere stimulant is hardly poisoning,” he replied, completely unconcerned about it in a way that had her wondering about his first year at Hogwarts yet again.

“It is not ‘hardly poisoning’.” She snapped, yet she stopped there as she pressed her lips into a line.

Hermione couldn’t put the precise nature of her fear into words, preferred not to enlighten him of the conclusions she’d made. An irrational part of her did not want to put into words of him turning into later-era Voldemort, as if it would make the event more probable.

One of these days, she was going to check what actually went on among Slytherin House’s lower years, knock some heads together and maybe even run some toxicology tests. Coming up with a plausible excuse to snoop wasn’t easy, though, which was unfortunate. She probably wouldn’t manage to do so any time soon.

Tom might not be able to read her mind, but he could easily infer that she was still holding back something.

“It’s not even lethal, or effective. Why does it matter so much to you?”

“You’re almost not fine, and I find that I can’t forgive them for it. It was too close. They have to learn their lesson, Tom. I’ll have to teach them a lesson.” The words came to her easily once her decision was made.

_(Two roads diverged in a yellow wood._
_ I took the one less travelled by,_
_and that has made all the difference.)_
No one else was going to watch over him but her. No one else could watch over him but her.

She knew that now.

Since when did Hermione not rise up to the challenge?

“What about the other group of people you have to teach a lesson to?” He asked. She had no idea what he was talking about and she said so. His eyebrows rose slightly.

“You remember the time when you ‘fell down’ a flight of stairs, don’t you?”

_The Three Stooges? Really Tom, I bet I can give them a beatdown even after pulling an all-nighter._

She shrugged. “They’re small fry. Seriously. I’ve given them enough warning that they’d back off if they’re not stupid. I can destroy them under my boots if I want to, but that’s overkill and they’re truly not that important. Now, if you don’t have anything important to say, I’m going to figure out how to track your group of idiots down and what to do after that. Hmm.” She tapped her chin in thought.

“It’s rather challenging to find a lesson that sticks other than Crucatus, isn’t it? Especially if you suspect that you’re dealing with some sort of idiots. You might have to spell things out before they’d get it.”

Hermione did _not_ want to use the Crucatus Curse. She wasn’t that barbaric or sadistic; she was aware that to be able to stomach using it so often and so casually would mean inuring herself to the pain she inflicted on others. She would harden her soul bit by bit as she kept wishing, wanting others to feel intense pain and very certain that they _deserve_ that pain. It was a price she wasn’t willing to pay just to deal with a bunch of amateur poisoners.

Another step and the torchlight on the wall behind her illuminated him better—

—and still his eyes were as endless night.

She gasped and he closed the distance between them to take the breath from her lips. Her coat fell on the floor and her back banged against the stone wall, but she barely noticed the sensation. The hand in her hair protected her head from bumping. His kisses were distracting, she knew, but this was the first one that pulled her under so quickly as her eyes fluttered close.

“Tom,” she whispered, remembering. “I think there’s still some effects of the stimulant remaining…”

“I know.” He murmured. “Now that I know what it is, I don’t really care.”

He trailed feather-light touches upwards at the inside of her thigh. This time, she was the one who pulled him into another deep kiss. Her arms held them together as much as his did.

“Spend the night with me, Hermione.”

His voice was low and the heat of his breath raised goosebumps at her neck. She had no idea why the question still embarrassed her, and yet she could feel warmth spreading over her cheeks. From his upturned lips, she knew he probably found it amusing.

“But classes…”
“Tomorrow’s Saturday.” Tom’s reply was succinct.

There was no way to avoid the knowing smile that he had. Hermione couldn’t help but duck her head slightly at that. He must’ve scattered her thoughts more than usual that she’d forgotten today was Friday.

“Um.”

It wasn’t as if they hadn’t spent the night together before. For some reason, venting her annoyance and post-fight adrenaline didn’t feel the same as answering this purposeful request. His eyes were dark, true, and his hands didn’t stop their idle caresses. Yet the fact that he still waited told her that Tom had enough control over himself.

“Yes.”

“And just where would you be sleeping if you need to take some change of clothes with you?” Lakshmi perfectly painted eyebrow rose up.

“Well, I thought I might as well take a bath in the prefect bathroom in the morning. It’s more convenient if I have a change of clothes with me—*Scourgify* always leaves my clothes feeling stiff and starchy.” Hermione replied, knowing well enough that it wasn’t exactly an answer.

She had her bag in one hand, and other than her clothes for tomorrow, she was considering about which textbooks to carry. The Defence textbook was an obvious answer, considering Starkey’s invitation for tomorrow’s breakfast, but on the other hand, she was looking forward to discussing Ancient Runes topics with Pendleton as well. He had a meticulous attention for details and just because Camellia Lee lived and breathed warding schemes didn’t mean Hermione was going to slack off and not try to keep up in class.

It was just a little inconvenient for Hermione that Lakshmi wasn’t as social as Eugenie, and so was in the dorms just as Hermione needed to pick up some things.

“You’re not going to be in the Ravenclaw Tower at all, are you?” Lakshmi shrewdly asked.

Lucretia had been writing letters on her desk all this time and had paid attention to neither of them so far. She’d only made some tea for everyone when Hermione arrived. The brunette witch let her bag rest for that moment and drank her tea to conveniently avoid giving an answer.

“It’s Riddle, isn’t it?” Lakshmi asked without concern.

“Do you know the Contraception Charm?” Lucretia asked from across the room. Hermione sputtered and sprayed tea to the unfortunate roommate on the table with her.

“Dammit, Hermione!” Lakshmi cursed.

Exasperated, Lakshmi immediately cast a cleaning spell over herself. Not that Lakshmi was any less surprised as she turned around to the seventh-year. The Black heiress had lifted her head, unconcerned with the shocked expressions of her dormmates.

“All the pureblood witches from both sides of my family would’ve been taught that since they were twelve, and I’m sure that applies to many of the old families too.” She said. “No one wants a naïve, young heiress to get pregnant by the undergardener and then insists that she has to marry him because of it.”
Hermione was still coughing, not that Lucretia’s next sentences were any easier to stomach. Lakshmi shook her head slightly, her thick eyebrows now high on her forehead.

“I thought the heiresses around here are all lily-pure ideals of maidenhood?” Lakshmi asked, not forgetting the sarcastic edge.

Lucretia added a few more lines to her current correspondence before she folded it up and slid it into her drawer. It clicked close. She rose from her seat, approaching the two of them at the central tea table. Hermione saw that even her non-uniform clothes were elegant black dresses that would not be amiss in a casual tea party with the queen…three decades ago. Well, even if the length wasn’t fashionable now, the simple, streamlined elegance of the whole design was timeless that no one would say that Lucretia’s clothes were outdated.

“Ideally, yes. But we all know how well ideals survive in contact with the real world, especially when you add greed as a primary motivation for most of them. Some of the newer houses might be more optimistic, or more easily swayed by the current norms.” Lucretia spoke up again after she took a seat the table.

“We Blacks have long memories of how things used to be—strict morality and loose morality in the muggle world ebbs and flows like the tides. Why should we follow either overly much? We did not hold with having formal mistresses when it was expected in Europe until it faded again. We did not care about last century’s habits of coddling ladies and insisting that they’re more fragile than fine china until times have changed and loosened once more.”

“You only mentioned formal mistresses,” Hermione blurted out before she could stop herself.

“It doesn’t matter. In the case of infidelity with clear evidence, the family rules allow the marriage to be dissolved. This has been established for six centuries…” Hermione found that hard to believe—dissolving a marriage? A couple of centuries ago? No one could do that unless they were Henry VIII—and he had to break away from the Catholic Church to be able to do that.

“…the aggrieved party can challenge the spouse to a duel.” Lucretia finished her explanation and everything made sense now.

“And then you can divorce if you win?”

“Back in the days when a divorce is unacceptable except in extreme cases? Of course not. You fight to the death.” She answered calmly.

Lakshmi was even nodding sagely in complete agreement. Hermione tried to digest in what universe killing your spouse made more sense than divorcing them when you no longer wish to be together.

“So…you could also die,” Hermione deadpanned.

“Sure, but you wouldn’t have to live with that adulterous spouse anymore and no one is going to strike you from the family tree. The children would probably be told of some polite fiction until they grow up, isn’t that right?” Lakshmi said, guessing from what she knew.

Their seventh-year dormmate answered. “Not to mention that if you’ve informed your siblings of the whole matter, they can take up your cause and challenge him even after you’ve failed.”

“That just leaves your children parentless in the worst-case scenario!” Hermione said.

“Of course not. Your siblings would raise them as their own.”
She could only stare blankly for another moment. That was…that was a complete *fustercluck*.

“Honour is satisfied.” Lucretia finished.

Hermione itched to facepalm. She didn’t think a bastard of a husband was worth a chance of dying, especially when you’re not that skilled as a duellist. Then again, honour and family name were Serious Business back then, wasn’t it? And still is even now, in the mid-20th century? Look at how Lakshmi didn’t see anything weird with what Lucretia was saying. The time-displaced witch was treated with the interesting insight that there was no doubt the past wizarding world was as brutal as the past non-magical world. It was simply the sort of brutality that was a bit more equal gender-wise than the muggle world.

“Look, I’m sorry to say, but that’s some rather senseless rules.” Hermione was shaking her head as she said this.

“We bow under no one’s senseless rules but our owns.” The elegant witch concluded.

“So,” the brunette’s tone was dry, “even if the Blacks still follow some senseless rules, at least they’re your rules?”

Lucretia wasn’t offended the least. A slight smile formed on her face, making her seem more approachable.

“That’s what I’ve seen so far in my family, yes. Besides, you can’t blame other people for your mistakes and stumbles if it all comes down to you again, right?”

“Huh. And here I thought all the Sacred 28 families are too straight-laced.” Lakshmi remarked.

“Find the older families and figure out their code of conduct for yourself. You’d actually see more eccentricities than not.” Lucretia answered. She turned to Hermione again. “You do know the Contraception Charm, don’t you? I know five varieties of it, even.”

Hermione could feel heat rising in her cheeks even as Lakshmi snickered. She waved the inquiry away quickly.

“I know! I know it just fine, no need to tell me anything.”

“From what I’ve seen so far, I’m sure you have a good sense of discretion. Night assignations goes unnoticed by almost everyone and is an excellent idea. Daytime requires far more care—avoid it on principle unless you’ve gained enough experience in rearranging your schedules relative to everyone else’s so no one is suspicious. It does help if you have many acquaintances and a wide circle of friends. When you’re not with one, they’d just presume you’re off with a different circle.”

It was hard to believe that she could say all that with a straight face, but that was exactly what Lucretia did, even when Lakshmi’s cheeks were ruddy simply because she was holding her breath, trying to keep her sniggers down. The heiress was as serene and helpful as ever.

“I think I have a good idea of what you mean.” Hermione said quickly. “Really, Lucretia, thanks for the advice and all, but I have avoided conspicuous absences during the day and I think I’ll leave right now.” It was only all those practice with Daphne that allowed Hermione to stand up and walk away with some dignity left instead of scurrying off like rats caught with their grubby paws on cheese. Even then, she was sure that the colour in her cheeks haven’t faded away.

It didn’t stop Lakshmi from laughing, or from offering Hermione her last suggestion.
“If you need to set up some music, you can borrow my gramophone!”

“Thanks, but no thanks!” Hermione shot back.

There was something rather mood-killing about her dormmates knowing exactly where she was going and what she intended to do with someone else once she was there. Tom was lucky that he was persistent to a fault and so very good at distracting her, because otherwise there might have been some change to his plans for that night—or at the very least, noticeably delay them.

She woke up some time in the middle of the night remembering that she’d dropped two dozen unbreakable glass vials into her bag for a specific purpose. That was how he found her; rummaging through her bag wearing the first shirt she found and pulled on. The roaring fireplace behind her made her only article of clothing useless, as it was practically transparent under the intense light.

“Hermione?”

“I forgot to hand you these earlier.” She piled the vials—and the belt that held them—next to his bag. Tom had sat up, uncaring of the blanket sliding down his naked torso. If she was less distracted, she might have idly mused on sketching him.

“Do you want to collect the blood from all the Knights?”

“What? Oh, no!” She paused her mind wandering with his words. “Though now that you say that, it might be interesting for some things…wait no, bad Hermione. No blood rituals without the consent of blood owner. It’s for your food!”

She rushed through the last sentence since Tom had left the bed and was trailing distracting kisses down her shoulder.

“I don’t think you can fit a sandwich in one of them.”

“No. It’s the…” her hands slid around his back without conscious thought. “You’re supposed to put food in them. Pieces! Little pieces of…dammit, Tom, I can’t think if you do that…”

He hummed in confirmation against her breast before his mouth disengaged (and Hermione could think clearly for that one short moment).

“That was the point.”

It was some time later, after her legs gave out and she dropped on the luxurious shag carpet in front of the fireplace, that she managed to clarify what she meant. It was to take samples of his food, particularly when he’s not eating with the Knights. (“I figured that we can eliminate them for now. You don’t really think any of them poisoned you, right?” Hermione had asked, and Tom confirmed that he was almost dead certain it wasn’t any of them).

All she needed was food samples from an entire day, and if he still planned on eating with people other than his closest friends, maybe the samples from the day after that too. Then, she’d start testing which one was dosed. It would be a piece of cake for her to figure out, especially since she already knew what substance she would be looking for (definitely Amortentia’s chemical and magical signature).

Not that she managed to tell him what she was going to do, since they were getting very distracted. Hermione had to put a pause on things and move them back to bed before she gets some rug burns
they’re seriously a pain in the rear, pun completely intended). It was admittedly one of the benefits of not being an actual teenager in terms of experience. She knew that all those exotic sex scenes in movies are not always comfortable to try out in real life.

Tom might have thought of her having ex-boyfriends if he hadn’t noticed the small spots of blood that came from breaking what was left of her hymen the first time around. Her completely unconcerned attitude did make him wonder (she only cast a silent Episkey to stop the barely-there bleeding, simply out of habit as a healer). Hermione honestly told him that even though her body was a definite virgin, some of the future memories she had was of her being in a relationship with other people. Experience-wise, this wasn’t something completely new for her.

“Who were those wizards?” He had asked in the early hours of their first night. “Or witches, if there are any.”

She’d only shook her head at that. “It doesn’t matter, does it? It’s not as if I’d be in a relationship with them again, um, for the first time, if I’m with you.”

“Again?”

She had merely shrugged. “Technically, for the first time. These memories are hell on my tenses.”

Hermione could see back then from the sharpness in his gaze that he hadn’t considered it done yet, though he knew that she had a point and thus backed away (for now, she surmised). She had the suspicion that he was the type of guy who would make life difficult for their partner’s exes—even if they were only quasi-exes like in her case.

Sometime in the early hours of the morning, she tried to recall whether there was significant difference between their interactions tonight and the night when he provoked her into sleeping with him for the first time. She did notice the increase in drive (there was no way she would miss that), and it certainly increased the frequency of their activity. But his behaviour was surprisingly constant otherwise.

The next time she lit a Lumos next to his left eye, he only pushed her hand away with a muttered complaint before pulling her closer. His eye was definitely blue again. She allowed him to reel her towards more pleasant distractions, now that one major concern about his health was dismissed.

’-

Hermione had always been an early riser. The last night she spent with him, she found out he was a light sleeper since he didn’t go back to sleep once she was up. This morning, she was surprised that he was dressing up already.

“You have people to see this early on Saturday?”

“No, I’m off for a swim.”

She couldn’t help looking askance at him. “Tom, this is already late October. The lake is going to suck all your body heat very quickly and even heating charms are impractical if you have to apply them too often. You’re just asking for hypothermia.”

His smile was a little mysterious.

“Ah, I didn’t say I’d be swimming in the Hogwarts Lake, did I? Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to do it all year round.”
Hermione frowned. Alright, this does explain how his endurance was at the very least a level beyond most people their age, but she had no idea what place he was referring to.

“Hogwarts doesn’t have a swimming pool,” the brunette insisted.

“Really?” He asked back with a friendly curiosity.

“It doesn’t. I know my Hogwarts: A History. Give me any edition you care to name, and I’ll show you—and you’re not even talking about this Room, are you?” She eyed him suspiciously. He shook his head.

“Certainly not. I had no idea of this room during the second year.”

“But…”

“Swimming. Pool.” Tom enunciated the words with care.

Hermione had to take a deep breath and count to ten to stop the impulse to deny that something was beyond the knowledge of her oldest favourite books on Hogwarts.

“You know what? I’m coming with you.”

“Just to see a mundane pool? Really, Hermione? Don’t you have more important essays to outline, and even house elf recipes to collect?”

She ignored his mischievous tone and simply wore her clothes quickly, casting quick cleaning charms before she did so. Hermione had intended on bathing first before going out, but she reasoned that she can always turn towards one of the prefect bathrooms later before making her way to the library for an hour or so. There was still plenty of time left before she needed to show up at the Slytherin table.

Hermione hated to admit it, but Tom was unexpectedly right. There was a pool that was close to Olympic-sized in one of the higher-levels. No wonder he could swim in laps to his hearts’ content. She knew it was located at one of Hogwarts’ higher-level by virtue of it having French windows* leading to a balcony, and the view was already above the treetop of the Forbidden Forest.

*She suspected she ought to have called them Spanish windows rather than French windows, as the intricate carvings from the posts to the arches was a bas relief of trees, with a variety of objects woven on or around the branches. The style was reminiscent of what she’d seen in some Spanish churches she’d visited before.

Hermione couldn’t stop herself from walking closer to the balcony, her eyes drawn to the detailed tree carvings. It was much more elaborate than what she’d see in most of Hogwarts, and just over the top of the largest arch, at its crown, was a carving of a literal crown, with a ribbon of the same coral stone floating to its left and right (she couldn’t read the text engraved on it, though, too far).

It was newer than the castle’s more commonly-found gothic style of architecture, or the older, unrenovated rooms of early medieval construction (most of the teaching staff’s rooms were in this category). This room was definitely one of the newer ones. It was recently added, relatively speaking.

For what purpose, though?
Something about it tickled her memory…

“How could *Hogwarts: A History* missed a pool this size??” She cried out.

At this point, she didn’t care if his smirk was as smug as a Cheshire Cat’s. She just *needed* to know. Her curiosity was killing her.

“Technically, it’s not wrong.” Tom finally answered. “Look at that door over there.”

He pointed to a double door at a corner of the indoor pool, its frame decorated with as much detail as the French windows to the balcony. She also noticed that it was certainly not the entrance door they just came in through. “Is that a changing room?”

“No. It’s a bedroom—a *suite*, to be exact.”

A suspicion began to form in Hermione’s mind.

“Just how large is this suite?”

“Very large.” Tom replied.

“And what about that door over there?” She pointed to a door on the other side of wall from the suite door. “Is *that* the changing room?”

“No, that’s the toilet.”

She paused, trying to read his face. Her next words were carefully thought out. “There’s no changing room at all attached to this place, is there?”

He shook his head. “No, not at all.”

“And *Hogwarts: A History* is technically right—”

“The best kind of right,” he interrupted her with a grin before she glared at him for his cheek.

“—because this wasn’t a pool, or at least the makers didn’t consider it to be so. This is part of the famous *Royal Suite*, isn’t it? It’s finished in 1575, with the expectation that Queen Elizabeth would reach Hogwarts with her travelling court soon. Too bad it was never used. She never managed to reach this far since she always had to stop every couple of miles and visit the nearest city, town or village.”

“This was merely the Royal Suite’s *bath*.” She concluded, breathless.

Hermione didn’t know why he looked so amused, and why he’d been staring at her for a while without saying anything.

“Tom?”

“Every time I mused that you couldn’t *possibly* have memorised *Hogwarts: A History* in the time you spent in the infirmary, you proved me wrong.”

“I was very bored.” Hermione insisted primly as she looked away. She couldn’t have memorised *Hogwarts: A History* in two weeks—she did it over a whole summer, after all, right after she received her Hogwarts letter.

She glanced at him suspiciously. “Did you bring me here just to make sure of that?”
“Me? Bring you here? You were the one who insisted on seeing the pool yourself, remember? I was just leaving on my usual weekly swim.” Tom asked with wide-eyed innocence.

It was a good thing that she was still wearing last night’s clothes, because Hermione dropped her bag without a second thought and ran over to push him into the pool. He fell in with no resistance and with unexpected grace—but not without pulling her in with him.

‘-

So… that plan she had to visit the library first before breakfast? To sit down and read for a while, and even outline an essay or two?

Nixed.

Hermione didn’t get out of the Royal Suite’s bathroom until an hour later, and neither did Tom start his swim routine until then. Refreshed, freshly showered and changed, it was hard for her to regret it. Other than certain extra-curricular physical activities they certainly engaged in, Tom also helped correct some of her swimming posture. Another thing she hadn’t expected was when she mused out loud about what to do to whichever pureblooded twit had dosed his food. Tom carelessly remarked that she might as well borrow one of the Knights for her purposes. When she looked up in surprise, he pointed out that it’s not as if she was aware of what actions she could do without blinking that might make those from wizarding families to shudder.

Basically, she’d need their cultural perspective. Tom had a point.

“Borrow?” She’d asked.

“I almost forgot. Give me your hand.”

“Um, what?” She gave him her right hand all the same.

To her surprise, he pulled one of his rings off and slipped it easily on her ring finger. It was a small silver one with Slytherin crest on it.

“There. The smarter ones would understand what it means the moment they see you wearing it.”

“And the not-so-smart ones?” She asked, simply out of curiosity.

“Well, you’d probably have to shove it at their nose. Whether peacefully or in a punch, I’m sure you can decide that for yourself.”

He really had no mercy to those he considered as slow. She ended up placing the ring on her necklace, simply because she didn’t want to take the risk of something so important slipping away easily (she wasn’t sure their ring sizes were the same). Tom had been so casual that she hadn’t given it much thought. It was only when she walked out that she realised the gesture was a tad… suggestive of something, wasn’t it? And she’d accepted without a second thought. She was pinching the bridge of her nose as she walked.

Yet it was also possible that she was just imagining things. After all, he wasn’t sentimental. It wasn’t as if she thought of anything other than how useful his signet ring would be in the moment he gave it to her either.

Speaking of his other gesture, Hermione also understood why he showed the place to her.

Not many people knew of the large bath/pool. Those who do are either prefects or upper years, and
practically none of them had connected the bath to the never-used Elizabethan Royal Suite. That meant that the bedroom was certainly free for anyone who wishes to use it. The professors each have their own suite, and thus have no urgent need to find another. He’d checked with the house elves and they’d confirmed his questions, not to mention that the doors to the suite *does* lock properly.

Anyone trying to open it while it’s in use would just thought it was one of the closed-off and locked-up rooms in Hogwarts.

She still wanted to bang her forehead against the nearest cupboard because she had no idea why she was blushing after she considered it carefully. There would certainly be times when one of the groups they’re sort-of-associated-with would need a sophisticated meeting room that can fulfil their needs (advanced duelling or fighting practice came to mind, the ones that require intensive terraforming like the Prewett twins seemed to be fond of). That meant that the Room of Requirement would need to be used…which meant that the two of them definitely *can’t* use it during that period.

*It's just a conveniently private bedroom. Get a grip, Hermione.*

Keeping this firmly in mind, she made her way to the library. There might not be enough time for her to settle there, but she could certainly browse the books and take one or two out.

Hermione reached the Great Hall before Tom did.

Considering that she’d only spent a little time in the library, that wasn’t a surprise. What surprised her was tired-looking Evariste sitting on the Gryffindor table with none of his friends around (yet), staring blankly at a scroll laid on the table. Even his usually-gleaming hair seemed dispirited today. She’d promised to breakfast with the Slytherins, yes, but it didn’t mean that she couldn’t take a detour. She ignored the occasional curious glance from other breakfasting Gryffindors.

“Evariste, are you alright?”

His reply was firm. “I’ll be fine. I only need Philippe to calm down a little and talk, and then get Maximilien to listen.”

Since he gave the impression that he had it under control and didn’t seem to be want Hermione’s involvement just yet, she wished him good luck on that front. Hermione certainly did not regret handing the responsibility over if this was the sort of headache that awaited the search’s coordinator. One last thought stopped her from walking away.

“Have you divided areas with Sigmund von Moritz or one of the other Germans?” She asked.

“Von Moritz? What for?”

Hermione raised an eyebrow in return at his answer. “The *Search*. You *do* know that he’s also volunteering to help with his family’s contacts and all, right?”

Evariste was still staring at her with a half-blank expression. Hermione only shook her head and placed the nearest coffee and tea pot near his right hand to leave him to choose.

“They’d…contact me if they hear anything? Is that what you mean?”

“Of course not. You have to decide which areas your associates would search and which ones
you’d leave to the Germans—overlaps waste time and are inefficient. You’d need to sit down and get into the details and you actually need to coordinate not just progress but also methods. That way, if anyone figured out a faster way to find out about something, the other teams would know about it quickly too…”

His gaze was drifting. Add the noticeable shadows under his eyes and she made a decision right then.

“You know what? I’ll find Auguste and get him to sit down with Sigmund and officially coordinate at that side of the search. He can help you sort out the technicalities. You look like you either need more sleep or more caffeine.” She filled his plate with a few croissant and buns, then placed several pots of butter and an assortment of jams nearby. The thud of glass jars on wood seemed to have snapped him out.

“Merci.”

“De rien.”

She couldn’t help but straighten his crooked cravat—it was a fairly simple knot that she recognised. Hermione had ceased to be surprised with the way other Hogwarts students dress even out of their uniforms in this time. She could recall at least one Auror event where she had to fix Harry and Neville’s cravats moments before stepping into a ballroom; she may have been mildly exasperated, but she was also too used to it. The brunette witch stepped back to look at her work critically, missing the hand Evariste raised to grasp her wrist.

Hermione nodded in satisfaction before smiling at him.

“Now, I’m going to go find Auguste.”

Hermione had left so quickly she missed the complicated expression on Evariste’s face, as was his aborted attempt to call her back.

It was a good thing that Auguste was also an early riser. She found him easily at the Ravenclaw table, his blue waistcoat’s brocade pattern was rather distinctive. He was neatly groomed, as usual.

“Morning, Auguste.”

“Good morning, Hermione. Not much to talk about with Evariste?” He gestured towards the Gryffindor table with his bread knife.

“He insists on having it under control. If he volunteers to keep refereeing Montmorency and Bernadotte, I’m the last person who would stop him.” She said, sitting down.

Auguste sighed. “Oh, yes. That would take some effort. I’ll say that I’m never as thankful as I am right now that I didn’t manage The Society. So, what brings you here?”

“Evariste didn’t seem to realise that working with the Germans also means actually dividing the search area and have a lot of talk about the details.”

“Ah.” His reply was too calm.

“So, I was wondering if we could ask for your assistance in coordinating with them? Please?”
He did not seem moved by her plea, only giving her a knowing glance in return when he wasn’t more invested in slathering marmalade over his toast.

“I’ll think about it.”

“They’re of one mind in principle. I don’t think they’d have a fight as large as the one between Montmorency and Philippe.”

“It doesn’t mean that they wouldn’t.”

Just as Hermione sighed, he let out a chuckle. “I’ll consider it Hermione. It does not seem to be too time-consuming right now, so I suppose I can do it. But…”

“But?”

“Have lunch with me next week in Hogsmeade?”

She had to pause for a while to make sure she heard that correctly. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

He shrugged. “Friendly date, if at all. You see, one of my friends is interested in you but is too cautious in his movements. If I’ve asked you to lunch with me already, even if he’d managed to reach a decision, he’d be too late. Let’s just say I’m giving him a lesson in being quicker and more decisive.”

For a moment she thought she saw a flash of a fox-like grin on his face.

Hermione laughed.

“In that case, I can certainly meet you at Hogsmeade for lunch next week—but only for lunch.”

“Perfect. And I’ll probably bring you my woes and complaints about coordination during that time.”

“If you complain during our entire meal, you better pick up the entire bill.”

He waved his hand easily at that. “That had never been in question. What else was I going to do?”

To his credit, Auguste did not seem the slightest bit surprised when Hermione stood up, taking an apple with her, and walked towards the Slytherin table.

Hermione walked to Tom’s usual spot at the Slytherin table. She was surprised to see not just Starkey, Pendleton with Gallus sitting across from them, but also Melchior and Abraxas next to the Rosier heir.

“I didn’t think I’d see you two this early on Saturday.” She commented.

Starkey had stood up with a flourish and guided her to a spot he seemed to have intentionally reserved for her. She’d taken his arm without a second thought.

“You just haven’t seen us on Saturday morning often enough,” Abraxas reasoned. Strands of sunlight fell over his head, vaguely reminiscent of a halo. If his hair was any brighter, she’d need to wear sunglasses indoors, she thought wryly.
“Really.” She drawled.

Hermione gave him an unblinking, unimpressed look for several seconds and he folded as fast as she thought he would. The blond pouted. “Oh, alright. Yes, I heard it from Gallus.”

“We certainly heard it from Gallus,” Melchior said this with the touchy mood of one only half-awake. “Why on earth would I drag myself out of bed on Saturday morning otherwise? Speaking of Monday’s malignant Prophet article, I’ve asked around a little. Same with Caspar and Bernard…”

“Caspar and Bernard?” Hermione had no idea who they were.

“Caspar Zabini and Bernard Greengrass.” Abraxas clarified for her. Melchior, on the other hand, had an awkward expression on his face as he glanced at his friend.

“Go on?” She prompted.

“Can we shelve this for the moment until Tom is here?”

Hermione wasn’t the only one who didn’t understand what he meant. Gallus’ confused ‘why?’ and Starkey’s ‘wot?’ said it all. As Melchior seemed to be carefully stepping around some topics, it took a while before Hermione understood that he was trying to bring up Knights business to her without Tom’s say so. She sighed and made a move of fiddling with her necklace chain. Incidentally, it pulled the cheap four-leaved clover pendant out…along with the silver ring hanging next to it.

“You were saying, Melchior?”

As Melchior sat stunned for a moment, staring at her pendant, Starkey snorted from her left. “Didn’t need to see that to know she’s different. Have you ever seen Tom talk wiv any other witch? ‘Course she can know things.”

To Starkey’s credit, he was right. He’d hardly flinched.

“Well, I was saying that none of us could be sure until one or two weekends.” Melchior finally said, ignoring Starkey’s smug expression. “I’ll probably take this Sunday too drop in at Diagon Alley and see if anyone’s heard about any Prophet reporter talking with anyone.”

“They couldn’t possibly be that obvious, could they?” Pendleton quietly asked.

“Most people aren’t overly complicated,” Abraxas said. As many surprised heads turned towards him, he huffed. “Oh, come on. You’d think so too with a few minutes thought. What else were they going to do? It’s not as if someone left a manual for these sorts of things lying around. Most people just go and do it like the make any other appointments.”

“What about discretion?” Pendleton asked again. “Obscuring the trail?”

“Not everyone has an Auror for a parent like you do and know ten different ways to avoid the attention of the law. To them, discretion is reserving a table at a restaurant under an alias and dressing slightly differently.”

Hermione didn’t miss the way Gallus and Melchior respectively cringed and winced on Abraxas’ sides. Even the usually laidback Starkey tensed slightly before he relaxed again. The Malfoy heir was blissfully unaware.

Pendleton himself seems pretty unaffected. “Ah, you make a very good point, Abraxas. Thank
“My pleasure.”

“So, this Sunday, I’ll be visiting Diagon Alley. If anyone wanted me to buy anything while I’m there, I can do it and just send it by post. I’d recommend trying out some of the new ice cream flavours at Fortescue’s.”

Hermione’s eyebrows would have shot up at his idea of recommending ice creams in autumn if she hadn’t noticed the witch that had suddenly sat next to Melchior. He’d been thinking on his feet and immediately redirected the topic.

It wasn’t Beatrix or the other German Slytherin witch whose name she hadn’t quite memorised. It was Tom’s partner prefect, the witch with a capital B who was also the head of that little clique that pushed her off the stairs. The one whose shorter friend received a (restrained) ass-kicking from Hermione. That pureblood princess.

“Good morning, Abraxas, Melchior…everyone.”

Hermione had felt that she wasn’t exactly included in that ‘everyone’ that she was talking about, considering how she acted as if the Ravenclaw witch wasn’t there.

Chapter End Notes

Additional Notes:

_We did not hold with having formal mistresses when it was expected in Europe until it faded again:_ Lucretia is most probably referring to the fashion of having an official mistress/maîtresse-en-titre for a king that it was an actual title in court. This meant that the official mistress has her own rules of precedent that shows which nobles are lower in rank than her and which aren’t (usually, there aren’t that many who are higher). This became popular throughout Europe with Louis XIV (1638 – 1715), the ‘Sun King’, as he became the most powerful monarch in Europe after successfully consolidating his power (and gutting the nobles’ in the process). Not that it was a surprise; as a centre of culture, France often became the source of many fashionable ideas for other countries throughout the centuries.

(French had become the language of international diplomacy for centuries. The court of the last Russian dynasty spoke more often in French than Russian).
51 Friends, Rivals II

Chapter Summary

*Saturday morning at the Slytherin table (this place is not big enough for both of us).*

Chapter Notes

Free this weekend! Yess! In case my update slows down any time in the future, it's probably because I was getting less free time to keep writing. Just saying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

51 Friends, Rivals II

Tom’s prefect partner was perched daintily on the seat right across Hermione’s, nails a little longer than practical and shone like pearls. Her waist-length hair fell straight down her back, light as gossamer with not a single knot on it. Just seeing it was making Hermione itch to brush her own hair (and she knew her hair was fine, she just did it this morning). If she hadn’t seen her prefect badge pinned discreetly over the blonde’s dress, she would’ve forgotten that Jemima Avery was a prefect.

Hermione had already nicknamed her ‘Head Stooge’ in her mind from the first time she encountered the annoying trio of witches.

The Slytherin witch’s attention, however, was squarely on Melchior and Abraxas, and sometimes even Pendleton or Starkey.

“It’s an interesting surprise to have you here.” Melchior smiled. “Your friends must be annoyed at us to have monopolised your company.”

Jemima relaxed a fraction. “Oh, not at all. Besides, we’re all housemates, aren’t we?”

“True, true…”

She had to commend Melchior on the charm he exuded the moment he spoke to her—even Abraxas couldn’t change his expression to be as pleasant as fast as his friend. Gallus looked perfectly content to be ignored with the Nott and Malfoy heirs buffering him from the witch. He simply added more bacon on his plate and started eating with relish without even trying to talk to her other than the initial good morning. Hermione couldn’t help the amused twitch of her lips.

Starkey was the first one to strike instead of sticking to platitudes.

“So…Jemma. What brings you ‘ere?”

Her porcelain brow was marred by creases before it smoothed out again within a second as if it were never there, her expression as friendly as ever. Hermione couldn’t help but be slightly
impressed.

“It’s Jemima, Starkey. Jemima Avery.” She corrected.

He nodded slowly, as if carefully keeping her words in mind, his eyes wide and guileless. Hermione didn’t know when he’d taken off his cap, because his thick curls gave him an even more innocent expression.

“Sure, it is. You’re the other prefect in our year. You and Tom. So, I sure knew your name afore. Jemma Avery. See? I do know.”

Abraxas’ easy grin turned sharper for a moment before he was back to his usual cheerful one. “Starkey knows already Jemima. Jemima’s a beautiful name.”


Jemima’s cheek twitched.

Melchior smirked before the expression melted back to his mild and friendly smile.

Hermione had opened her bag by now, intent on pulling out some Defence and Ancient Runes books. Tom might not be arriving any time soon, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t interested in actually studying with the Slytherin boys.

Pendleton, who was on Starkey’s other side, saw what she was doing.

“I don’t think that’s our Ancient Runes textbook.”

The Ravenclaw handed the book he was eyeing over, with Starkey (who she sat next to) smoothly passing it to his friend without looking away from Jemima. Hermione lowered her voice so as to not intrude on the main conversation on the table. “I thought you’d appreciate it since you’re interested in upgrading your family wards, right? The basics of geomancy would be right up your alley.”

Pendleton’s smile was faint, but it certainly warmed his eyes. It was hard to imagine then that she’d heard him being called ‘expressionless’ more than once.

“Ah, thank you. I was losing track a bit when Ms. Lee started going into the details of terrain alignment.”

“So, Avery, are you here to join our study group too?” Melchior asked.

“A study group, really? Oh, my goodness, I didn’t know. I thought we’re all just chatting as friends here.” Jemima replied with a bright smile.

Hermione had to duck her head lest she be caught snickering. She couldn’t believe that Avery was going to try playing the ingénue. *Somebody, nominate the lady for an Oscar!*

“Ah, that’s because we haven’t quite started yet,” Abraxas said with the same amount of friendliness.

“Yes, we’re still mostly concerned with breakfast.” Gallus commented from the far side.

“But once this is done, we’re going to go through the effects of the phases of the moon on the different ingredients.” Melchior said.
“Aconite fully flowering in a full moon is more potent on werewolves than those whose flowers peak on the dark new moon.” Starkey added. “It’s a wee bit obvious, innit? Same with foxgloves you’ve need for making wards.”

Gallus’ eyebrows shot up to his hairline, but he said nothing. Probably because anyone below a talented potioneer or herbalist wouldn’t have found either observation obvious. It might explain Melchior’s polite throat clearing.

“So, aconite works against werewolves?” Jemima asked.

“Ruddy well it does.” Starkey replied, with a tone akin to someone saying ‘duh’ in the future.

“It’s not just wolfsbane that worked well against werewolves, then!”

Hermione took a herculean bite out of the sandwich she’d just made, just to shut herself up. Based on Starkey’s aborted curse, right before Pendleton either elbowed him in the gut or stepped on his foot, she wasn’t the only one having that issue. Even Abraxas choked on his pumpkin juice, while Melchior was simply out of words. Like her, Gallus was more interested in his breakfast.

Aconite is wolfsbane, honey, Hermione thought drily.

“Pendleton, I give up. You explain.” Starkey muttered, pulling the plate of bacon rashers that had been monopolised by Gallus over to his side.

“Not just wolfsbane and aconite, monkshood is also very potent against werewolves,” Pendleton said this with an entirely flat expression.

Abraxas hadn’t even finished clearing his throat when those words started another coughing fit. Melchior did better, mostly by slowly breathing in and out and determinedly not looking at anyone. Starkey glared at Pendleton as he almost choked on his bacon. As his mouth was currently too full to say anything, he can only mime his protest with expansive gestures.

“…!”

“Well, I did continue your explanation, didn’t I?” Pendleton asked.

She felt Starkey’s pain. Yes, but monkshood is simply yet another different name for the same plant!

Soon, the pale Slytherin lost interest altogether and started opening the geomancy book Hermione had just handed over, and buttered rolls in his other hand. He ignored Starkey’s wordless protestations.

“You might want to swallow that first before you complain,” Hermione said this to Starkey, who grumpily gave up complaining to his friend and settled down to eat. Not that Hermione thought it was a big deal—how many people consider preparing to fight werewolves as something important to memorise, even in Hogwarts? They’d be more inclined to look up muggle-repelling spells and the like, if any.

Jemima knew she’d missed something but was determined to soldier on.

“It’s a good thing that Professor Slughorn had always made sure our ingredients are fresh. I still remember when Tom and I were sent to the Forbidden Forest to collect some plants and herbs together.” Jemima said.
“That’s nice.” Hermione replied with the tone of someone humouring a child.

“Yes, it’s been our routine since our third year.”

From the way Gallus was rolling his eyes two seats down from Avery, Hermione knew it certainly wasn’t what the Slytherin witch was trying to make it sound like. Not that she cared the slightest. She already knew it was probably routine work.

“I think it’s very responsible of Professor Slughorn to start training his prefect candidates early.” Hermione used the blandest tone she can manage.

“Professor Strange had also trusted us with some class preparation in our second year, before Professor Flitwick did the same.” The Slytherin paused in thought. “But you wouldn’t know her, would you? She’s the Charms professor before Flitwick.”

“Well, it’s old history already, isn’t it? Unless you still share many classes with Tom?” Hermione asked back as sweetly.

Tom’s schedule was almost as insanely packed as hers, and Hermione knew scarcely anyone could keep up with him, much less a witch who seemed to hate any activity that might cause her to break her nails. At least her dark-haired friend (Carrow, was it?) seemed more competent.

“I’m sure you would know better if you ask the boys here how Hogwarts is like.”

Other than the slight chilliness in her blue eyes, Jemima continued as if Hermione hadn’t said anything concerning.

“I think I’m doing just fine even now. And boys, I’ll be sure to tell you about any extra drudge work the teachers might give me and Tom. It’s just that you’ll have to ask near the event, because why on earth would I want to keep such menial grind in my memory?”

Even if the Ravenclaw witch was speaking to Starkey next to her, along with the other wizards in their small breakfast party, everyone had a very good idea to whom her words were actually directed at.

A wisp of Daphne’s voice flittered past her mind. To fight like a Slytherin, Hermione, is to find other people’s dreams and then break them. Here, she was very well aware that Jemima Avery cannot boast of any prolonged time that she’d spent with Tom Riddle that wasn’t due to their prefect duties or extra class assignment, even though that was clearly her dearest wish.

Hermione saw the strawberries near Abraxas on top of a few eclairs. She did not pay any attention to the twitch of a jaw muscle of the other witch’s, because she had not considered Jemima to be relevant even from the moment she arrived.

“Abraxas, would you mind passing the eclairs?” She asked.

He saw what she wanted easily. His smile was boyish and bright, and she was almost tempted to dub him Lancelot right there.

“Ah, you’d want the ones with strawberries rather than the chocolate ones, isn’t that right?”

She was slightly surprised. “How do you know?”

“Because you enjoyed the strawberries and cream that Tom passed to you the first time you breakfasted with us. I know I can’t exactly compare to him, but I do hope the cook’s skill can make
up for the lack in company.” His humility wasn’t even fake, and as such his earnestness was genuine. For all of Abraxas’ overconfidence, he did believe that Tom’s worth far exceeded his.

The smile that grew on her face happened without her even thinking about it. *Smooth, Abraxas. Very smooth.*

“I think I’ll enjoy it just fine.”

She took the small plate he passed without second thoughts.

At this point, Pendleton was lost in his geomancy book. Starkey had struck up a conversation with Melchior on whether the dried nightshades used in the Potion of Dreamless Sleep were better chopped or ground down while Jemima gamely tried to join their conversation. This slight distraction was probably why Hermione hadn’t noticed the wizard coming up her side of the table until he took a seat to her right.

She’d already leaned away slightly at the intense perfume that drifted in her direction. His voice only worsened her mood.

“*Hello* Nurse. Mind checking me up today?” He drawled.

“Only if you’re interested in getting a limb removed, Rowle.”

Robbe Rowle clucked his tongue disapprovingly. “Such appalling bedside manner! Why, it would seem that you’re in need of a re-education.”

“Oh, I find that it’s *exactly* what’s needed to prevent malingering.”

Her cutting tone did not seem to have dissuaded him completely as he turned to watch her, chin leaning against his hand. His expression was thoughtful. His waistcoat was a moss-green shade that matched his tie and his robe was of an even darker shade. She was too annoyed to even give him credit for it.

“Interesting way to separate the wheat from the chaff.” Rowle noted.

“Some patients need to be kept in line.” Hermione replied, because she didn’t quite understand what he meant.

“Get ready for dinner with me, in Hogsmeade, today. Wear something green.”

“First, it’s not even a Hogsmeade weekend. Secondly, no.”

She found it ironic that Tom wasn’t even half as churlish in his request.

“Hogsmeade weekends are merely formalities if you can ask for exemptions from your head of house.” He was staring at her too intensely for her liking, raising her hackles. Hermione could hear Starkey cutting his conversation short as he turned his attention to hers, ignoring Jemima’s.

“Did you just miss the unreserved no I gave you?”

Rowle lowered his voice a little.

“I know your strategy, Curie. You aim for the highest possible target with the least chance of success just to get your profile up. In truth, you’d as easily settle for any target less than the first, as long as its high enough.” He leaned forward slightly. His smirk was shameless. “I know your type. Husband-seekers are the same everywhere—”
His slightest touch of her knee was accompanied by a jab of her wand at his groin. She could see his eyebrows rising in surprise, certainly because he (still) hadn’t expected her speed.

“Move away from me on the count of three, or I’ll take one of your balls as trophy.”

Hermione’s voice was even, not too quiet or loud. Her smile had a violent edge to it. She knew Starkey heard her easily, since he’d relaxed and moved away from her back (she suspected he was close to lunging at Rowle himself—her estimation of him rose).

“There’s really no need for these theatrics anymore.”

“One.”

“A chance is the best you’ll ever get.”

Hermione merely smiled wider.

“Two.”

She could see when his confidence started to waver, when he was having second thoughts about his belief and certainty.

“You know,” Hermione said conversationally. “I really don’t care if I happen to take off both balls at once. I mean, I am a competent field healer, and I can attach them back. Even if a professor happened to hear you screaming like a gelded pig and come around, they’d see that you’re fine and everything is at its place. I’ll get a warning, you’ll get a warning, and they’ll leave us both alone again. It’s so nice to know that cleaning spells work splendidly even with spurting arterial blood, isn’t it?”

Hermione was bluffing. Attaching organs with many fine blood vessels involved is never a simple operation, even if it could be done. Usually it took at least two healers. Still, she was really pissed off, and it’s not as if he could even tell, could he?

It was her turn to lean forward now. “I can always cut your balls off again later on when no one’s paying attention. So, which one do you like the least, Mr. Rowle? The left one, or the right one? Or shall I take both and choose myself?”

The best tone to threaten dense pureblood wizards with, as Daphne had demonstrated, is the exact one you’ll use to ask ‘would you like some more tea?’ Complete with that sweet and charming smile that you’re supposed to show to prospective mothers-in-law from the Sacred 28. Right now, she was thrusting the tip of her wand down at what was probably one of his balls alright, albeit through several layers of clothing. That he hadn’t screamed even as he paled spoke of his pain endurance more than anything.

A second later, he scrambled backward with more dignity than she thought anyone could manage, before standing up and leaving without another word.

(A flash of memory with Daphne’s voice to her right. A crowd? An interview in a bookstore—now, smile and wave, Hermione! Smile and wave!)

Hermione was still smiling as she waved at him with her left hand.

(She certainly wouldn’t use her right hand. The Ravenclaw was still aiming her wand at him).

When she turned back at the table, she saw that the other Slytherins were now staring at her.
Jemima was as pale as a sheet, while Starkey had broken down into laughter.

“Good one, Hermione! Robbe’s a little on the dense side—pain usually works best at reminding him of things.”

Her smile was more than a little amused. “So, it’s Hermione now?”

“Thank you, Vespasian.”

Starkey shuddered. “Ves, please. Vespasian reminds me of my grandmother reprimanding me.”

“Tom called you Vespasian.” Hermione remembered. Ves shrugged.

“Eh, that’s Tom. He can call anyone whatever ‘e likes.”

“Yes, that was excellent. I don’t think I could see your wand when you drew it.” Melchior said, shaking his head.

“Forearm holster.” Pendleton suddenly answered from Starkey’s other side as he finally pulled his nose out of the geomancy book he was reading. “I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again. If you want your draw speed to go below four seconds, you’ll stick with a forearm holster. How do you think Tom always outdraws you or Abraxas when we go for first hit?”

“Yes, yes, Mr. I-Will-Endlessly-Preach-on-Duelling-Basics.” Abraxas muttered resignedly.

“I used a forearm holster!” Melchior defended.

“But you don’t practise your draw enough. In Advanced Defence, you both usually already had your wands out.”

Abraxas’ brows furrowed slightly as he realised something. “While Tom never had his wand out from the beginning.”

“Exactly.”

“Sheesh. I still defeat you almost two-thirds of the time we fight, drawing speed notwithstanding.” Melchior groused.

“More like three fifths.” Pendleton said between sips of his tea. “Your spell repertoire is uncommonly large—you and Abraxas both.”

Just when Abraxas was grinning widely and Melchior look more satisfied, Pendleton gave his last shot.

“Those fancy spells aren’t much help when you’re fighting someone at least three times faster than you. Isn’t that right?”

A slight glance at Hermione made it clear who he was referring to. Hermione herself only noticed it when the two Slytherins across from her turned to her direction with a glum expression.

“Because there’d be times when drawing speed will make a difference between the quick and the dead.” She added.

“Hey, that’s catchy!” Starkey, no, Ves, remarked.

Hermione shrugged and simply picked up another éclair puffy with cream. “Wasn’t mine. Pretty
“sure I’ve heard it before from someone else.”

The slight clink of glass on the table was louder than usual, for some reason drawing their attention.

“Is no one going to mention how you threatened Rowle?” Jemima’s tone was high.

The Ravenclaw witch was surprised that Avery was still there. The other Slytherins exchanged glances with each other. Hermione had no regrets about striking back at Rowle, whatever their answers were, but she was now curious.

*Avery was right,* she mused. None of them looked the slightest bit perturbed.

“He’s asking for it, frankly. Would’ve recommended the method to me own sister if he ever gives ‘er hell.” Starkey spoke up. Hermione snorted. She almost forgot that he was Mr. Psychopath Junior.

“It’s just Robbe, Jemima.” Abraxas said without concern.

*“Just Robbe?”*

“He always feels more important than he actually is. You get used to it.” The Malfoy heir was more interested in the sausages he was adding to his plate.

That was when Hermione paid attention to the dishes he was picking. Since when was there more than two varieties of sausages for breakfast? Not even in the Hogwarts of her own time. After staring at the fourth sausage platter (and the one she actually found interesting with its scent of herbs), she realised that the Slytherin Germans must’ve made some requests to the kitchen elfs, recipes in tow.

Gallus kindly shifted her that platter of sausage when she’d stretched a hand towards it. Ves continued to pass it towards her. She thanked them.

Jemima Avery was frowning, marring her pretty face.

“But Curie’s—”

“Only putting him in his place.” Melchior finished.

As Hermione poured herself some water and was drawn by the serene splashing of the flowing liquid, she realised that her corner of the Slytherin table had to be rather quiet for her to have heard it clearly.

The Knights of Walpurgis were generally enjoying their breakfast, if not reading (Pendleton, again). Most had stopped paying attention to their fifth-year prefect. To Hermione’s left, Starkey was happily swallowing his meal down with a speed that would shame an anaconda. The only reason Hermione barely blinked was because Ron had even worse table manners in his Hogwarts years—she’d seen it all, and at least Starkey didn’t leave a mess (she suspected that Pendleton was going to drive an elbow to his gut if any food flew onto his book).

Jemima stared at them in turn, with the disbelief of someone who’d heard there was a fair coming to town and visited, only to find out it was a butcher’s convention on the spot when a bucket of blood spilled in front of her.

It was with some embarrassment that Hermione had only realised the reason then.
Slytherins stick together, Draco had once told her. Especially towards outsiders. It doesn’t matter if you disagree with your housemate. It doesn’t matter if you want to wipe that grin with your fist. You don’t let the outsiders see your weakness as a house. We play divide et impera to other houses, not the reverse.

Jemima Avery had just seen Tom’s closest friends (associates, that Daphne-like voice corrected in her head) close ranks around Hermione against one of their own.

The first public expression you learn to make in Slytherin is easy, Daphne had said.

Hermione was wearing it even as Jemima’s gaze turn to her. It was the ‘all according to plan’ smile. It didn’t even matter if it wasn’t your plan. It wasn’t as if most would know. She spotted the teapot in the middle, filled with boiling water—she’d just checked. The teapot had a very basic stasis charm (house elf magic) that unravelled the moment she touched it. No tea had yet to be added as the boys had either been more occupied with eating or was satisfied with pouring themselves some juice.

Hermione chose black tea with jasmine and spooned some loose leaves inside.

“Would you like some tea?” Hermione offered with a pleasant tone.

To Hermione’s surprise, Jemima said yes.

The brunette poured some tea for her without further thoughts, asking whether she preferred to take hers with lemon or milk. Milk, and sweet too. If Hermione had found it weird that their tastes were similar, it was dispelled the moment Jemima confirmed that she does prefer the lighter and more fragrant teas. Unlike the thick brews Hermione preferred, courtesy of the all-nighters she had often pulled in a different life.

Vespasian Starkey might have successfully schooled his face into a neutral expression and only focused on his food, but Hermione could see easily from sitting beside him that he was dissatisfied with the current state of things. His looks of annoyance were even more notable than Melchior’s expression of forbearance—and he was the one right next to Jemima.

“So, Hermione,” Starkey—Ves, started.

“Yes?”

“Yer a healer, right?”

“I’ve got the basics of a field healer down, at least,” she said. As far as I can remember, she did not voice.

“How much blood does someone ‘ave of, hmm, say, Jemma’s height and weight ‘ere?”

Starkey (Ves, Hermione, Ves) turned appraisingly across the table, while Jemima did a good job of looking too engrossed in her drink to notice. It was a pity that Hermione was not an amateur in interviewing witnesses, even if she didn’t need to do it as frequently as Harry or Ron.

“And what height would that be?” She asked back.

“An inch or two shorter than you.”
“Four and a half litres, give or take a quarter of a litre.” Hermione estimated.

“Litres? We ain’t no bloody French. What’s that in quarts?”

She groaned, only now remembering that the metrification hasn’t exactly gone in full swing yet. Heck, the last time she was in Diagon Alley idly asking the conversion rate from galleons to pound sterling, she saw the rates to guineas as well as pound, and the shilling was still around. It meant that one pound was 240 pence during this time instead of the easy-to-calculate 100—unless, she uses base 12 instead of base 10 to calculate in.

“A litre is about 88% of a quart.” Melchior commented. She was about to give him a look of amazement when she saw that he was reading off a bookmark.

“Urgh, wait a sec…I can round that to 3 quarts and 2 pints, give or take half a pint. Why do you ask?”

Ves tilted his head to the side a little, his gaze unmoving from Jemima.

“How much blood needs spillin’ before consciousness is lost? Almost all three quarts?”

“That’s outright murder,” Hermione calmly replied. “Just over two-fifths of total blood volume is enough to make consciousness go down. It’s safer to just use a knock-out spell, though, since that much blood loss is already class four haemorrhagic shock. If blood is not replenished in the system quickly, the knock-on hypovolemic shock is going to get major organs to shut down.”

Starkey was still staring at Jemima, unblinking, unaffected by the glare she gave him.

“Pudding?” Pendleton leaned forward and offered from Ves’ other side. Hermione nodded. She had no idea if he knew about what she liked, but she was certainly not going to turn down the raspberry and orange pudding he suggested.

“Yes please. And thank you.”

“That’s a pity.” Ves said.

“Really? Why?”

“I do like to see arterial blood flow. So red, fresh and…vivid. Don’t you think so, Jemma?”

“I don’t have to listen to this.” Jemima Avery enunciated each word carefully.

Starkey nodded happily. “’Course not. You can walk away from us barbarians anytime you want.”

Jemima glanced around her. It was rather telling that not even Pendleton cut into Starkey’s explanation and disagreed with his use of the word ‘barbarians’.

“Not that the term meant anything,” Gallus opined. “Considering that the Romans consider the Coliseum a civilised entertainment. If you don’t mind helping me out with what Slughorn’s comments are supposed to mean, Hermione?”

Gallus was…eating salad? Oh, and taking out some homework scrolls without further ado. In fact, he’d just slid one over to Hermione’s. A potions essay already marked by Slughorn. She took the scroll easily.

“Oh no, not at all. I’ll just doodle right here, shall I?”
“Please do.”

Hermione pulled out one of her favourite quills. She placed its associated ink bottle on the table too while she’s at it. She’d filled both with dark rose ink (she was determined on having her favourite ink colour to annotate with, even if she had to mix several inks herself and test each mix to get that particular shade). She started adding explanation in the spaces remaining among the margin in her small, neat handwriting.

“Could you kill people from pain?” Ves Starkey idly asked her again.

“No, not really. They’d just faint from shock.” She replied absently.

“Oh, how boring.”

“Theoretically, you can frighten people to death, though,” Hermione added. “It’s been observed in wild animals that are captured but are not anaesthetised. They’re so afraid of their situation and surroundings but they can’t escape. Adrenaline spikes, their heart rates spikes, and it doesn’t stop. They die of heart failure. That’s why it’s always a good idea to drug any wildlife you catch, even if you were to catch to heal them. It’s not as if they can understand your intentions, after all.”

Ves sounded more than a little excited. If Hermione was a little less distracted by her work, she might be a bit more worried.

“Wicked!”

“Yes, but people aren’t as irrational as those poor animals. They don’t stay afraid of the same thing for hours and days on end. I can’t see it happening in our species.” Hermione explained.

When the table quieted down, she thought that line of conversation was over. Hermione was more interested in musing what the hell Slughorn’s scribble of ‘not enough vision!!’ was supposed to mean. She had never received such strange comments even when she last studied under the Potions Master. Then again, she always made sure her work was comprehensive.

“That just means we ‘ave to be very creative, isn’t it?” Ves mused out loud again.

The brunette snorted. She could guess where his mind just went. “Torture just creates more pain, not fear. You’d probably kill someone from the blood loss first.”

“Oh, it needs a real artist, you mean. Hmm. Sounds like a proper challenge, y’know? To be able to frighten someone to death…”

“I don’t even get why all that is even necessary in the first place. If you really have an enemy you want to get out of the way, then ‘wham, bam, Azkaban’ is the best solution. No one ever gets out of there and all your troubles are now…contained.” Abraxas commented, with the ease of a family that has successfully brought down their occasional political enemies by litigating them to bankruptcy.

Hermione heard Melchior groan. “That’s an awful pun, Brax.”

“No, it’s not,” Ves defended. “At least it’s not the one about Guy Fawkes being hung and quartered.”

“What about it?” Melchior asked.

“Well, the king doesn’t need to worry about ‘im anymore, does he? Now that he’s…resting in
Malchior wasn’t the only one who groaned at that, even as Ves chortled.

“There’s still another one.” Pendleton unexpectedly spoke up. “What did the king say to him when it’s all said and done?”

“What?”

“The rebellion is getting out of hand, isn’t it?” He deadpanned.

Even Gallus groaned. “Merlin, that’s bad and you should be ashamed of it.”

Pendleton shrugged. “You were asking for bad examples.”

“And then he’ll go ‘here, let me lend you a hand’.” Abraxas added, to the pained chuckles and groans of almost everyone else.

“Or, ‘why don’t you just…leg it?’” Pendleton added yet again.

“The Parliament Building is just a hop away,” Gallus commented.

Melchior was burying his face in his hands, despite his chuckles. Abraxas laughed freely. Hermione only let the occasional twitch of her lips show, as she was determined to finish her notes on Gallus’ essay.

Ves hooted at that. “If I was the king, I’d say that while shaking his legs in front of him.”

“Oh, I know! ‘Missing something?’” Abraxas commented.

On and on they went with their morbid jokes (and some she had to admit were as funny as they were awful), until the clatter of plate surprised them all.

Avery had stood up and left without preamble, and Hermione had only realised then that the other witch had been getting paler.

“Finally! Been wondering when she’d finally leave!”

Pendleton swiped the back of Ves’ head.

“Oy!”

“She’s not out of hearing yet, you dolt.”

“Oh, good point.” Ves scratched his head of thick curls before hollering in the direction of Jemima.

“Sorry about our bad jokes, Jemma!”

That only caused Abraxas, Melchior and Gallus to groan.

“Don’t tell me your mother lets you get away behaving like that to a respectable witch?” Abraxas asked.

“I think she’s given up on him.” Pendleton’s reply was as flat as his bland expression.

“That’s the point of doing it behind her, right?” Vespasian said.
Melchior pinched the bridge of his nose. “And pray, tell, what would your solution be if she wrote about this to her mother? Who might possibly write to all our mothers, or even worse meet and have tea with them?”

Too curious to stay away, Hermione looked up from Gallus’ essay. Three other wizards were staring Ves’ down. Pendleton, she supposed, was already too used to his friend’s antics by his neutral mien. (She’d asked him how he knew Starkey—he’d admitted that their ancestral lands were practically neighbours, which would make them childhood friends).

“Um, run?” Ves hazarded.

Hermione laughed, surprising everyone else.

“You know, I do know a very good, anti-Howler ward. If that’s too much for you to erect in a place as large as Hogwarts, I even know the smaller charm version you can put on something wearable, for a very good price…”

Most of the Slytherin wizards around her was now hanging to her every word.

“Melchior, what are you doing?” Abraxas asked.

“As interested as I am to negotiate you teaching me that particular howler-repelling charm,” Melchior began. He glanced up from the scroll he was writing to Hermione. “I happen to think that publishing our version of the story needs to be done first and foremost.”

His friend seemed to realise what he was doing just then.

“You’re writing a letter?”

“I certainly am writing a letter.”

“Oh, good grief, how the hell could I have forgotten!” Gallus cried, slapping his palm over his forehead on Abraxas’ other side. “Good point, Melchior!”

Melchior only managed a wordless grunt in acknowledgement, too focused on his letter-writing. Soon, Gallus pushed aside his half-eaten salad and spread a fresh roll of parchment on his part of the table as he tried to get a fountain pen of his to work (his bowl of salad disappeared ten minutes later). Abraxas ducked when Gallus seemed to be a little too enthusiastic in shaking his pen and almost hit him at the temple (Rosier was left-handed).

Pendleton seemed to be struck by something and was also pulling parchments out and pushing empty dishes to the side. Unlike the others, he shoved it towards Ves.

“Write.”

“What?”

Abraxas was a bit late to the party, but he’d figured it out now as he scrambled for writing tools.

“Letters home, Ves. Jemima may or may not end up writing a letter home to her mother. Now, in case she actually wrote that letter, and her mother actually sent another letter to our mothers, would they be more pissed off if it’s the first time they heard of the incident, or if they’ve heard about it before from us?” Abraxas said.
“Oh, right! So, we need to get our truth out before she does.”

“Definitely.” Melchior confirmed. “Then, Jemima can publish and be damned, for all I care.”

Hermione glanced at Pendleton, who was the only one unconcerned and who’d continued with his Ancient Runes reading.

“You’re not writing anything?” She asked. His reply was succinct.

“My father’s chronically unwell and my mother’s dead. My grandaunt doesn’t actually care about these trivial things.”

She winced. Didn’t he say that his father was in St. Mungo’s, or something? Mental ward! That was it, her memory supplied her.

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t mention it,” he quickly said. He actually looked more uncomfortable from her apology than her comments before. He pre-empted her from saying anything else. “Really, don’t mention it. I’m used to it already by now.”

The sound of quills and pen gliding over paper was the only sound audible or a while.

“My owl has flown back to the owlery, though.” Abraxas fretted.

“Get all our owls to fly back here. What else?” Gallus replied without care.

Before any of his friends asked how, he’d already raised his right hand and hailed someone at the lower end of the Slytherin house table. The table being only half-filled on Saturday morning, they seemed to have no problem seeing and communicating with each other. Not long after that, one of the lower years walked forward.

Hermione couldn’t help but consider the rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed younger version of Gallus as adorable. He even had a small cowlick sticking up.

“Hello.”

Everyone greeted him and Gallus gave a summary introduction of everyone there to his brother, including Hermione. The younger Rosier was looking at her with a clear and curious glance.

“So, everyone, that’s Jonah, my younger brother. I can get him to go to the owlery and get our owls to fly down.”

“That’d be ten knuts and a Honeydukes candy.” Jonah promptly said.

It amused Hermione that everyone tipped him without a second thought before telling him what their respective owls look like and what their names are. Jonah dutifully wrote it down.

“I’m surprised none of you balk at the cost.”

Abraxas sniffed. “Please, Hermione, if we gave nothing, it would be a favour instead of a simple quid pro quo exchange. You should actually suspect people who insist they’re providing you a service for free.”

“Trust is expensive and worth paying for.” Gallus concluded.
When Tom finally arrived at the Slytherin table after his morning swim, what he saw surprised him. It was not outside the realm of possibility that Hermione would decide to breakfast at his house table, true. But he hadn’t expected the ease in which she socialised with his house mates.

Hermione was tutoring the twin boulders, Parkinson and Mulciber.

Tom cleared his throat when he was right behind them. Hermione looked up. He did not fail to notice the smile that brightened her expression. Parkinson and Mulciber was looking up blankly at him until Melchior (bless him) pointedly cleared his throat at them. Tom was sure Abraxas was saying some things too, but why would he need to pay attention to whatever command the blond gave to his slow minions?

“Tom! How’s your swim?”

“It went well, as I’m sure you know.”

She shrugged. “I still have to ask. Anyway, I’d offer you a seat, but…”

Hermione paused in surprise as she glanced forward, possibly because of the seats to her right that is now conveniently vacated—the boulder twins had moved down. He sat down at his rightful place. Tom turned to her with an expression of complete innocence.

“You were saying?”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t comment, only knocked at his part of the table with a distinct shave-and-a-haircut pattern. This summoned a new table setting at his location—plate, silverware and napkin. Gallus had started passing some of the more interesting breakfast foods from his side, and everyone helped move the dishes closer to his side of the table. A quick glance at the table informed him of what everyone else was currently up to.

“So, everyone is apparently homesick at once.” Tom commented.

As a few heads bobbed up to stare at him in confusion, he gestured at their sudden letter-writing spree. Starkey barked a laughter and Abraxas chuckled.

Melchior sighed. “Avery the Prefect is in a snit. The last thing I need is her crocodile tears making the rounds in my mother’s circle of friends.”

From Tom’s amused smile, it was clear that he’d somehow picked up the rest of the story from the shared glances and glimpses of vexed expressions on everyone else’s face. That was the last time Jemima Avery was mentioned.

They did end up studying at the Slytherin table, though it wasn’t strictly for a specific subject. Most were reading up on Defence, true, but Pendleton always ended up going back to Ancient Runes every other ten minutes and Gallus had his Potions essay with Slughorn’s odd and incomprehensible notes about his work.

It had scarcely been an hour later when another Slytherin witch walked to their particular corner of the house table.

“Good morning, Clytemnestra.”
Hermione had only noticed her approach when she heard Tom’s greeting and the witch’s reply. She might be beautiful, but Hermione wouldn’t know, since Clytemnestra’s expression was perpetually akin to someone who’d just smelled something unpleasant. It marred her entire impression. The prefect pin Hermione could see clarified who she was. A sixth-year prefect—the Slytherin Montmorency’s partner, Clytemnestra Gamp.

“Someone’s looking for you, Curie.” She said without any greeting.

“Who is it?”

“An Auror.” A beat. There was the shadow of a cold smile. “The past always catches up with you, no matter how far you’ve run.”

Hermione didn’t even spare her a glance as she tidied her things unhurriedly. “They probably just wanted to ask questions.”

A flash of white teeth. “You can tell yourself that if it makes you feel better.”

No matter the truth, she was not going to let herself be intimidated. If her calm demeanour annoyed other people, even better. Tom, on the other hand, seemed to have picked up more clues from the other prefect as there was a slight crease of his brow.

“I’m coming with you.”

“I’m sure it’s unnecessary,” Gamp started.

“I insist.”

Tom had stood up right before Hermione did. Even if his tone was light, it was not one that brooked any argument.

“They would have absolved your presence completely,” the Slytherin witch insisted. “You would be above suspicion.”

Suspicion? She frowned. Why did she even mention suspicion in the first place? That’s not a concern for eyewitnesses at all. Unless…

“What is going on, Gamp?” Hermione asked, a discomfiting feeling growing in her mind.

“Nothing much, I’m sure.” The Slytherin prefect smiled.

Hermione had never been so baldly lied to in her face.

Chapter End Notes

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

Guinea (currency, UK): A coin and an old currency in the UK. Wikipedia informs me that it’s approximately one quarter ounce of gold, and minted between 1663 and 1814. (I didn’t know the exact date, only that it came around sometime after Isaac
Newton became the Director of the Royal Mint). It was still in use to enumerate price of many expensive things, particularly luxury goods, in post WWI Britain. You can see glimpses of this in novels set from that era like Agatha Christie’s body of work of the Lord Peter Wimsey series.

Since the pound sterling’s worth is, as its name implies, fixed to the worth/price of silver (the silver standard) and the guinea is literally made of gold and thus its worth follows its material (gold standard) how many shillings a guinea is worth is not always the same throughout history, though it’s fixed from 1717 to 1816. Yeah, I know this is probably way, waay more than anyone actually cared to know about an outdated currency.

**Shilling (currency, UK):** The shilling was in use in England since the time of Henry VII, with Scotland having their own version (*Scots: schilling*). The common currency shilling was created in 1707 by Articles of Union, standardising the shilling of both states to 12 pence per shilling and 20 shillings per pound. Hence Hermione’s comment of how there were 240 pence to the pound before the decimalisation of 1971.

...yeah, old currency is complicated. Come to think of it, this old currency weirdness is probably why Rowling made the complicated conversion between knuts, sickles and galleons too. Because she knew about this shit.

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**Additional Notes:**

“Theoretically, you can frighten people to death, though,” Hermione added. “It’s been observed in wild animals that are captured but are not anaesthetised; There is actually a specific term for this that I’m sure all veterinarians and animal conservationists are aware of—*capture myopathy* (myopathy; any abnormality or disease of the muscle tissue). It all began with the stress hormones that their bodies can’t stop excreting non-stop when they stay at a heightened state of fear for long periods of time that cascades destructively.

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52 The Interview

Chapter Summary

Situations with uncertain outcomes. Hermione is somewhere else. Tom Riddle rolls the dice. Hermione may be caged, but she is not helpless nor desperate. The heroine schemes with the extra time she has. An unexpected fragment of a memory surfaces.

Chapter Notes

Wow, there are almost 750 kudos and over 200 bookmarks! Thank you for all the support guys! I’ll try to keep up my writing pace even between work.

52 The Interview

The Auror had a wide smile. It was not one that she trusted easily as his eyes had the cagey look of the hunted.

“And you are…?” Hermione asked.

“Orestes Blakeshaw, Auror. You must be Hermione Curie.” He said.

“Yes, that would be me.”

The Ravenclaw could see his momentary surprise when he saw that she hadn’t come alone. Behind his bland smile, Tom had quickly introduced himself as well, oblivious to the side-glance the Auror gave him.

“Miss Curie, I have a few questions about Hogsmeade, shouldn’t take too long.”

“Certainly.” She nodded.

“You have received permission from the headmaster, then?” Tom cut in before she could say anything else.

“The DMLE will coordinate with the headmaster’s office.” Blakeshaw said. “If Miss Curie will follow me…”

That wasn’t an outright yes, Hermione sharply noted, but she didn’t let her expression change. It was why she made no comment when Tom kept abreast of her steps.

“Mr. Riddle, we’ll contact you later for your interview.” The Auror said.

“I’ll be waiting for it.”
“Right now, we only need to confirm some details with Miss Curie.”

Tom nodded. “Of course. Which classroom would you be using for the interview? I’m sure I can show you the way.”

Subtly or not, he was giving the Auror a hint that he was not about to be sent away that easily.

“This may come as a surprise to you, but I was a Hogwarts student too, once.” The Auror remarked coolly.

“Ah, then this visit must’ve brought many good memories back.” The Slytherin replied.

When Auror Blakeshaw turned towards them, his imitation of friendliness was as convincing as a plate of rotting leftovers and just as palatable. Hermione stood up straighter because she refused to be intimidated. Tom hardly even blinked.

“You might say that.” He clasped his hands together for a moment. “As pleasant as this could be, we have places to go to. Mr. Riddle.”

He strode away, this time with a firm hand on her upper arm that was less of a suggestion and more of a nonverbal order. Hermione went because she didn’t see anything too bad with it—she was innocent of any crime and this will not take long. What she hadn’t expected was for Tom to narrow his eyes and take a step was faster and farther than one would expect casually, oh-so-accidentally getting in the Auror’s way.

“And where would you be going, Mr. Blakeshaw?”

“Official Auror business, which has nothing to do with you, boy.”

The Auror sidestepped him with Hermione pulled alongside merely because she wasn’t resisting.

“We’ll be going to the DMLE, then?” She asked. Tom wasn’t the only one curious.

“Yes.” The slight curl of his lips turned his smile into a smirk, and for all of Hermione’s trust in the DMLE (well, Harry), a part of her tensed.

“Why? Is it about the Hogsmeade attack?”

He did not answer but for a glance, yet she could see that her question was close.

“I’ll be fine, Tom.”

A sceptical glance told her of his opinion. She had to admit, she’d barely convinced herself, much less someone with a keener ear like him.

“I’ll see you off to the Headmaster’s office, then, Mr. Blakeshaw.” Tom said instead.

“My pleasure.”

The twitch of Tom’s jaw muscle was visible from where she stood, as clear as a clenched fist in anyone else, but they walked on without a pause. Tom stepped aside for the Auror at the gargoyle to the headmaster’s office politely – if he’d expected the Blakeshaw to knock and wait for Dippet’s permission to go up, that did not happen.

“Praeparationem.”
The gargoyle stepped aside. From the flash of incredulity that she saw from a corner of her eyes, she knew Tom was cursing Dippet in his mind for telling the password to the Auror. It might be slightly disloyal of her to the Auror force, to Harry and Ron, but she found herself wondering about the wisdom of the same thing—Dippet really needed to distrust people more. Up they went before finally reaching the headmaster’s office.

The office was unexpectedly empty. It was a slight shock to Hermione to see the place not only neat and tidy, but with scarce any personal touches. The portraits of various headmaster and headmistresses were mostly asleep.

Auror Blakeshaw’s hand pulled Hermione’s arm towards the fireplace.

“I’ll see you soon, Mr. Riddle.”

There was a dark undercurrent to the Auror’s promise.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Tom’s politeness was as thin as ice sheets cracking underfoot right before the splash, his voice had an Arctic bite to it even as he smiled.

Blakeshaw threw the floo powder into the fire and pushed Hermione ahead of him.

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The blaze of green fizzled down to something smaller before the colouring faded away entirely into more mundane fire of oranges and yellows; the figure of the Auror and Hermione had already been gone even before the flame lost its green hue. That was not the reason he was still here.

Focusing on it helped him even his breathing back.

Tom Riddle had never been so tempted to Crucio someone in public as Auror Blakeshaw. He could ignore the incivility, for it was the simple hallmark of the ignorant and stupid. No. What he could not ignore was the wizard’s presumption that he could easily take something that belonged to Tom without so much as a by-your-leave.

Hermione was his, and he was determined to make Blakeshaw pay.

The Ravenclaw witch may not seem to be too concerned by the sudden ‘request’ at all but Tom chalked it up to her naïveté. For all her wariness of him, she still gave the authorities a little too much trust. The same could be said of the headmaster, he dryly mused. If Dippet had been an underling of his, he would’ve been thrashing in pain on the floor right now, bright red blood pooling on the floor from his mouth from a bitten tongue. He had one job. Tom thought, as frustration began to seep back into his mind: to uphold Hogwarts’ integrity against internal and external disturbances and apparently, he couldn’t even manage that.

(Ever since he practised the charm to connect severed tongue back to its base, he didn’t bother to lock the tongue of anyone’s mouth with a spell before applying the maximum burn of a full-body Cruciatus. It was a convenient additional pain to add. Not that he used it often since most people wasn’t worth the added bother of reconnecting their tongues.)

Tom strode down the stairs, wand firmly in his hand.

It was not a simple matter of Hermione being a witness. If that was the case, they could’ve just interviewed her here, using one of Hogwarts’ empty classrooms. It would suffice to have a
professor inform Hermione that some Aurors had some questions they needed to ask to her.

The way Hermione had been called away raised his hackles.

*It’s because she’s an orphan, isn’t it?*

He held no illusions. If either he or Hermione had been from an old wizarding house, no Auror would even dare to try *talking* to them in relation to a case without explicit approval from their family. Some well-dressed gentlemen congregating on the pavement on hot summer nights were merely ‘chatting’, even when the pub was nearby and more than half of them were drunk. Several day labourers doing the same was going to get a visit from a passing policeman. Someone might have even gone to a police box and reported them sooner if they were ‘rowdy’ (talking too loudly) and were Irish. Another scene he remembered were parents immediately pulling their children away from other kids with industrial school uniforms, even when said kids was doing nothing more than playing hopscotch.

He’d know. He’d seen similar events play out as he was going on an errand or another for Mrs. Cole.

He would not trust the Aurors with his snake, much less with Hermione.

At one point, Tom had to pause and lean back against the nearest wall. He closed his eyes as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. The faint tingling at his fingertips told him that he was a blink away from a wandless Cruciatux. The younger students he’d passed had immediately hugged the opposite wall, and even the older ones took a couple of steps back.

‘Social’ was the last word anyone would describe him right now and it was not a state he could leave alone. He was planning to persuade someone and that required him being on his best appearance. This was why he was methodically slowing his breathing down to normalise his heartbeat (it had been hammering in his ears for a while).

The thought of Slughorn came and went in a flash, earning only an internal scoff from him. As useful as his Head of House could be, he also knew too well that the older wizard did not like conflict of any form. He was the last person Tom would go to if he needed a decisive strike. The clock was ticking. Every minute lost was every minute that she was pulled farther from his reach.

*No, it had to be someone else.*

As Tom ran through myriad possibilities and quickly discard the more outlandish ones, he started walking. The one he had in mind right now was a gamble.

*Audentes Fortuna iuvat.*

Then again, a peaceful life would bore him to death. Tom picked up his pace, the prospect of a challenge caused a smirk to illuminate his face, even if only for a fleeting moment. *Well, why not?*

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When he swung the door open, the student on the other side was certainly the last person he imagined would knock on his doors. He sighed inwardly. And here he was expecting a relaxing Saturday filled with reading the draft of a paper that Agnethe Tordenfeldt sent him, perhaps with the added bonus of a little experimentation to go with it.

“Mr. Riddle, is there something I can help you with?”
“Yes, there is, Professor.”

Tom Riddle looked up. Unusually enough, his expression did not have the charming smile that made people give him their favour so easily, one that actually raised his guard most of the time. He blinked and held back the urge to clean his glasses to ensure he wasn’t seeing things.

“I know you don’t like me,” The Slytherin raised a hand to forestall further words. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I know you think well of Hermione, since she’s the one that needs your help right now and I’d rather not waste time.”

“Really?”

Tom inhaled sharply. “An Auror took her out of Hogwarts.”

He remembered several interviews he had after that fateful Hogsmeade weekend with Aurors trying to record all the pertinent facts and details from practically everyone involved.

“It’s probably only routine work, Mr. Riddle.”

“Technically, no one can take a minor from Hogwarts without permission from one of the professors. This is an abnormality.” The student pointed out.

Knowing that no one can enter Hogwarts without either passing the front gates or through several highly regulated spots, he wasn’t concerned. He couldn’t imagine a single wizard to be crazy enough to frontally assault Hogwarts in broad daylight, and no teacher worth their salt would carelessly allow unknown people through their fireplace.

“And where exactly did they leave Hogwarts from?” He stepped inside into his quarters as it seemed that their conversation would last for a while. Tom followed suit.

“…the fireplace at the headmaster’s office.” The admission was grudging.

“Then the headmaster knows exactly what’s going on,” was his answer to the prefect.

“There’s probably only routine work, Mr. Riddle.”

“Professor Dumbledore, I’ll be frank with you. With all due respect, I still wouldn’t trust Headmaster to carry 200 galleons from one end of Knockturn Alley to the other without losing at least half of it.”

“Mr. Riddle,” Dumbledore warned, but Tom was not concerned in the least.

The Transfigurations Professor could easily recognise the cold gleam in his eyes to be the same one that he had once spied in Wool’s Orphanage. They belonged to a young boy who had strangled his friend’s rabbit with his bare hands and hung it from the rafters while humming a ditty. The same boy had then walked out and easily chatted with said friend as if he hadn’t done anything wrong.

“You do know that she’s a muggleborn orphan, don’t you?” Riddle’s tone was unexpectedly biting.

“I don’t see how that has anything to do with—”
“Professor, the Prophet had recently insinuated that muggleborns are using muggle catspaw to attack Hogsmeade. If you think that Hermione is actually safe in the hands of the DMLE thugs—”

He cut himself off before Albus could even do so, the professor taken aback by the actual disgust and distrust he’d shown of the Aurors to actually say anything immediately. Tom Riddle had always excelled at demonstrating how perfectly able he was in following and obeying authority figures, that he was not only intelligent but also dependable.

To see him break away from that…

“Why didn’t you ask Professor Slughorn’s help?"

The question flowed from his tongue without a thought, but as blunt as it was, Dumbledore didn’t regret it. It was highly curious. Now that he’d begun with the question, he might as well finish it.

“He thinks the world of you. There is nothing he wouldn’t have done as the Head of your House.” Albus added.

Whatever reaction he had expected, the cynical huff wasn’t among them.

“Professor Slughorn will be convinced that this is all just a grand misunderstanding. That if we speak nicely and patiently with the authorities involved, we could somehow straighten everything out. Everyone is suddenly jolly good friends with everyone else. As if any harm and hurt suffered can be undone easily with a few mild words and concessions.”

His smile was just as cutting as his words and as strange to Dumbledore.

“There. Are you going to try to convince me otherwise, Professor? Tell me that I’ve been unkind to my own Head of House?”

Tom’s tone was belligerent, almost a challenge towards him to rebuke the student.

It was too obvious a bait that the Transfigurations Master didn’t take it. Albus rubbed his auburn beard instead, further watching this creature who had worn the skin of a responsible leader and student very well. This was an unexpected opportunity—in their years of knowing each other formally (guardedly) it was the first time that Tom Riddle had loosened the mask of humanity he’d always worn around other people. If Albus’ nonchalance caused the Slytherin student to narrow his eyes in wariness, Albus himself was not bothered in the least.

This time, the transfigurations professor faced the human-shaped monster instead of the disguise. He didn’t know when he’d have the same opportunity again—he could not let it slip away so easily.

“You could be a bit nicer to Horace, you know.” Albus said in mild rebuke.

“Technically, I could. Yet technically, all this doesn’t need to happen at all either.”

He shrugged and left it at that without feeling the urge to explain further or even the slightest case of guilt.

Albus Dumbledore tilted his head a little. It was odd—this was the first time he did not think that Tom was coldly unaffected from the warmth of the human interaction around him, or that the only emotion he knew very well was his own wrath.

Oh, there was still wrath in the young wizard’s eyes, of course, and in such volume and strength
that his dark blue eyes were windows to a raging storm. *Pity the person who had to cross him right now.* Yet tucked in the corner of that was a fragment of actual worry. Now, he could not look at Tom in the same cautious way he always did before, to his own irritation.

“Hmmm,” Albus murmured.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I don’t always wake easily in the mornings during the weekend, Mr. Riddle. Pay the nattering of an old wizard no mind. I am certain I’d make better sense after fortifying myself with good tea.” His answer was friendly as he rose up to put the kettle on.

Tom had too good a control over his expression or it to be easily readable, but Albus didn’t miss the annoyed twitch of his eyebrow even as gave a polite nod in return.

*Any actual concern he has might only be an afterthought, of course,* Albus reminded himself. It was the same way that a dark wizard who had just butchered and sacrificed a whole family in a blood magic ritual might still take pity on a litter of orphaned kittens that he picked all of them up on the way home to raise and take care.

It shouldn’t surprise him, really, as people are almost never so absolutely good or evil. Yet the fact that it did was a clue that his own character sketch of young Mr. Riddle was flawed.

*Hermione Curie. It all comes down to Hermione again, isn’t it? Why is she even involved with him? Why is he even involved with her?*

He took two mismatched mugs, one cheerfully orange and the other luminescent blue-green and began to make tea.

*She is neither shallow nor insecure enough to desperately wish for his interest and favour to vindicate her self-worth. If it was merely studying partners, she can easily find five others or so that together can assist her better than Tom can as an individual. If he merely wishes to have Hermione present once more, then Slughorn can certainly provide him the assistance he needed to help her out, as he’ll manage it sooner or later. That way, there would be no need to be here and provide me with even more evidence that there is something a bit wrong with him.*

*Why the rush? It doesn’t make sense. Something doesn’t add up.*

He placed the mugs of tea on the table, along with the sugar bowl and cream pitcher. Tom took his wordless offer silently and picked up the bright bluish mug without even blinking.

The prefect hadn’t even noticed how garish it was when it usually would’ve earned an annoyed twitch or a frown that he repressed—it became yet another point of observation in Albus’ mind, one that annoyed him yet again.

*He is distracted for real.*

Dumbledore sat on his couch once more, pulling at the threads of his thoughts with a slight frown. The last thing he needed was to be sympathetic towards the Slytherin when Albus knew the teen left a trail of traumatised victims behind him. A wolf does not change its nature just because it did not happen to be hunting right now. Neither of them seemed inclined to put on a more normal façade and make small talk at this point.

The professor still could not consider that his assessment was somehow flawed. His impressions on people were never wrong, not the least because it was always backed by not a little scrying.
Riddle rubbed his forehead slowly. He shook his head. Dumbledore might not wish to be able to see the slight tension of his jaw, but he saw it all the same since his gaze had returned often to the young wizard’s features.

“I don’t know why I even thought of coming here. Well, at least it has been interesting.”

It was not the mild disappointment in his tone that prompted Dumbledore to move, it was the complete lack of surprise in it, that dry nihilistic humour that coloured a passing grin.

“Tom—”

“I’m sorry for bothering you, Professor. I’m sure you have other things you were planning to do today. I have just remembered that I have other things to do too.” His voice was polite once more, with a slight smile perfectly balanced between embarrassed and grateful. It would not be out of place on a student that just happened to drop in to ask questions about his class or homework.

Albus felt an unexpected pang of disappointment when he saw it; *ah, the mask is up again.*

“Don’t be reckless.” He said, instead of anything more non-committal.

“I have no idea what you mean, Professor, but I’ll keep your words in mind.” Tom said.

Dumbledore sighed.

“It’s probably only a routine interview.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Professor.” Tom’s reply had all the politeness it always had, but Albus was certain he did not imagine the sardonic undertones this time.

“Tom, wait. Please.”

The plea caught him because it had been unexpected.

Albus had a feeling that he might regret this as he still considered Tom Riddle to be a catastrophe waiting to happen. It was a sense of foreboding even worse than what he felt when he read of that infamous case of the wizard who ate three elephants transfigured into strawberries to prove a (stupid and absolutely wrong) technical point on transfiguration*.

“Professor?”

(*When the elephants returned to their original volume—hideously torn as they’d been chewed up as strawberries, the man exploded from the sudden increase of volume of his stomach contents. Passer-by still had bits of him or dead elephants dropping on them from the nearby trees up to three weeks later. The stench of dead elephants never did quite disappear from that particular spot on the lane for a good chunk of a year.)*

The professor met his gaze. He disliked being hasty in his conclusion, but it was getting harder to deny.

“*You are worried.*”

Tom blinked slowly. “And you don’t think it’s real. Who knows? Perhaps it was mere indigestion that I have successfully passed as something else to you. As fun as this had been, I don’t have the time to waste by repeatedly stating the obvious.”

His tone was unchanged from his usual smooth one, his emotions under perfect regulation. It
disturbed Albus more than he’d admit.

“If that was true, wouldn’t it be a mistake to tell me?” Albus asked back.

“Perhaps it was a double bluff.” Tom replied with a careless air.

A beat passed. His actions were too effortless to be true. Dumbledore still could not ignore his gut instinct that told him that in front of him was a civilised monster. Tom briskly nodded as he stood up.

“Good day, Professor.”

He’s not only worried, he’s impatient, Albus noted with some surprise.

“One hour.” Dumbledore finally said. The prefect stopped at the doorway before he turned back slightly.

“Excuse me?”

He sighed. He might regret this, but he had to admit that he was now worried for Hermione too.

“If she’s not back by one hour, you can find me again and we’ll do something about it.”

“If it’s only to file a complaint to the headmaster, I’d have to respectfully decline the offer.” He said coolly. Albus had to hold back from huffing at the cheek of the boy.

“Of course not. That wouldn’t be enough. We’ll find her, of course.”

The silence stretched longer. That was the only sign that Riddle was surprised.

“One hour, then,” he nodded, before striding away without further ado.

“Please give us your wand for weighing and registration.”

It was not the clerk by the front lobby that asked her that. They were at a different check point, one that she knew was rather deep inside the Ministry. Hermione surrendered her wand without a complaint to the bored-faced desk wizard.

“Let’s see…10 ¼ inches of, hmm, cherry wood. Not too common here. Dragon heartstring core.”

What?

The clerk was twisting it in his hands, noting down distinctive marks as he muttered those further details while doing his work, but she wasn’t paying attention to him anymore.

For the first time in weeks, Hermione actually stared at her wand. Like vine wood, it was also light coloured, and in length it was close to her old one that the differences were barely noticeable. It might come as a surprise to non-magical people, but a well-trained wizard or witch don’t actually need to see their wand much. Even grasping for it while half-awake, Hermione knew that the wand she was holding was hers (as opposed to someone else’s) from the warmth that seemed to glow from her chest to her arm as it resonated strongly with her magic. No random wand would feel so alive in her hands as her own would.

It was another reminder to her that Hermione Curie was not exactly the same as Hermione
Granger, another piece to the puzzle of her current identity. She can feel Blakeshaw pulling her arm again, but she held her ground, shelving her current confounded thoughts back in her mind to be examined later.

The Auror’s annoyance was almost palpable. “Miss Curie.”

She hadn’t turned to him.

“I’d like my wand back, thank you.”

The clerk had already picked up her wand when Blakeshaw’s order cut the air. “No need. She can pick it up later on the way out.”

“I suppose I can, but I’d really like my wand back. Right now.” She countered.

If the Auror thought she came with him because she was obedient, he had another thing coming.

“Your wand would be secure here.” He said.

“Well, I’m sure that your wand is just as secure in the lockers here, but I don’t think you’d part with it anytime soon, will you, Auror Blakeshaw?” She turned to him with the blandest smile she could manage and meet his gaze head on.

The clerk glanced between the two of them.

“Umm, should I store this or—”

“Keep it for later.” He stated to the clerk.

“Belay that.” Hermione interrupted. She glanced at the clerk’s nametag. Her right palm was open in a wordless request to him and she stared him down without blinking. “I’m sure a guest here is allowed to carry their wand inside. Isn’t that right, Mr. Sutton?”

As she expected, it did not take long before the clerk folded.

“Ah, yes. Here’s your wand, Miss…”

“Curie. Hermione Curie.”

She took it and raised an eyebrow at Blakeshaw, waiting for him to say something about it. When he shrugged and simply gestured for her to follow, she did so after slipping her wand back up to its forearm holster. Well, at least she hadn’t had to bring up the Wizengamot Act of 1806 (right in the middle of the Napoleonic Wars, that), as it gave the right of known ‘honourable’ enemy combatants who had given their parole to another wizard be allowed to carry their wands.

Considering that she wasn’t even an enemy anything, she would dare anyone to try to argue how they had the right to deprive her of her wand.

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Instead of being led to one of the more run-of-the-mill interview rooms, Hermione found herself pulled deeper into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

It was certainly not a good sign when she saw that the path they took did not pass the Aurors’ offices but through the secured corridors she recognised as the route that all Aurors take when they were escorting a risky prisoner. She knew it, because she’d accompanied Harry twice down the
same set of corridors when Ron couldn’t make it and none of the more senior (and capable) members of Harry’s team could make it either.

They stopped in front of a thick door. Next to it was a giant hourglass affixed to the wall, as great as the door itself and filled with green sands—and Hermione took a sharp breath in recognition. Orestes Blakeshaw casually made a small cut on his left hand, smeared his blood on a white square on the hourglass’ frame. He can turn it easily once the blood was absorbed and he was recognised. If she had any remaining thought that this was an entirely innocent interview, his last act would have shattered it completely.

*A time-dilated room.* She thought as he went through the motions. *Usually used to gain lengthened interrogation time on a suspect in time-sensitive cases.* It was a more primitive artefact than a time-turner as it did not involve going backwards in time and only affected one suite (she could hear the gears supporting the giant hourglass grinding as it was turned upside-down). Yet the dilation hourglass was easier to make and very useful in assisting Aurors in their job.

It was too bad that she realised the hourglass’ size meant that one day outside would be equal to around ten days inside.

*Well, I know they can’t possibly starve me,* she thought dryly, and stepped in as he prompted her. He followed suit and closed the door behind them, the deep and echoing *thud* rather ominous. They were in a small room with only one table and two chairs, though she knew there were at least one other hidden door on the walls that would lead to a small bathroom. A bell pull existed to the side of the door. He gestured for her to take a seat and she sat down at the same time that he did.

“I’m sure you know why you’re here, Miss Curie.” He said knowingly.

“I don’t, actually.”

The small window opened into some inner courtyard, but Hermione did not think it was an actual window than an illusory one, since that was what most rooms in the DMLE were actually like. Blakeshaw was staring at her from across the table. Hermione stared back.

“The prefects of Hogwarts have compiled all our experiences during the Hogsmeade attack in one document, which we’ve passed on to the Auror in charge of the investigation.” She stated.

“Your statement is not entirely truthful.”

“Ah, you were talking about the second attacker we took down, I take it? Well, Tom said that if we made the knowledge of the sniper public, the fact that a *muggle* had a range of attack that can easily cover half a street’s length will only induce more panic among the public. We did inform the authorities of our experience, though—we’ve been interviewed by the Auror in charge for the details, one Alastor Moody.”

“Have you?”

“Yes, I have. So, unless you were going to ask about something different, I’d prefer to get back to Hogwarts right now.” She said.

Hermione did not put it as a request, only a statement. Neither did she made to move as she kept her eyes on him, her posture straight but relaxed in her seat. She was almost sure that Blakeshaw narrowed his eyes for a split-second before his face turned stone-like and unreadable again.

The silence stretched on for a while. The Auror finally spoke up when he realised that Hermione was not going to say anything else, nor was she the slightest bit disturbed by being wordlessly
stared at.

“There are certain, shall we say, holes, in your story that proves to be very critical, Miss Curie.” His tone was grave.

“Are there?”

“Yes. I’m afraid we don’t look kindly on deliberate obfuscation of your muggle connections.”

It was not hard to catch the undercurrents of his message, the implicit warning. If he meant to be unnerving, then most Hogwarts students in her position would have been worried. It was just that Hermione had watched her share of interviews and interrogations in the DMLE from the other side to be unsettled just by sitting there, and she was more confused by what he was actually trying to say.

“Muggle connections? I never hid the fact that my parents are both muggleborn.”

“Ah, yes. Muggleborn. How simple that word seems.” He mused, too casual by a half. She did not trust the way he said it.

Her forehead creased slightly but she had nothing else to say.

“I’m sure you are aware that many muggleborns have problems with the purebloods and even halfbloods. They cannot accept the natural order of the universe and wishes to upend it completely, resulting in chaos. The breakdown of society. Anarchy. But then again, anything to allow them to climb up over their betters is fair game, isn’t it? All for the sake of their bottomless greed.” Blakeshaw’s words were pointed. His insinuation grated on her nerves.

“What are you talking about?”

“Muggleborns bringing muggle thoughts and ideologies to destroy the wizarding world.” He shook his head. “Mr. Flint—Wulfstan Flint, head of the DMLE—had a point when he said that maybe it’s better if we don’t allow muggleborn into our society at all for our own safety.”

She frowned. “What on earth—”

“Which you would know, because your father had associated with members of the muggleborn ‘social’ group Anomie. Like his associates, he has a long-term plan to tear our social foundations, and after his death, he has passed them down to you. Isn’t that right, Miss Curie?”

Hermione was startled when he slapped his hands on the table, the coldness of his expression all too clear. She had to force her hands to open from the clenched fists she formed by reflex, felt her wand comfortably warm against her inner forearm, even within its holster.

Her reason surmised that nothing she’d read on Martin Curie gave the impression that the man was delusional enough to be such a violent revolutionist—she was pretty sure that neither Pendleton nor Ves would be remiss in their research on her background to fail to notice any dangerous factoid about either of her parents. Her gut feeling convinced her that no version of her father was going to be that stupid or desperate.

Odds are, he merely had a rather unfortunate choice in friends apart from being of the opinion that it was about time for the wizarding world to experience some social change, she determined.

“You’re nuts, Mr. Blakeshaw, and I don’t have to listen to this.” Hermione snapped.
“But you do, because it has everything to do with the Hogsmeade Attack, isn’t it? I hear that you have built the perfect cover of being such a diligent student. Nobody would expect you to actually be a second-generation anarchist. It is just your bad luck that I’m always looking out for anything potentially related to the muggleborn conspiracy to destroy purebloods.”

His statement had more than a touch of condescending victory in its tone.

Perhaps it would have been more comforting if she could say that his eyes were red-rimmed and crazy as he leaned forward too far into her personal space, but she could not. Blakeshaw was too sane, even as he spat out his opinions with conviction—he was merely a believer. His wand was already in his hands and pointed at her, a discomfiting development and Hermione had to consciously hold herself from drawing hers by reflex.

She wouldn’t give him an easy excuse to attack her.

“You found the muggles who hated magic and ensured they would attack Hogwarts and you took some of them down and came out a heroine because of it. I know how your kind think. You may have been able to fool some people, but you can’t fool me. It would be in your best interest to confess your guilt to have your sentence lightened.”

“You know, I might really have just taken the attacker down.” The brunette noted after she’d just finished watching him go through the whole motion of outrage.

“He’s just one person. Same with the other one. I wasn’t alone either—Tom had my back. Why is this so hard for you to accept?”

“Impossible.”

The answer was too quick, too sharp.

It wouldn’t exactly help her case, she knew, but she couldn’t contain her first burst of laughter.

“You came into this case with preconceptions instead of evidence! Why, I’m sure your captain would be glad to hear that.”

She didn’t miss the twitch of his hand even as he replied to her quickly.

“We’re talking about an actual attacker with anti-magic ability and a muggle exploding stick. Even a professional will find them difficult.”

“I’m actually familiar with the capabilities of said exploding stick.” She noted. “Or, are we talking about my being a muggleborn?”

His nod was firm. “Clearly.”

She scoffed loudly. “Clearly?”

“It would be impossible for you to have managed so well when the other, pureblood prefects of Hogwarts did not manage to do as far. This is your mistake in trying to fake your heroism. You tried too far with unbelievable acts—you should’ve toned it down.”

Hermione stared at him in disbelief, holding back the urge to denounce him as a first-rank idiot. When she next spoke up, she didn’t bother to keep the sarcasm from her voice.

“Well, if you feel like you already have all the proof required to make up your mind, why don’t you just try me, then? Bring me to court. Charge me in front of the Wizengamot. I might as well
not say anything if it would be useless against your oh-so-extensive evidence.”

Clearly, her defiance was not what he expected. She could hear his growl and she refused to back away from his attempt at intimidating her.

“Your lack of remorse would not only send you to Azkaban—it will earn you the Kiss.” He warned.

“Why should I care for such punishment when I know in my heart of hearts that I am innocent?” She asked back. He had sat properly on his seat once more when he saw that she would not be easily cowed. It was rather tempting to pull her wand out and start hexing the man, but she wouldn’t do it; that would just give him an excuse to attack her. She could still stretch her patience further.

“Just because you think you’re innocent does not mean that the Wizengamot would be unable to prove your guilt. Repent, confess, and your months in Azkaban would pass in a blink.”

She let out a dismissive snort.

“I’d rather die having spoken in my manner, than to speak in your manner and live.”

If looks could kill, she’d be strangled to death by now. Hermione did not flinch the slightest and she matched him glare for glare.

The brunette witch did not know how long it took before he spoke up again. A feeling of vindication rose inside her as she saw that he was vexed with things not going the way he expected them to.

“You will regret your stubbornness, Miss Curie.”

“I doubt I will, Mr. Blakeshaw.”

Hermione was locked in the room and she still had her wand.

Oh, she knew trying to cast spells from the inside was not the greatest of ideas. This was an interrogation chamber she was kept in, designed for important suspects as well as witnesses. It was pretty much well-warded to absorb any spell she might try to throw at it. She was left with a paper, a quill and a bottle of ink she was quite sure was not only charmed to be unbreakable, but practically glue to the table.

The first thing she did after he left was actually murmur Hamlet’s monologue softly under her breath. She’d tried recording it more than once, back in her Shakespeare phase during the summer holidays, just to see how she fared (the fact that it coincided with the time that she began crushing hard on Ron was something she pushed deep that even she herself had almost forgotten that bit of factoid until now). Well, she wasn’t going to pass the audition for the Royal Shakespeare Company anytime soon, but she did come out of it with a good appreciation for the Bard and a good knowledge of how long it would take for her to recite or act out a particular segment.

Her take on Hamlet’s monologue took around three minutes.

It was a useful to know because as Hermione finished reciting it the first time around, she made a single mark on the scroll. Soon enough, four more marks joined the first.
Hermione wasn’t sure how reliable the Tempus spell was in an environment with accelerated time, so she had decided to try tracking the passage of time in other ways. She didn’t continuously try to say the monologue—she had no intention of driving herself mad. She took a break once in a while to think, like how on earth she suddenly had a blinkered Auror on her tail, convinced that she was out to destroy the wizarding world. She only started reading the monologue aloud again when she had hit a wall and couldn’t think of anything else to do.

“To be or not to be: that is the question.  
Whether ‘tis nobler for the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of trouble  
And by opposing, thus end them? …

Another three marks later and Hermione stood up from the desk, stretching her back. She decided to sit with her legs outstretched in front of her on the floor, on the room’s far corner, quill and scroll carried with her. Changing position helped her from feeling cramped.

She sighed. There really wasn’t much she could do at this point but wait, trusting that the Hogwarts staff was going to wonder of her absence sooner or later.

Even if she was optimistic that they’d be able to find and get her out within an hour (and she wasn’t), that still meant that she would be stuck here for at least ten hours.

Hermione leaned against the wall in her boredom and drifted off to a light nap.

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Wakefulness retrieved her from unconsciousness with ease.

She had no idea how long her nap had taken—it could be anything between a bit less than half an hour to around two hours. Hermione noted that on her parchment with a small symbol of a crescent moon and time estimates in brackets. There was no guarantee that she’d get another parchment. Better not waste the one she had with more details than necessary.

It was hard not to wonder at her predicament.

The brunette witch did know that not all Aurors were the most stellar representatives of sane and well-adjusted individuals.

The fact that most of the senior ranks had to fight through Voldemort’s Second Rise and the subsequent clean-up of his remaining followers all the way to an acrimonious guerrilla warfare did not help any. Future Moody’s paranoia had caused more than one junior Auror to trip into his traps, suffering some harm (how for all of Tonks’ clumsiness she was never one of them was one Hermione still hadn’t managed to wrap her head around). There were always those who were overzealous. The right cold case tugging the heartstrings could draw in even the most laidback of people into obsessing over it.

But the post-war Auror corps were strapped of skilled people and as long as most of them were functional, it was fine. If a group of them chose to drown their sorrows in drinks at weekends and puke their guts out on Sunday mornings, then the regular health check-up (with discreet liver and kidney rejuvenation-slash-maintenance obviously included) could safeguard them against the effects somewhat.

Yet the Hogsmeade attack was not even a week ago.
She can accept that someone might have handed Blakeshaw the files on Hogsmeade attack, subtly edited to guide his credulous mind to their wished-for conclusion. But there wasn’t even enough time to collect and condense all the information around it into a comprehensive file yet, much less for anyone to read and pore through it continuously to be able to develop an obsession.

The timing was impossible for mere obsession to be the only factor—it happened too quickly.

That someone was feeding Blakeshaw inside information of the event, she had no doubt. Obviously, there had to be a Hogwarts link. It wasn’t as if people outside Hogwarts were truly aware of her existence or considered her as someone worth watching. Oh, sure, there was that Prophet article that Tom somehow engineered, but in the same way that her pureblood friends can look at it as having another purpose due to their family background and education, she was sure that others in wizarding London of similar background can do the same (like those from old, well-established pureblooded families). They might even err on the conservative side too much and consider that she was just a mildly more talented Hogwarts student than usual, merely with a very strong supporter at her back to shine light on her so-called ‘talent’.

Whoever raised the alarm had to have been at Hogwarts—someone who was able to watch her directly for a while and decide for themselves what her actual threat level to them would be. That the alarm was heard immediately and with such consequences for Hermione implied that the person was not without influence, if not outright power altogether.

The odds dictate that it was highly likely a student, one with connections.

She easily eliminated the usually-passive contingent of muggleborns in Hogwarts. (She did not miss the irony that she was more involved with purebloods right now than muggleborns).

What purpose would they have in getting her apprehended? What would they gain from it? As one of the most prominent muggleborns anything that would slander her character would also indirectly mar the reputations of people who came from non-magical backgrounds in general. No, the probability of that occurring was too minuscule.

If it was a mere intra-house competition in Hogwarts, she didn’t think the Ravenclaws involved would use such outsized force as involving the Aurors in it. The same applied to any possible academic rivalry that Lakshmi had mentioned once, even if it involved members of other houses (like say, Slytherin).

To somehow report her to the Aurors on charges of aiding terrorism was escalating the conflict too fast and too far.

There was a high chance that the entire plan would run away from them as it involved circumstances and people beyond the control of most Hogwarts students. Such competition could scarcely have bred enough emotional resentment or hate that someone considered the disproportional misfortune falling on Hermione to be an adequate response.

That would only make sense if she killed someone’s family or tortured them to insanity. Last time she checked, she wasn’t an insane and power-mad Voldemort and the only person she knew that could turn into him was still rather sane, thank you very much. Not to mention that Tom much preferred to keep her by his side and leverage her abilities for his own purposes.

(She cared for him, but it didn’t mean she was delusional to think he loved her, or that he was interested in her for no practical reason).

The suggestion that one of the teachers of Hogwarts were behind it was laughable.
She knew it wasn’t impossible, considering how Quirrell hosted a fragment of Voldemort while he was a teacher at Hogwarts and he certainly did his best to kill Harry then. To extend the analogy further, it would mean that one of them had been secretly spying for Grindelwald…and as much as she wanted to consider most possibilities, she wasn’t going to follow Blakeshaw’s courtship with fantasies and go straight to conspiracy theories.

*There was no evidence so far.* She shook her head, wondering why she even went on such a strange tangent in the first place. *If I were a spy for Grindelwald who’d somehow managed to gain a post as a Hogwarts professor...well, I’d suggest that he attack Hogwarts directly instead of Hogsmeade, with me opening access for him and his men from the inside.*

It would be a cold and brutal decision to attack children, yet her experience with ascending dark lords (and ladies) showed that some of them were even more loopy than Voldemort—they would not hesitate to strike at vulnerable members of society if they could. Such individual might not even realise or care that it opened themselves to risks of dissatisfaction from their followers once said followers found out that their offspring were threatened. It was not as if anyone could ever think that Dippet was the head of the resistance against Grindelwald and might be subtly brainwashing the students in that direction, unlike Dumbledore’s position in her old time. Even if his leadership of the Order of Phoenix was a secret, it was not as if people outside it did not have their own suspicions. (To Grindelwald’s credit, he would be less loopy even if he did attack Hogwarts if most of his followers weren’t actually from the British wizarding community).

That such an attack didn’t happen neatly eliminated the possibility of Grindelwald’s spy among Hogwarts’ staff. There was either no spy, or whoever the spy was, he or she was highly incompetent. Hardly something to consider as an important threat at the moment.

But why would another Hogwarts student be prepared to do something so extreme to bring her down?

Currently out of ideas and without managing to narrow down the suspects and motivations much, Hermione leaned back against the wall with a sigh.

‘-

A part of Hermione wished she knew by heart some longer piece of work, like, say, Poe’s *the Raven* or even parts of the *Aeneid*. Reciting Hamlet’s monologue was getting too repetitive after a while. She had napped twice now, the second without her even realising it, simply because she was bored and her body had apparently decided to just rest for now without consulting her.

Hunger came. She ignored it with ease begotten by long practice.

She’d missed a meal or two when she was working on something too fascinating in the Department of Mystery, sometimes only remembering to eat when her friends checked up on her. Just because she knew the Aurors had rules against starving the people in their custody didn’t mean she would receive a meal when she wanted it. To only give her food when they deigned to do so was to demonstrate that she was powerless here and many things are beyond her control.

It was basic psychological manipulation to soften prisoners. Just because she disagreed with the methods (she didn’t think they were more effective in gleaning information than building a rapport with the interviewee) didn’t mean she wouldn’t study them.

The door opened. She picked herself up from the floor.

“Auror Blakeshaw.”
“Ms. Curie.”

She took her previous seat without a second thought, hair already frizzier from the neater curls they were in this morning, but she didn’t care. He had paused by the table without sitting down.

“Are you ready to tell your story?”

“Everything I needed to say has been said, either in the account of events compiled by the prefects of Hogwarts or in the latter interview I had with Auror Alastor Moody.” A sprightly Moody with both eyes intact surprised her when she first met him post Hogsmeade attack, but he was just as gruff and straightforward as he’d always been that soon she didn’t really notice the difference as they talked.

“They have no idea of your involvement with pro-muggleborn anarchic groups.”

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. “That’s because I’m not involved in any of them.”

“Denying it wouldn’t make it any less true.”

“Your wishing for it wouldn’t make it any truer either. I don’t grant wishes—I’m not a genie in a bottle.” She returned with a jab that was just as sharp. Merlin help her, she couldn’t help smiling viciously back. He needed to know that she was not a simple Hogwarts student, even if she was nothing like his accusations.

For every outlandish allegation he made, she denied it easily, mockingly, firmly.

The Auror left the first time around in frustration, while Hermione was left to deal with recurring hunger pangs. Her stubbornness might not be what the average student could manage when they were detained by law enforcement the first time around, but she didn’t know how to not be herself.

The second time he came again, she simply asked him outright where the door to the bathroom was in the room.

Blakeshaw said that he wouldn’t tell her until they finished their round of interview. Hermione simply crossed her arms in front of her and stared him down. The young witch did not reply to his questions, nor did she say anything else. She didn’t care about his accusations—he could say anything he wanted and she wouldn’t budge.

He stated that since they’d been here for hours, clearly the school hadn’t interfered because they knew how guilty she was and that her friends didn’t want to be associated with someone so dangerous.

Hermione gave him a lopsided smile at that and laughed. She still said nothing.

The Auror started insinuating that they were going to be very comprehensive in trying to capture the group she was clearly leader of, by bringing her friends in one by one to be interviewed as well. A different member of her cabal might crack first and confess, and this would cause Hermione to get a heavier punishment for being uncooperative and the clear ring-leader of them all.

The brunette witch let her smile grow wider.

She had observed a hundred and one of Tom’s smiles, from the charming to the downright creepy. Objectively speaking, the breadth of his repertoire was interesting, and Hermione was nothing if not a diligent student. Now, she did her best to copy the smile Tom gave Ves right before he beat the stuffing out of his minion.
The Auror’s words and explanation stopped after some time and silence spread.

Her expression hadn’t changed. Neither had her pose. It was a stare off.

A minute passed between them.

“The door is that way. Tap the thirteenth brick from the corner, at the height of the door’s handle.”

He finally pointed with his left hand.

“Why, thank you, Auror Blakeshaw. We can certainly talk after I’ve returned.”

They talked again, but his questions did not vary much beyond the initial outlandish questions. It was no surprise, then, that her answers were still what she’d given before.

“You’re not cooperating at all.” Blakeshaw’s tone was dark.

“If you keep asking the same questions, of course you’d get the same answers.” She rolled her eyes, one hand holding up her temples. She was feeling a little tired, but it was nothing major.

“Stop denying your involvement. I can do this indefinitely and it would only look worse for you the longer you stay stubborn.”

“It only looks like a denial to you because you already have the answer you want in your head. What you wanted me to do was not answer your questions. You only want me to repeat your own opinions to you.” She leaned back.

“If you need someone to do that, buy a parrot.”

Hermione idly massaged her head, ignoring the black look caused by her last words. How long has it been already? Several hours, she knew. Late afternoon or early evening, by her reckoning. Not that it would match the time outside.

The meeting was as unproductive as the previous one.

‘-

Food will have to come sometime soon, right? Hermione thought to herself.

She lost any shred of respect still remaining for Blakeshaw when there was still no food. There was a jug of water and a glass, and she can refill that through the tap, but she can’t subsist on water alone. It didn’t help that when she napped again out of tiredness and hunger, he just had to come in and try to talk to her there and then when she was still bleary-eyed. Hermione answered half his questions at random and outright ignored the other half.

“Ask me again when I’m not sleepy.” She had said.

“Are you being uncooperative, Ms. Curie?”

“I’m being tired. But I’m sure you don’t really care, right? You’ll just write whatever you want to write, so I’ll just sleep here while you make up some tale or another. Don’t expect me to sign whatever made-up confession you just wrote, though.”

‘-
Hermione remembered belatedly the regulation that stated an ‘interviewee’ of the DMLE must be fed at least twice in one 24-hour span, but it didn’t state when it was supposed to occur. With her luck, the first one was going to come around only after she was here for 11 hours and 50 minutes. On the other hand, she had frustrated Blakeshaw enough that he hadn’t been back for a while now.

Good, maybe she can get some peace.

The Ravenclaw pulled her robes off to make a pillow out of them and placed her uniform jacket over her face to block out the lights. She didn’t care how ridiculous it looked like to anyone entering at the doors—she was going to get some proper sleep around here whatever it takes.

It felt as if she’d scarcely closed her eyes when she heard the heavy door swung open again. Groaning, Hermione picked herself up.

That was when the bitter chill blew past, the cold deep enough to sink into her bones.

Her wand was in her hand. Instinct told her instantly that it was magical in origins.

She staggered as an intense migraine hit the left side of her head like a jackhammer. As she swayed, for a moment she wasn’t in a sealed room inside the DMLE—she was in a decaying city centre at night. The northern town was ravaged; less by magical fights and more by the economic ruin of dead industries culled by Margaret Thatcher. The magical destruction probably didn’t help the place look any better.

There was the distinct iron tang of blood. The stench of rot from the darkest of hexes.

*I can’t feel my left hand? What?*

Harry had gone on first with everyone else, because he needed to defend someplace else. She had a slight limp. Ron was saying goodbye. *Cold. So cold*

His face was a blur, her memory unclear. Yet his eyes were the clearest they’d been in the last few years.

“*I know I’m bollocks at understanding you, ‘Mione. I’m probably your most insensitive ex, right?*”

He spoke with uncharacteristic clarity and self-deprecating humour. She didn’t know how he gained that understanding of himself and yet made peace with it—this wasn’t the Ron she remembered, far from it. Ron had always been a bit sensitive to criticism—it came from feeling that he was sorely lacking when compared to his stellar brothers, even after he’d become one of the heroes of the wizarding world.

“*Ron—*”

“Well. At least I can still protect you. Go.”

The distance was filled with slowly-coalescing crown of dark forms, many of whom she doubted were humans. The old Unspeakable Hermione shook her head.

“No, you can’t face them alone!”

He shrugged. “*Ten people can’t face them either. Someone has to slow them down, but it makes no difference if you’re here. Go!*”

“No!”
He seems to be muttering something to himself, probably cursing her stubbornness again.

“Well, catch this, then.”

Ron threw a galleon towards her and she raised her arm without thinking. The tug at her navel told Hermione that the coin she’d caught was a **portkey**.

*No!*

In the isolated room at the DMLE, Orestes Blakeshaw had just stepped in, shivering. Behind him was a dementor, with its own guard close by.

Hermione Curie had fallen all of a sudden to her knees and let out an ear-piercing scream.

She whipped out her wand in high speed, her eyes not quite here. “**Expecto Patronum!**”

The owl was large, its stretched wingspan covered the entire width of the room. The creature’s light was blinding, and yet it soothed instead of burned. The ineffable peace it brought echoed the taste of ambrosia, or the richness of wine poured from the grail, or the fragment of David’s lost final song. Faced with such an adversary, there was no other direction to go for it but to retreat. Even the guard has never seen a dementor flee so fast.

The moment she saw the dementor, she cast by reflex. She might have been thinking of the glorious day they knew they won the war, but underneath that were still the grief and anger from an old wound reopened. Her patronus was massively overpowered.

Hermione still hadn’t eaten.

Her limbs lost their remaining strength and dizziness sets in. Darkness closed in around her and she knew nothing more.

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**Chapter End Notes**

*Tirra lirra ♫, tirra lirra ♬... well, apparently I’ve developed a taste for cliffhangers. Never you mind. It probably wouldn’t last long.*

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**List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:**

**Anomie:** (Sociology) a state of individuals or society characterized by the non-existence, decay or destruction of social norms and values. First defined and precisely constructed by Émile Durkheim.

**Audentes Fortuna iuvat:** (Latin) Fortune favours the bold. There are several variations of the Latin verse due to a smattering of little details. The bold in this form,
for example, is plural—as in, bold *people* and not bold *person*.

**Industrial School:** The 19th and 20th century UK’s answer to minor juvenile delinquency and things like child beggars and vagrancy. A highly regimented place that also happen to teach trade, the uniforms are severe and depressing.

**Parole:** (Meaning 2) *(Military)* the promise, usually written, of a prisoner of war, that if released he or she either will return to custody at a specified time or will not again take up arms against his or her captors.

(Meaning 3) word of honour given or pledged. *(Source: Dictionary.com)*

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**Additional Notes:**

*I’d rather die having spoken in my manner, than to speak in your manner and live:* An English take of Socrates’ last bits in this long sentence “Sed neque antea putabam periculi metu faciendum esse quicquam inhonestum, nec me nunc poenitet causam ita dixisse, itaque dicentem multo me emori malo quam isto modo vivere.” From Socrates’ Final Defence as written and told by Plato *(Platonis Apologia Socratis)*.

Which is Socrates politely saying the jurors of Athens to respectfully fuck off when given the opportunity to defend himself against their charges (he already figured out that his guilt is more-or-less pre-determined and it was a kangaroo court than anything).

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53 Reclamation

Chapter Summary

Tom Riddle is very, very annoyed. Amelia Bones is pissed off and Daedalus Bones no less so. Orpheus Dexter is on the warpath. An enlightening chat in Florian Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour. Hermione wakes up. The Knights meet.

Chapter Notes

An unexpectedly long chapter because...apparently I wanted to try to stuff everything inside it. Work has deadlines on top of deadlines right now, though I'm thankfully pulled out of the mind-numbing administrative stuff. You're lucky I managed to write a chapter this week...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

53 Reclamation

“Bones.”

Tom found the person he was looking for in one of the library’s sitting room corners. Unexpectedly, two blond heads rose up; one had the Hufflepuff tie that he’d been looking for while another had the blue-and-bronze bands of the Ravenclaws.

“The prettier Bones,” the Slytherin corrected himself.

Daedalus Bones stood up at almost the same time his sister did. She punched his forearm.

“Ow. That’s not nice, Amelia.” The blond complained.

“You definitely don’t need to stand, you dolt.” For all her eyeroll, her tone was fond.

“You definitely don’t need to stand, you dolt.” For all her eyeroll, her tone was fond.

“Hey, he might be referring to me being prettier than you.” Daedalus insisted. That only gained a raised eyebrow from Tom and a snort from his sister.

“I’m sure someone will consider you the most beautiful person they know, but I’m sorry to say, you’re not my type.” Tom deadpanned. It got a chuckle out of Amelia and a final groan of surrender from the Ravenclaw.

“Fine, fine. I know when I should cut my losses.” Daedalus said, blowing some stray bangs out of his face.

“What brings you here, Riddle?” His sister asked.

Tom considered his angles carefully.
“Do you remember what we talked about when the Prophet had just begun their slander?”

“Oh, yes. I feel like dragging someone by the ear.” She frowned in remembrance before turning to him curiously. “Wait, are you saying that you heard rumours of another possible nonsense like that getting published yet again?”

Tom shook his head. “No. It’s even worse, I’m afraid. It’s Hermione.”

Daedalus’ eyes were sharper. “What about her?”

“I don’t know where they heard such nonsense from, but an Auror took her out of Hogwarts ‘for an interview’.” He stated.

Amelia shook her head. “Impossible. If they only need to know more details from her as an eyewitness, they could do it here.”

“Besides, all our testimony had been noted down in detail, courtesy of Emma.” Daedalus replied.

Tom made a slow and careful shrug, both of his palms open upwards, while his expression was probably extremely cynical. A flash of something passed the seventh-year’s face, before his expression was more or less one of boredom again, but his posture had subtly changed. It was more alert now. Amelia narrowed her eyes.

“Tell us everything from the beginning.”

‛-

Tom had expected Amelia to curse and set off to floo-call her father because she was damned sure that this was not usual procedure at all. What he hadn’t expected was to see Daedalus moving with the same sense of urgency.

“You’re going to call your father too?”

“What, me?” He snorted. “We’ve established that the one who’s going to follow him into the Auror corps is Amelia, not me. She doesn’t find endlessly knocking sense into knuckleheads tiring. There’s no way he needs a second call from me.”

“And yet you’re hurrying.”

“And yet I am,” the seventh-year nodded, a small knowing grin on his face even as he deftly dodged from giving Tom an answer.

The Slytherin shrugged it away and held back from asking. Whatever the Ravenclaw was up to, it was probably because he was concerned for a fellow house-mate. It could hardly be bad news.

‛-

Pendleton was giving Tom his full attention from a comfortable wing-backed chair in one of the library’s reading corners. The prefect easily took the chair on the other side of the small table.

“What was his name?”

“Orestes Blakeshaw.”

A faint crease grew on Pendleton’s brow as his parchment-pale fingers lace together underneath his chin. Three seconds later, there was a sharp intake of breath.
“Rather average looking wizard, but with a certain unsavoury look in his eyes?” The pale blond asked.

Tom nodded. “The look of a hunted creature, yes.”

“Then we must make haste.”

Pendleton stood up. Tom eyed him but did not immediately made to leave.

“What do you remember about him?”

He paused. Even then, his hand was tapping out a subtle rhythm against his thigh. “That he never considered accepting more and more muggleborns into the Auror corps as a good idea, because they are a people with ‘inherent conflicting loyalties.’”

“He’s a colleague of your father’s, then?”

Pendleton huffed, his usually placid expression showing clear distaste. “My father might have socialised mostly with purebloods simply because they made up most of the corps of his generation, but he was never blind to talent or hard work. He considers Blakeshaw to be blinkered.”

Anyone wondering that Hogwarts was not at least semi-sentient would soon find incidents to the contrary piling up. Tom had his own list. As he and Pendleton took all the shortcuts they could remember between the library and the headmaster’s office, they somehow encountered Dumbledore heading in the same direction from the other end of the corridor, with Dexter trying to keep up with his long strides. The transfiguration master’s flashy robes of purple and indigo (with actual moving waves of water on his hem) was a contrast to his companion’s unobtrusive navy one, dotted with only the faintest of stars.

This coincidental encounter was just one more example to put on his list.

_What unbelievably convenient timing._

“Fancy seeing you here, Professor Dumbledore.” Tom greeted. If his expression did not quite match his polite tone, well, he was not quite in the mood for pleasantries right now.

“I dare say neither of us are actually surprised,” Dumbledore’s reply was dry.

“Who kidnapped Hermione?” Dexter snapped.

If Tom and Dumbledore’s visible annoyance was a damp drizzly mood, then Dexter’s demands held the surging emotions of someone whose home had just been swept away by a storm flood—and was _still_ expected to pay his taxes by tomorrow. His mood was as violent as that weather; the astronomer looked perfectly capable of robbing the horses out from under the next man who tested his patience.

Dumbledore tried to calm him down. “It’s not a kidnapping—”

“An Auror,” Tom cut in, his smile loaded with unsaid meanings. “For an ‘interview’.”

“What’s his name?” Dexter clearly wasn’t listening to Dumbledore at this point.

“Orestes Blakeshaw, Professor.” Tom said.
“And where were you two going?” Dumbledore stepped back into the conversation before anything more inflammatory was said.

It was Pendleton who answered instead of Tom, straightforward and without guile. Tom himself was silently wrestling his impatience and anger back down.

“To the Ministry, since we wish to ask for an explanation.”

Dexter sighed, and the roiling thundercloud impression he’d been doing abated slightly. Even the air felt lighter.

“I know you’re both concerned, but we’ll take it from here. They would listen to not only her teachers, but also her Head of House.”

“Professor—”

“We have this in hand, Mr. Riddle. You can wait at the headmaster’s office and we’ll assure you that you’ll be the first to know.” This time, it was Dumbledore who cut him short.

Dexter was too distracted to notice; he had already given the password to the gargoyle that guarded the stairs going up and had gone off ahead.

Pendleton nodded thoughtfully. “Very well, Professors. Best of luck on your trip.”

Tom didn’t give any reply even as Dumbledore easily followed his colleague, neither did he move.

“So,” the prefect said, the calmness of his voice did not hide its core of steel, “the fireplace at Slughorn’s quarters, don’t you think?”

“Of course, my lord.”

The two Slytherins knocked on Slughorn’s quarters. He was still in his dressing gown, furry slippers covering his feet. Other than that, he was well-groomed.

“Tom, Pendleton, what a surprise!”

“Good morning, Professor.”

“Morning, Professor Slughorn.”

“What brings you to my quarters? Don’t just stand there; come in! Come in!”

Slughorn cheerfully ushered them in without further ado. Tom thanked him for receiving them easily in his free time when they had visited without warning and Pendleton murmured something of a similar tone right behind him. They chatted for a moment or two, before the prefect smoothly segued into how sometimes there are rare and critical ingredients that you forgot to stock before trying out an experimental potion or three.

It’s such a shame to destroy your unusual potion project just for that, so you settled with a stasis charm and hope you can get the missing item(s) with a quick hop to London and then back again. Whether the destination was going to be Diagon Alley or Knockturn Alley, Slughorn has enough discretion and knowledge of his House’s character that he didn’t even ask. What he knew was that Tom was talented in potion-making, and Pendleton was the farthest thing from a rabble rouser. They were dependable students.
That was how he easily gave them leave to use his fireplace to floo out of Hogwarts.

They travelled to Diagon Alley from his office. Once they both had stepped out at the Leaky Cauldron’s main fireplace, Pendleton left a sickle in the tipping jar while Tom became the first of them to take a pinch of floo powder from the common jar. He threw it into the fireplace once more.

“Ministry of Magic.” The dark-haired Slytherin enunciated, before stepping in once more.

Orpheus found himself gritting his teeth the moment he stepped out into the main lobby of the Ministry of Magic, a cold wind sweeping uncomfortably close over his skin.

Why was he having flashbacks to dearly departed Eurydike’s fratricidal family? If other people had hellish in-laws, he would have brought his up as candidates as rulers of hell instead. Never the most athletic even at school, Orpheus had never practised duelling as hard as when he knew he needed to fight more than one of them. The pain of possibly losing his children was still acute now, decades after he’d solved that particular problem.

His wand hand twitched, remembering the last potent chain of spell he’d managed to pull off that downed (crippled) one of her cousins—

Orpheus wouldn’t have realised what he was doing if Albus hadn’t cast a majestic glowing bird to circle around them, as if in a protective embrace. It was beautiful – the tips of its wing were almost transparent that it glittered faintly, refracting a little of the light that passes through.

*A patronus,* the blond noted with surprise and awe.

“Albus?”

“I’d have thought that our minister is wiser than this,” Albus muttered. “Why would they involve those…things?”

It was the way he said the last word that caught Orpheus’ attention and pulled him away from trying to observe his colleague’s patronus further. His tone spoke of foul objects found on the underside of dead logs and better left there to rot. As he followed the gaze of Hogwarts’ transfigurations master, he saw the dark shadows congregating and drifting ten steps away from the main entrance. It was not close enough to cause anyone passing to faint, but enough to start draining the colour on their face.

He wished he was one of those who had no idea what those shadowed hoods held, but alas he was not that lucky. He had seen what they held underneath once, and he still saw it again and again in his nightmares.

“*Dementors.*” Orpheus cursed.

“Yes. Dementors.” Albus’ reply was hushed.

“Of all the forsaken things on this blasted earth—why *them*?”

“Well, if there’s one thing guaranteed to chase away criminals of lesser strength, it’s a predator greater than them. I’m sure even Grindelwald wouldn’t be able to find enough people with the mental fortitude to go through them.” Dumbledore’s casual words almost hid the irony in them.

His fellow head of house had helpfully taken Orpheus’ elbow, waiting until he found his own
balance back. After that, he soon found three chocolate frogs shoved into his hands with a smattering of candy. He had to do some quick grabs to stop a few of them from falling over.

“Um, what?”

“Chocolate helps. In fact, copious amount of sugar helps. Candies are therefore an excellent balm for the body and soul after an encounter with a dementor.” Even as Albus joyfully prattled on, he had deftly navigated for both of them. Smoothly they slid, past the throngs of confused people as well as the shocked visitors who certainly didn’t expect to find the spectres of Azkaban haunting London. He’d even managed to dodge a woman with a wailing kid and pulled the blond away from a minor staff who’d slipped on something without another look.

“Did you expect them here? Those monsters?”

The blond professor had chomped through the first frog in a few seconds and was now tearing through his third almost as fast. A first-year acting that way would earn a mild reproof from him, which was why he was glad that none of his kids could see him.

“It was in the Daily Prophet, Orpheus.” The mild disappointment in his tone was almost a rebuke.

“The headline only said something about them getting more guards! It’s not as if they were even mentioned by name.”

“One does have to read carefully and collect the clues between the lines. Spencer-Moon is not an idiot—he knew how much opposition would rise if the people heard about the creatures he invoked.”

The astronomy master didn’t really feel guilty about it. Really, he was a Hogwarts professor—being isolated from the outside world was almost a given. How was he supposed to know that one of the ministry stooges would be stupid enough to take one of his kids?

Orpheus was collecting the candy wrappers into one neat pile when he noticed the dates.

“Albus, some of these are manufactured a year ago.” Which wasn’t a surprise since wizarding food had a long shelf life. That wasn’t his concern here. “And you say you only knew of these dementors recently?”

He was sceptical at this degree of preparation. The auburn-haired professor sounded amused instead.

“I thought you’ve figured it out already. I love sweets.”

With a flourish, he pulled something out of his pockets. His left hand was filled with what can be kindly said as the contents of a Honeydukes grab bag, and what the less charitable would consider as teeth-rotters and the signs of an immature man.

“What do you like? I’m sure I have practically everything Honeydukes has ever made.”

He blinked. “…did you apply that long and complicated bottomless charm to your pockets to hold near-infinite candy?”

Albus nodded with a solemn mien. “It is a very important reason, Orpheus.”

Orpheus decided to tactfully say nothing.
“We’d like to see Auror Blakeshaw right now.” Orpheus said this to the junior recruit manning the front desk of the DMLE.

“Do you have an appointment—”

“Do you know what he did? No? He took my kid. If I don’t see him now, I’ll bring him to the Wizengamot on charges of kidnapping.” He leaned forward a little, his expression dark.

The clerk flinched at his restrained anger. It didn’t matter that he didn’t raise his voice the slightest.

“It’s all just a misunderstanding—”

“He gave his name to her friend before he whisked her away straight out of Hogwarts. Now, you can take me to him, or I’ll go straight into that elevator over there,” he pointed casually, “press Wizengamot’s floor, and start the administrative requirements of the lawsuit.”

“Now, what would you rather I do?”

The head of Ravenclaw had thrown the gauntlet. Usually, his sombre clothing gave the impression of a staid muggle lawyer (if one were to ignore his long braid). Now, with his dark expression paired with his dark clothes, he looked more like a hatchet-man, eliminating any problem his master wished to see gone permanently. Albus knew his imagination could be rather fanciful at times, but it was hard not to be entertained.

The clerk was new enough to know that this was far beyond what his meagre job entailed.

“Um, uh, I can try finding him?”

“Ten minutes.” He warned.

The clerk took that as permission to run down the hallway. By some implicit agreement, they followed him, Dumbledore only a few steps ahead of him before the astronomy teacher caught up by his side, colour high on his cheeks.

“That was impressive, Orpheus.”

The blond scoffed. “Intimidating kids not long out of their teens is hardly an achievement.”

“That might be. Yet I’m also quite certain that you’re not joking about involving the Wizengamot.” He finished.

“Oh, I’m definitely not kidding.” He was a little too calm about it. “No one touches any of my kids.”

“You know that Hermione might be alright, don’t you?”


His tone had the finality of an ultimatum.

Albus sighed. “If you’re too vigorous in pursuing your lawsuit while you lack adequate evidence, it will only bring you down. If you don’t plan this carefully, you might even lose your position as head of house, perhaps even your Hogwarts teaching post.”
They’d entered an open office area, filled with desks. Neither of them said anything else for a while. The sounds of the junior clerk apologising to people he’d inadvertently ran over could be heard from their front, or his frantic efforts to catch one person after another who could tell him where exactly Auror Blakeshaw was.

Orpheus was shaking his head.

“I know. I know exactly what you mean. It’s just that I’ve seen several of my muggleborn students disappear or die under suspicious circumstances over two decades or so. I just…I can’t let it happen again. Not again.” Then, he muttered distractedly under his breath. “Eurydike’s crazy family almost did the same thing after her death.”

Taking his children away? Over his dead body.

With that, the astronomy master hurried up to the clerk, unconsciously intimidating the poor young wizard to go faster. He heard Albus murmur something under his breath.

’-

Dexter’s words sounded strange even to Dumbledore. Again? What did he mean by again? Children do not disappear from Hogwarts that frequently. At most, it was only the occasional case or so after several years. Yet the haunted look in his eyes were real. What was he talking about?

Albus was determined to figure out what it meant as he picked up his pace to catch up.

“Orpheus,” he called.

“What?”

“What do you plan to do on finding him?”

“Shake him by his lapels until he gives up Hermione, of course.”

It was a simple statement with no excessive bravado or emotion. It brought home the truth that Orpheus was not always the mild-mannered astronomy professor at Hogwarts, the same way that Albus was not always Hogwarts’ transfigurations master. Once, he was also that headstrong young apprentice who maintained to his master that he will study the magical properties of dragon blood. When Flamel told him that it was hard to find dragon blood in large enough quantities in the market, he insisted on finding those dragons himself and ensure they…donated appropriate amounts. All for the sake of progressing magical research.

Dumbledore took a careful breath.

“Not that I disagree with your sentiment, but we need a plan. Let’s start with Blakeshaw, what do you know about him?”

Orpheus shook his head. “I’m not sure I’d remember if he was one among the hordes of first and second years that I have. I know he didn’t take Advanced Astronomy later on.”

Albus had been the transfigurations master for longer and made it a point to keep watch over Hogwarts students who had taken important positions in the Ministry or had entered the DMLE. He knew he had more insight.

“Well, here’s what I do know…”
The minute flinch in Blakeshaw’s face when he first saw them clinched his guilt for Dumbledore.

It was Orpheus who struck first, with all the ferocity of a wolf trying to recover his pup. Blakeshaw blustered something about ‘witnesses’ and ‘interview’ at the beginning, but the Hogwarts professor grinned and it did not look pleasant.

“You cannot take a student out of Hogwarts without the permission of their parents.” He stated, still calm.

“She’s an orphan.” The answer came a little too fast.

“Do you know who gets to decide in loco parentis as to whether taking a student out of Hogwarts is for their own good or not? The Head of the House.” If he was cracking his knuckles then, he would not be more intimidating. “Now, I ask you, what do you think I consider the appropriate action to take when someone holds my child captive when she’s innocent of any wrongdoing?”

“We can return her quickly once you’ve signed the release forms—”

“I’ll see you and your superior in the Wizengamot, Mr. Blakeshaw.” His voice was soft, and he did not even have the uptown drawl that the Blacks and the more rarefied purebloods have. It did not make the threat in them less real.

Albus cleared his throat, drawing their attention towards him.

“Not that we need to go that far that fast. For one, you can begin by bringing us to Hermione right now.”

If he would just show them the way, this could be done quickly. Dumbledore gave an internal sigh when he saw the young wizard steeling himself instead and digging in his heels.

“About those forms—”

“If I even read one single line say that I will not blame you or the Aurors for any harm she might have suffered, I won’t just not sign it, I’ll even put in that lawsuit this evening.” Dexter had casually picked up the pile of papers in front of him. “Do you really want me to read these papers right now, Blakeshaw? What do you think I’ll find if I do?”

They stared down each other across the table, the increasingly cornered Auror and the unrelenting professor.

“If administrative issues concern you so much, I’m sure I can ask someone else in this place while you settle the details with my colleague.” Dumbledore said lightly. “After all, a witch in Hogwarts uniform is not a usual sight at the Ministry most days.”

Blakeshaw stood up with a speed that neither expected.

“No need. She’ll be back at Hogwarts before you know it.”

It was the way he paled that caused Albus to narrow his eyes.

“Mr. Blakeshaw? Is there something you wish to tell us?”

Dexter hadn’t noticed it yet. He was frowning still, but it was no different from his previous expression since seeing the Auror firsthand.
The door to the room swung hard.

“Mr. Blakeshaw—oh, Professor Dumbledore, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Dumbledore turned to the newcomer. A witch in the Ministry’s nurse’s uniform with a familiarly sweet face. She was probably someone who had only graduated recently, based on the easy way she fell into school-based speaking patterns when talking to him.

“Good afternoon. Professor Dexter and I were about to pick up one of our students.”

Her expression lightened up. “Then, I’m glad you came! I think Miss Curie had something slightly more complex than low blood pressure. Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing serious, but the senior nurse sent her to St. Mungo’s just to be safe.”

Dexter’s tone was sharp. He’d gone out of his seat and blocked Blakeshaw from reaching the nurse.

“Hermione is at St. Mungo’s?”

The image of that dark, battered street has somehow surfaced from the wreck of her memories—though how it did so, Hermione had no idea. There was also that final galleon flipping in slow motion, seemingly floating in an air as thick as molasses. A flash of red over a blurry face. Then, the rows of inhuman shadows and forms in the distance, creeping ever closer, some twisted in ways human limbs weren’t meant to go...

Her eyes opened and she winced at the brightness. Slanted rays shone down the tall windows.

The ceiling had scarcely any spots. *This isn’t the Hogwarts infirmary.*

But it was some sort of infirmary room all the same, based on the other beds around her, some filled and others not. Hermione gingerly tried to sit up.

Hermione wondered where Harry and Ron (and Neville, Luna and Malina) could be until she realised that they weren’t here. The young witch was surprised at how outdated the St. Mungo’s room was. *Wasn’t there a renovation sometime in the 2000s—*

*Wrong time, Hermione.*

She tightened her jaw at the realisation. She was still in 1942. Her teeth bit something stuck at the corner of her mouth.

Her throat felt *weird* and she soon found why; a slender spider-silk tube ran down into her mouth and she presumed it ended at her stomach. She pulled it out slowly. As weird as she could still find the wizarding world, at least it does have its edge when it comes to healing compared to the non-magical one. A feeding tube doesn’t have to go down from her nose, for one, and it was so smooth and thin that it wasn’t too noticeable. She ignored the gel it was coated in (to heal any cuts and inflammation her oesophagus might have gotten in the process of inserting or removing it) and dropped it in the kidney tray she found nearby. She picked up her wand that was placed on the same bedside cabinet.

Her head felt oddly cool and her hunger was no longer noticeable—to her surprise, Hermione actually felt rather full.
They must’ve rushed to feed her. The residual warmth in her torso made her certain that they definitely increased the digestive and absorption rate of her stomach and intestines. She remembered the appearance of the dementor and smacked her forehead. *That was obvious, Hermione,* she chided herself, *you clearly need a lot of food quickly.*

Getting too close to a dementor meant entering its psychic field. This in turn meant exposing yourself to its mental attack of dread and despair. Regardless of how abstract it seemed, it actually *does* leave a physical mark on people – the brain shifts gears and musters its mental defence against the assault. As it does that, it sucks up inordinate amount of sugar from the blood to cover its increased energy consumption. It was why light-headedness and fainting were also side-effects of dementor exposure.

It was why chocolate and sweets were a good post-dementor recovery food.

Hermione leaned forward, scrambling on the bed. She ignored the slight faint feeling that came from the changing positions. She took her medical chart from its position on the bottom of the bed and sat there to read. There was a wizard patient whose bed was near the door who had been reading a newspaper when she woke up. He was now staring at her curiously as she skimmed through her chart. She ignored him easily.

**Hypoglycaemia.** Worryingly low blood sugar levels. That wasn’t a surprise. Add the fact that she hadn’t eaten for *hours* and it would certainly make the effects of dementor exposure worse.

*Food tube inserted and food absorption speed increased to five times. Brain locally cooled by around twenty degrees centigrade to reduce risk of damage before blood sugar levels return to...* oh, they were trying to slow her brain’s metabolism as they waited for her digestive system to catch up with digesting the pureed lunch they had provided, since the wizarding world just doesn’t *do* needles. This was their alternative of the muggle option of just giving a glucose IV. It was good news for the needle-phobics, she supposed, but the downside of it was that it required more skill to perform—

A line in the report brought her thoughts to a halt.

*I was at risk for a coma? What the hell?* Hermione loudly harrumphed at that.

The last conscious patient in the room (a middle-aged witch) stared at her, joining the previous newspaper reader. Not that she noticed either of them except in the most perfunctory way.

Her condition couldn’t have been that bad, right? It was only a missing meal. She was fine! On the other hand, the fact that she had made textbook recovery was no indication of how bad she had it before. It just showed how effective wizarding world’s treatment was and how knowledgeable her healers are. The brain exists at a very fine balance of homeostasis for optimum performance, for one, with not much slack. Unlike the muscles, it does not have access to a local emergency supply of energy. Cut off its food supply for just a little too long and brain cells will start dying.

Her throat felt a little too dry as she cleared it. She forced herself to breathe methodically and closed her eyes.

She’d had a dozen close calls before, what was one more?

Hermione didn’t know how long she tried to calm herself—it could have been a minute; it could have been five. What she knew was that she looked up when she heard the whoosh of air that signalled the door swinging open. The elegant tailored suit and robes of the Hogwarts uniform was familiar.
“Tom!” His presence was a surprise. She had expected the second person behind him, surreptitiously checking the corridors before he entered and closed the door, even less. “Pendleton?”

“Nurse Edelstein had talked to the healer here and assured me that you would recover.” Tom said. “The nervous air she has assuaged me even less and I’ve decided to see for myself to make sure.”

He stopped at her bedside. His voice was perfectly modulated, politeness the exact level one could expect from a classmate. However, she did not miss the way his gaze quickly took in her appearance from the tips of her fingers, the errant curls of her hair and how she was still leaning back against her pillows.

“Hello, Curie. It’s good to see you well.” Pendleton greeted quietly. She gave him a tired smile.

“I expect that we’d only have ten minutes of free time before the duty nurse realises that you’re awake and arrives here. After that, I suppose everyone else would descend here.” Tom said.

His words prompted her to start moving.

“Does anyone have spare scrolls?”

To his credit, Pendleton searched into his sleeves the moment she asked that and unstuck a spare scroll to hand it to her. No questions asked. One murmured thanks later, she had copied the contents of her medical charts to the scroll before she rolled it up and cast an anti-creasing charm. She slipped it into her left sleeve and stuck it there.

“Are you well enough to leave?” Tom asked.

“Well enough to travel and only a bit faint besides. Any further recovery I need could be easily gotten from the Hogwarts infirmary.” Hermione replied. She took the arm Tom offered to help pull herself up, nor did she hesitate placing most of her weight against him as she slid out of the bed. He was more than capable to hold her up, as her experience going on a tour of Hogwarts with him when only mostly-recovered had demonstrated.

“I’d better find Professor Dexter and say that you’re on your way back to Hogwarts, then,” Pendleton spoke up again. That confused her slightly.

“Professor Dexter?”

“How did you think we found our way here?” Tom asked dryly. “All we had to do was to follow the trail of shell-shocked staff he’d verbally shredded before.”

It was oddly comforting to hear that her Head of House was outraged at her questionable removal from Hogwarts.

“All we needed to do was to wait until everyone left your unconscious self here. I checked back every so often,” Pendleton clarified.

“Checked back?”

“It would be too suspicious to loiter in the hallways.” The blond wizard confirmed.

“Right. Let’s get moving, boys.”

Pendleton stood straight and nodded firmly, as if she’d given him a direct order. Hermione watch
with mild surprise as he set off first ahead of them. He was…huh, was he clearing the way? The easy way that he and Tom coordinated with each other was giving her pangs of déjà vu to her Auror friends. For a second, they could’ve been Harry and Draco, due to the hair colours. Perhaps they were in the occasional investigation that was politically sensitive—hence why Draco was roped into it as well.

A blink and she was somewhere else.

“You should stop being so careless.” She chided, pulling the eyepatch back into place after she’d checked the bruising right below it.

Harry snorted. “You know that we’re still going to be fearless idiots as long as we know that you have our backs, don’t you?”

“Speak for yourself, Potter.”

“Says the guy who took that slashing curse for Hermione,” was Harry’s dry remark. Draco’s sarcastic denials might have fooled someone else, but his pale colouring didn’t do him any favours—there was colour high on his cheeks. Hermione laughed as they walked again. Two of them walked with a slight limp.

“I haven’t thanked you for that, have I? So yes, thanks.”

Tom noticed her slight shiver.

“Are you truly better?”

“It’s nothing. It’s—” the words caught in her throat as she turned her head slightly, focusing on his side profile. “Memories. Sometimes I want them all back. At other times I just…”

…wish they would leave me alone.

“How is everybody, by the way?” She quickly asked. “I lost track of time a bit. I thought Lakshmi would’ve sneaked in if she heard what happened.”

Tom didn’t comment on her deflection.

“I did promise your housemates with more news as soon as you get better.”

She eyed him sideways. “Based on the fact that they’re not here, you haven’t told them, have you?”

“I have. I merely said that it was better for them to wait for you to wake up.” He replied, completely guiltless.

“Well, I’m awake now.” ‘And you haven’t informed them’ was what she’d left unsaid.

“Yes. And you’d rather see them in the Hogwarts infirmary than St. Mungo’s, don’t you? I’m sure their preferences matched yours in this case and they would appreciate my efforts to assist your return.” Tom said, in the self-satisfied tones of someone who knew he was doing someone else a favour. She sighed. Well, he wasn’t exactly wrong…

“Not that I’m not glad to see you, I’d half expected that you’d be here with Abraxas or Melchior.”

“Well, Abraxas was a little busy,” there was dark amusement whose source she couldn’t exactly divine. “As for Melchior…”
"Yes?"

"He’s indisposed this afternoon."

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Once Orpheus saw that Hermione was in the hands of experienced nurses and healers who assured him that now she only needed time to recover, he’d marched straight back to the DMLE. Albus matched the speed easily and he couldn’t blame the other teacher either. He could feel the prickle of static at the edge of his fingers, his magic tumultuous and rushing close to the surface.

"You brought one of my children into contact with a Dementor!" Orpheus Dexter snapped.

The Auror he was glaring down at had started to open his mouth.

"It was for safety—"

"Oh, and an Auror in the middle of the DMLE is under such dangerous threat from a school girl, so much that a Dementor is necessary?" Albus’ voice was calmer, practically the voice of reason when compared to Orpheus, but it was hard to miss his ironic tone.

"She needs to know the fullest extent of the law—"

"Bull. Shit."

He was slightly impressed that Orpheus had gotten around to cursing—it was a reflex most teachers had buried deep since they were around impressionable minds most of the time.

Dumbledore slowly took a few steps forward, ignoring the stuttered step back that the younger wizard took by reflex. He stopped trying to hold back the raw magic coursing just under his skin, which meant that he now had a nimbus of power that was plainly…uncomfortable for people he did not felt friendly to. That Fawkes was his familiar had given it a fiery edge to the senses of most people.

"Were you going for a Kiss?"

Blakeshaw’s eyes were wide, beads of sweat starting to dot his temples. “No! Of course not!”

Eye contact was made. Dumbledore stepped into the man’s mind without much guilt. The first room was almost a copy of the DMLE’s lobby, but he sliced his way out of that reality with ease with phoenix fire. Memories were rifled through.

"He’s telling the truth.” His voice hadn’t lost its hard edge.

"It doesn’t mean he hasn’t harmed her already.” Dexter stepped up next to him, their shoulders almost touching. He did not seem to be bothered by Dumbledore’s aura.

“Oh, I quite agree.” Albus nodded and turned to his colleague. “I think he’s done enough, don’t you think?”

It was the first time he saw Orpheus’ pale blue eyes truly look like chips of ice, colder than the poles of Neptune. His voice was soft when he spoke up and yet it was just as frigid.

“Think we should make sure that he can never do so again.”

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The sky was a pale grey. Even if the sun occasionally shone from behind the smooth sheet of cloud, its heat was barely more than even a rudimentary warming charm. It was normal autumn weather by all counts.

Not that he needed to mind the occasional cold wind when he could still feel licking heat from time to time, courtesy of a vexed Dumbledore.

Orpheus hadn’t expected Albus to look as if he’d aged by at least a decade once they left the Auror Corps for the second time that day. The other wizard was so pale that he couldn’t help but guide him gently by the elbow to Florian Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour. From their visit to St. Mungo’s, it was clear that Hermione was under excellent care. The nurse assured him that her condition was stable and improving and that there was nothing left that he could do for her but wait (he had to keep reminding himself of this since his reflex was to run straight back there). He asked for strongly-brewed tea for both of them after he saw that Albus had sat down.

“I can’t believe him. I still…” Albus took his glasses off before rubbing his forehead.

“Didn’t you say that you knew he was a prat even as a student?” The blond asked. He wasn’t exactly deaf to the trailing sentences and mumbled curses his colleague said between the silences on their way there.

Albus glanced up and his eyes were startlingly clear.

“Yes, but I had expected him to be uptight or perhaps to be rigid in implementing the rules, not—not this!”

Their tea came—he cleared his throat and gave Albus a look to stop that intimidating aura he did. The other wizard complied with a surprised expression; he hadn’t been aware. Orpheus thanked the waitress with a kind smile. He barely noticed the witch’s blush before she walked away with her tray. He poured the tea for both of them and Albus thanked him absently.

“Why not?” He asked back.

“Excuse me?”

“Why wouldn’t you have expected such shenanigans from someone of his station?”

“Because he’s an Auror; he’s a representative of the law which he has sworn to uphold. Because Hermione is a minor for whom you stand for as a parent! Because—because if you were a decent human being, then you’re aware that going after children instead of trying to untangle the adults behind them is the acts of a—a schoolyard bully! No, he is even worse since he held more power. He is a blackguard.”

“Now, now, don’t hold back your feelings. Tell me what you really feel.” Orpheus said dryly, though he was mildly amused that Albus still managed to avoid cursing the blasted Auror.

That earned him a short chuckle from his fellow teacher.

“Well, between the two of us, his career is not going to survive,“

“Career? What career?” Orpheus asked back blandly.

“And yet he must have seen that happening. He could not have thought that we take our responsibilities so flippantly, so shallowly. Why would he even…”
Their gaze met again.

“Why would he try to destroy an innocent?” He could still hear the grief hidden behind his public composure.

Albus was so full of sentiment, so true to his ideals in his disquiet, that for once Orpheus could understand all those people who kept trying to persuade his friend to enter either the Wizengamot or the Parliament of the International Confederation of Wizards. Albus was as magnetic as he was powerful and he could not look away.

He was the first to look down, to watch the occasional leaf spin in his tea.

“Albus, your family might not be part of the Sacred 28, but it’s a sight older than three-quarters of the family in it. Like the Blacks, you can scoff them for acting as if their Norman values are the most venerable one that exists and they still wouldn’t be able to counter that successfully.” He sipped his tea. “I’m sure everyone is aware of that, all the way to the Ministry and the Auror Corps.”

“What are you saying?”

Orpheus raised his head once more but said nothing for a few moments, considering what to say—what he dared to say. Family history was a private thing for most wizards and witches, especially when they weren’t particularly old or from the Sacred 28.

“My family aren’t like the Alhazen, who’d been developing and augmenting their telescopes from a millennium ago that they can see farther into the depths of the universe than anyone else—”

He ignored Albus’ scoff of ‘no one is a better astronomer than them’.

“—farther than even the muggles. The occasional Dexter that became astronomers had only started to make a name for themselves when we started tweaking with Cassegrain’s telescope design.”

Only then he could bring himself to meet Albus’ gaze. His friend waited patiently, his eyes solemn and without any judgement in them. He’d never thought Albus to be closeminded, but still, you never know.

“Orpheus?”

“Don’t you see?”

A slight embarrassed smile followed, his expression almost boyish. “I’m afraid astronomy is not my forte.”

It was his turn to be embarrassed then as he cleared his throat. He could even feel his face heating up slightly, “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m just too used to… well, Cassegrain’s telescope design is rather elegant, and in my opinion, an improvement over Newton’s, but yes, let us skip the details.”

He took a deep breath. “Don’t you see it? Laurent Cassegrain is a muggle, Albus. The first Dexters who became astronomers in their own right only did so some two centuries ago, and we only managed that by relying on the works of a muggle priest!”

Albus shook his head. There were still creases on his brow as he hadn’t stopped thinking.

“I fail to see what the problem is. He must have been an intelligent man to have managed such an invention, and one that your family found very useful for a long time yet.”
He couldn’t help the relieved laughter from breaking out, and it bloomed for yet a little longer when Albus’ baffled expression met his. For the first time of the day, he actually felt warm.

“Merlin. Albus…oh, Albus.” Orpheus couldn’t help the fondness in his voice as he shook his head. “You truly don’t see it, don’t you?”

Cornflower blue eyes blinked. He looked away before he was caught staring for too long.

“See what?” Albus asked.

“Many pureblood astronomers from more esteemed lineages have never let any astronomer from my family to forget that we have to get help from a muggle to get our start. I have the correspondences of the older generations with my grand-aunt and other older relatives to prove it.”

He took a deep breath even as he tapped his wand at Albus’ teacup to warm it again.

“My family is still a reasonably pureblooded one, and that’s what we have to face. How exactly do you think the wizarding world would treat a young witch, no matter how talented, from a muggleborn family when she’s under suspicion of attacks?”

Orpheus had to look away. He knew that Albus needed to hear it, to know how different life could be when one did not have such august provenance backing them. Yet he wasn’t sure he could bear to look at perhaps the last of Dumbledore’s innocence and trust in the wizarding world finally breaking.

Tom still remembered waiting for a frustrated Dexter and a solemn Dumbledore to step out of the St. Mungo’s room. He slipped in easily after they left. Pendleton stayed outside and pretended to be reading the newspaper in the nearest waiting area, while in reality he was keeping watch on the people coming and going. He was the most methodical of the Knights and he’d picked up more than a few skills from his Auror father who’d taught his heir his craft. He was the perfect man for the task.

The Slytherin prefect remembered seeing Hermione pale on the bed and unconscious. The feeding tube at the corner of her mouth made her condition seem even worse.

This was why he asked Pendleton to stay to keep watch as he returned back to Hogwarts to collect the rest of the Knights in one place.

This was why he carefully turned the cold shard of his anger inside with the ease of a sawbones about to slice someone’s limbs off.

They were in one of the spare dungeon-level classrooms in Hogwarts that didn’t even try to improve the moods of its occupants, the worn stone giving the impression that the place was too tired to bother looking marginally more habitable. There were no windows. Tom only lit several candles on the chandelier to get some light. The humidity seal in the room had clearly deteriorated in the past half century or so and no one had renewed it—every so often, Gallus would sneeze from what he presumed was the occasional mould spore floating in the air.

In short, it felt like an abandoned dungeon and he did nothing to improve their surroundings.

“Gentlemen, I’m sure you know why you’re here. Pendleton has given you the basics of what had happened this morning that ended up with Hermione Curie hospitalised in St. Mungo’s.”
To Abraxas’ left and right, Mulciber and Parkinson had a blankness to their faces that showed they only had the vaguest inklings even now. At least they had enough awareness to know that thinking wasn’t their forte. They were there to show up, wait and simply do what they were told. The careless Tybalt Yaxley seemed quizzical but wasn’t the slightest bit concerned.

Melchior, on the other hand paled. It did not stop him from stepping forward from the line.

“Yes, Melchior?”

“I continued with my…task after this morning’s unpleasant interruption. I don’t have a particular name behind the slanderous articles recently posted on the Daily Prophet—the Nott family men are still watching Diagon Alley for further developments.” He began.

Tybalt was clearly more than a little out of the loop as he surreptitiously whispered to Gallus. Probably trying to determine about which Daily Prophet article they were talking about—at least until Vespasian elbowed him. Tybalt hissed in pain and elbowed him back.

Tom ignored the byplay.

“And?” He prompted Melchior

“I can already narrow down the field. The restaurants and venues the men followed to are not mediocre or easily accessible. They’re rather selective, actually. These places are where the reporters are treated to dine.”

“Some pureblood paid for that hit piece, then,” Ves carelessly commented.

“What do you mean by hit piece?”

Rufus Carrow spoke up with a furrowed brow, rounding the shorter curly-haired Slytherin who was currently (and unusually) without his hat. Tom took a step back, an implicit signal that he was allowing the discussion. Vespasian was not the slightest bit intimidated by his broad-chested Housemate.

“Oh, you know, the one tryin’ to blame the Hogsmeade attack on squibs and muggles, of all people, instead of the dark lord currently at war with Britain.” Ves might be slouching with his hands in his pockets, but anyone who thought he was unprepared was in for a surprise.

“That’s just harmless speculation,” Rufus commented.

“Don’t be a simkin, Rufus. Ain’t so harmless anymore if Hermione got hobbled, is it?”

A silent beat, their eyes never leaving each other. Carrow spoke up again.

“It’s Hermione, is it?”

“Course it is. Milord says it is, I bow and follow. Sides, she’s a rum mort worth three of ye. ‘Tis an improvement to the company, I say.” Not everyone might be used to Vespasian’s argot, but there was no mistaking what his idle act of pretending to buff his nails on his coat meant, or how he didn’t even spare Rufus a glance.

Rufus Carrow vividly coloured. Ves grinned as he looked up. Even with his curls, his expression was less cherubic and closer to Puck toying with humans.

“What about you, Robbe? Not opening your gob too? How were your tools? As bruised as your
ego after her beating?” His side-glance was mocking.

It was interesting to see Robbe Rowle paling as he saw Tom’s attention drift in his direction.

“What was that about, Robbe?” Tom asked.

He lowered his head quickly.

“A mistake, my lord. I learned my lesson.”

“She taught him a lesson. Of course, he did.” Gallus muttered sarcastically. Considering the clear regret that Robbe was displaying, he was sure that Hermione had it in hand. Tom only stepped passed him without stopping.

“I’ll drop my inquiry just this once, Robbe, because I know you’re not the sharpest tool in the box. You get one pass to blunder.”

There were a few held-back snort or expressions of humour, the most obvious coming from Abraxas.

“You’re not going to get a second chance, so please don’t be stupid. I do so hate stupid people.” He stated, emotionless.

“Thank you, my lord.”

Tom waved it away carelessly without looking, his attention turned to Rufus Carrow now. He did not miss how Tybalt had taken a step away from Rufus by reflex.

“Do you have anything you wish to say to me, Rufus?”

“About Curie…”

Tom raised an eyebrow.

“Aren’t you making a mistake?” Rufus said.

Tom smiled, approaching Rufus Carrow with a pleasant expression. Gallus was already nowhere nearby at this point; his keen instincts had removed him from a potential confrontation even as Tybalt backpedalled from his friend. The already-chastised Robbe took one large step away from Rufus’ other side.

“Before I even consider that, let me ask you another question in return. Are you challenging my judgment, Rufus?” His tone was smooth and unhurried.

The Slytherin stood mostly alone now, the other Knights had already fallen back from him. Tom stared him down.

Rufus glanced away first.

“I…I have no more questions, my lord.”

“Very well. For those of you who somehow still failed to keep up with the news, Hermione Curie is mine. There are no exceptions. Adjust yourself accordingly.” Tom pretended he didn’t see Robbe doing his best to blend into the background. Hmm, what idiocy could he have done? He was curious. Vespasian Starkey nodded with the zeal of a convert while Gallus was matter-of-fact about it.
Tybalt actually looked confused, his eyes darting sideways every once in a while, trying to read his peers for cues. Add his long and pointed face to his behaviour, and he was not unlike to a human-shaped weasel. Tom sighed inwardly; there was laying low and there’s being so out of touch as to missing relevant intelligence altogether. He’d have to fix that bad habit of Tybalt’s—later, he thought.

There were more important things to deal with.

“So, where were we before the unexpected interruption? Ah, yes, Melchior. Your report.”

The Nott heir closed his eyes and Tom could see him steeling himself before he taking a step forward once more. Gone was the warm and pleasant expression that had softened many a witch’s heart when they gazed upon him. In its place was unusual gravity—unusual, that is, unless you were one of the Knights of Walpurgis. Most of them had seen his sober expression often.

“Do you disagree with Vespasian’s summary about the Daily Prophet articles?” Tom asked.

“No, my lord, I don’t. The perpetrators are probably pureblood.” He paused, the next words seemed to be stuck in his throat.

“And?” He prompted.

Melchior sighed, looking down. A wayward curl fell over his forehead. “And whoever brought the outlandish tale to bring Hermione to that questionable Auror’s attention is definitely pureblood. Pendleton had informed me enough of Blakeshaw’s paranoid tendencies against everyone not of the oldest lines.”

“Are the events related, then?”

His shoulders slumped even further and he said nothing even as he clenched his jaws. Abraxas Malfoy stepped forward from Melchior’s right.

“If I may add to Melchior’s words?”

“Go on, Abraxas.”

“I suppose it’s possible that there’s actually two parties with distinctly anti-muggleborn prejudice somehow deciding to move at the same time and to both of their advantage. Yet I think it’s more likely that this is the result of one faction—whomever they are. Melchior would not say this much because he thinks this is merely speculation without enough proof.”

Abraxas shrugged. “I think it’s an educated guess—and a valid result besides.”

Tom saw Rufus opening his mouth at the corner of his sight. He turned immediately, catching the Carrow heir off-balance.

“Yes, Rufus?”

Dark blue eyes gleamed with anticipated jollity. Those present knew that any jollies to be had was in the form of Tom refining several versions of his custom modified Cruciatuus. Tom hid his amusement at the twitch of Gallus’ right hand. The poor wizard must’ve still remembered sensation on said hand from the last time Tom tried the one-thousand-needles-slowly-heated-up-to-glowing for his last major failure.

“I…I just don’t understand, my lord. If they were purebloods, why would we be against them?”
Tom smiled. More than one Slytherin felt the hairs at the back of their necks stand. “Ah, you’ve got it the wrong way around, Rufus.”

“My lord?”

He took a step to the side, towards the perplexed wizard.

“Why are they putting themselves against me?” His voice was soft. Reasonable. A charismatic politician drawing his audience in on the wizarding wireless.

“They might not be—”

“No one takes from me and gets away with it.” Tom cut in.

“They don’t know who you are,” Rufus said quickly. “I’m not saying this to excuse them, but as something to fix—as something we can fix. We should make the announcement to Slytherin House now. Secrecy in Slytherin is not useful now.”

Even if Tom had not his size and muscle, he’d taken an inadvertent step back.

“He has a point,” Melchior said, missing Rufus’ relieved sigh. “It’s what I’ve come to conclude as well. Purebloods going against you, or someone associated with you even if loosely? Then, they must be unaware of just who you are. But consider who would easily pitch themselves in that position…”

Abraxas shook his head. “No one outside Hogwarts, certainly, since we’re still low profile.”

“True. Very low odds. I’m not done figuring things out yet, but I would guess that the perpetrator would be rooted in Hogwarts even if he or she had mobilised family resources outside.” The Nott heir added.

Melchior’s left hand was holding his right elbow, his chin tucked into his chest as he rubbed his face. He was lost in his thoughts as he continued speaking.

“It’s ridiculous to think that Hufflepuff would go against you with muggleborn prejudice. They’re the ones who cared about blood purity the least. Gryffindor has similarly low odds, unless one of them has a blood feud with another—something easily discounted in this case since neither you nor Hermione are publicly known to be part of any particular family’s history. We’re down to Ravenclaw and Slytherin, as usual.”

“I can’t believe it would be Slytherin,” Rufus commented.

“Can’t you?” It was Abraxas who asked back.

“Look, we all know who the Heir of Slytherin is.”

“Then you’re not looking carefully enough.” Melchior snapped. It surprised more than one wizard present. “Do you see any seventh-years here? Sixth-years?”

He took a measured breath before facing Tom once again. His bronze-hued skin was still paler than usual.

“We should have clarified things with them faster. If we did, this misunderstanding wouldn’t happen.”

“Or, you might be wrong and it was someone from Ravenclaw after all. There are old families
there too.” Abraxas calmly countered his friend, softening his criticism to himself.

Melchior shook his head, an errant curl falling in front of his face.

“That still has lower odds than someone from Slytherin.”

“A miscalculation on a strategic level like this is hardly your responsibility, Melchior,” Tom’s words were unexpectedly generous, easily relieving him of any responsibility. He might be a demanding taskmaster, but he also knew the limits of his people. He was the one who provided them with a grand vision and direction; the rest of them followed him.

“I appreciate that, my lord, but the speed of my investigations into the Prophet articles is still within my responsibility. That I haven’t have an answer yet is my fault.”

Melchior was certainly ambitious as there were not many families who had a network that could dig into this matter faster than his. That the Nott heir was forthright about owning up to what he saw as his flaws was something that Tom considered as the successful result of his conditioning.

What surprised him, however, was the occasional expression of guilt.

He let the silence stretch for a little bit more, to hang between them like bated breath.

“You blame yourself for Hermione’s misfortune,” Tom said suddenly, his own realisation as fresh as his words. It dawned as unexpectedly as a brightly warm winter morning.

The emotion was unforeseen and was one he’d scarcely seen in his men unprompted. If he was naïve, he might have mistakenly thought that Hermione being a damsel-in-distress brought out Melchior’s protective side, but it couldn’t be that. She was the farthest thing from helpless.

“Of course, I do. Ves blamed me enough already.” Melchior said.

The aforementioned wizard sheepishly scratched his curls.

“I was stretchin’ it, Melchy. ‘Tis simply a queered-up business, that’s what. Poor Hermy. I would’ve hectored anyone being the setter all the same.”

Tom blinked. Tybalt didn’t hide his expression of incomprehension as he furtively nudged Gallus, probably asking for a translation while Rufus merely looked cross and proceeded to glare at Ves. Even in their third year, there was at least one exasperated person per day who yelled at Vespasian to ‘speak like a normal person’, especially if Pendleton wasn’t around to give hints. Tom took it as a matter of personal pride that he never did, even if at times it took him a few seconds to process.

That Melchior’s acceptance of responsibility included punishment was a matter of course.

“Melchior, kneel.”

Even as his hands curled into fists, Melchior obeyed without a doubt and he watched it with not a small amount of satisfaction. This was something he’d trained into them too.

What should it be, now?” Tom mused.

Most people’s Crucius was the equivalent of a stomach-ache or at worst a couple of punches. Tom took it as a point of pride that he could wish people pain with a cold-blooded callousness that they’d lose consciousness within two or three minutes.

Hence his pastime of making slight and yet varied modifications to the Crucius to be more local
and more specific. The point of it all was pain, was it not? What use would it be if people pass out too fast, then? Or battered with pain of such extreme intensity that their brains had no basis of comparison to comprehend it? It would strain their mind for some time, even beginning before they hit unconsciousness. As a result, the memory of the torture ended up being hazy or incorrectly remembered. He’d know—he’d carelessly tried it out around third year and saw how dazed the recipients were about their memories (some atavistic reminder somehow stayed in the form of screaming nightmares for weeks, but that was all. *Boring*).

Pain that is not scarred indelibly into memory would fail to function as a reminder and a warning.

A pure Cruciatus might be the preferred spell of the average sadistic Slytherin. With his exceptional talent for torture, it was useless to him for most purposes since *his* Cruciatus was overpowered.

*Ah, I know. Let’s start with fire. A minute would do.*

Tom laid his hand on Melchior’s shoulder and focused on the pain of being burnt alive. The Hogwarts’ mice population had fallen when Tom went looking for test animals, just to make sure he could copy the sensation well. Half of the animals were actually burnt alive; the other half was only inflicted with that particular modified Cruciatus. Without a control group, how would he be able to compare how accurately his spell mimicked the actual pain otherwise?

Melchior screamed.

—

**Chapter End Notes**

In which Dumbledore sort-of figures out that being class-blind or colour-blind* is not an advantage.

*colour-blind in the figurative sense, not in the way that your colour-receiving cells inside your eyeballs have a more limited range than most humans.

**List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:**

**Alhazen:** Latinised name of *Hasan Ibn al-Haytham* (c. 965 – c. 1040), a mathematician, astronomer and physicist of the Islamic Golden Age. Born during the time of the Fatimid dynasty, he made substantial contributions in the field of the principles of optics and visual perception, among others. His most influential work is *Kitāb al-Manāẓir* (كتاب المناطر, "Book of Optics"), written during 1011–1021, which survived in the Latin edition. (All details courtesy of Wikipedia).

I thought I’d just make him a patriarch of his own wizarding family. The current Alhazen family is still based in Egypt, even as some of their members live in other locations and continents.

**Cassegrain, Laurent:** (ca. 1629 – September 1, 1693) a Catholic priest who is notable as the probable inventor of the Cassegrain reflector, a folded two-mirror reflecting telescope design. Details courtesy of Wikipedia.
54 Returns to Hogwarts

Chapter Summary

Exiting St. Mungo’s. Hermione goes out for a cat. A return to Hogwarts. A general warning in Slytherin dungeons with Francis Flint as observer. Late afternoon in the infirmary with an unexpected Slytherin guest. A prefect meeting takes an unpredictable turn or two. Tom indulges in an old hobby of his—watching people. Jonah Rosier has a bad day.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is pretty monstrous in size. It helps to consider it as being made of two parts: the main story and the side story. The side story is an aside to the experience and perspective of one Jonah Rosier and his friends. So…just treat this like two chapters, I guess? After all, it’s around the size of two of my First Arc chapters…

I really appreciate any offers of beta-reading, but...I feel I have to desperately find time/remind myself to upload some times, I don't know whether I can juggle beta-reading between all that

Happy Saka New Year/Hindu New Year to anyone celebrating! That kinda reminds me that it's probably time to drop in at Da'd's grave again now that I've just passed his death day. Almost forgot if the Nee-san/Jiějiě in Australia didn't chat me up on that occasion last week or so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

54 Returns to Hogwarts

They were already walking down the corridors of St. Mungo’s anonymously, tall gothic arches rose and swooped with stately grace above them. The sounds of their footsteps didn’t even echo, a feat that Hermione tended to ascribe more to medieval engineering than wards—it was not absolute, for one, she could still hear their steps click, but that was all. One of these days, she’d figure out how the wizarding world managed to acquire an old and beautiful abbey for their hospital (other than the style, she could see the vestiges of the original floor plan to be able to identify what it used to be).

Hermione was leaning against Tom when she raised the other topic apart from architecture that was currently occupying her mind.

“You want a cat.” Tom stated, one eyebrow raised.

“Or a kneazle, or a half-kneazle, I’m not picky. A familiar. I miss my cats.” She said.

“You’re still unwell.” He pointed out.
“Well, when am I going to get out of Hogwarts again?” Her reply was peevish and she sighed as
she heard the strain in her own voice, still felt the slight weakness in her own body. I’d probably
need at least another proper meal first. “It’s probably not until Christmas hols, is it? Better make
use of this opportunity while it’s there. Come on, one floo trip to the Leaky Cauldron and then it’s
not so far to the Menagerie.”

Hermione was almost certain that he disagreed. To her surprise, he said nothing, merely turning to
the nearest outgoing fireplace. He pronounced Leaky Cauldron for both of them and threw enough
powder for two before they walked into the green flames. Wooden beams covered in soot and
who-knows-what greeted her when she glanced upwards as she arrived, the scent of deep-fried
foods filling the air as they were not far from the door to the kitchen. She’d almost forgot that
Pendleton was with them until he stepped out behind them.

Instead of guiding her out to the back wall leading to Diagon Alley, he procured a seat for them—
Hermione couldn’t help cast Scourgify a few times on the table’s oak surface before she felt
comfortable placing her arm on it. Sometimes, she thought the only thing lacking before the place
looked like a genuine medieval establishment was some fresh rushes over a dirt floor (the current
floor was well-worn wood).

The bartender barely glanced up to see the school-aged people entering. He minded his own
business once it was clear that they weren’t off to some mischief or another.

Her brows creased slightly. “Tom?”

“You’re not taking another step from this place.” The Slytherin stated. With the gravity of his
words, it might as well be a decree.

“I was serious in trying to get a cat.” She said right back.

He nodded with surprising agreement.

“Oh, you will get a cat. I’ll see to it. What Pendleton is going to do, is to go to the Menagerie and
offer to pay five times the price of any cat you’d pick. The catch is that the proprietor must allow
him to take them out of the shop and bring them here for you to choose.” As he said this, he turned
to the other Slytherin, giving a slight nod. She was almost sure that she saw Pendleton sigh, but he
did not pause the slightest in turning around and making his way to the alley proper.

Tom returned his attention to her again, his dark unwavering gaze rather unsettling in the silence.
That was when she realised that he was still taking stock of her condition.

“I’ll be fine,” she said.

“I notice that you said will be, which meant your current condition is a different matter entirely.”
He parried her defence with ease. He stared her down. She met his gaze but couldn’t exactly deny
him.

“Now, I heard Madame Edelstein saying something about how they allowed you no repast before
an encounter with a dementor, so why don’t you tell me what you find interesting from the menu
and we’ll start there?”

Hermione huffed in resignation. Sometimes, there were downsides to Tom being too perceptive by
a half.
The witch shook her head from above the five felines wandering in and out, of various sizes, colours and shapes. She coaxed them back into their cages one by one, with Pendleton giving a hand.

“No. I don’t think I had a strong connection with any of them.” She said.

“Do you want to try your luck with a third group?” Pendleton asked.

The pale Slytherin hadn’t said anything when he diligently brought forth five cat carriers from the Magical Menagerie via floo, through the Leaky Cauldron’s fireplace. The fact that the staff could see him clearly tipping beyond the costs of the floo powder was one of the reasons they let him trudge back and forth. When the first group of cat-kneazles didn’t seem to do it for Hermione, he had wordlessly brought them back again in a few trips before returning several times with new cats.

This time, it seemed even his unusual patience caused him to pause and ask.

Hermione could see Tom’s disapproving glance to his underling and she tried to head off any possible words he was going to have.

“I’m sorry. It’s different trying to find a familiar compared to any pet, you know? Why don’t I just walk over to the Menagerie and see for myself?”

“Hermione,” Tom warned before Pendleton could say anything.

“St. Mungo’s gave me a nutritious meal straight to my stomach with speeded up digestion—and I’ve just eaten again. I’ve got my energy needs covered for now.” She said. “Really, I’m sure I’ll be fine. You can watch every step of the way if you’re not sure.”

Hermione waited because she knew that the silence unnerved some people and Tom used it well. After a while, she knew he’d reached his own decision and seen that she had clarity of mind when she made her suggestion. He nodded and stood up, offering his arm to her; she accepted his assistance without a second thought. Feeling better was one thing, but the brunette witch certainly wasn’t going to gamble on the possibility that she was perfectly fine yet.

Hermione had gone through practically all the cats on display without finding the beginnings of a bond that she was sure she’d get with a familiar. The beleaguered shopkeeper decided to allow her to step to the back, where their more ‘unusual’ creatures are. Most are just those who had been sitting in the store for too long without anyone interested in them. She agreed without a second thought.

“That…is not a kneazle.” Pendleton said, staring at the large creature sitting on the counter. His left flank had a hairless patch from an old battle scar.

The cat was watching him in return with one gimlet eye. The other eye was slightly clouded, but it did not give the impression of blindness.

“Well, they did say that most of the cats here are mixed breeds. It’s what you get relying on actually finding working familiars instead of focusing on appearance.” Hermione explained as she petted the cat. Pendleton hadn’t looked away.
“I was not referring to that. I was referring to how it could tear out my throat if it wanted. Look at the size of that jaw. Did you take him out of a forest?”

Pendleton’s dubious tone had the shopkeeper shaking his head firmly, hands waving, as he insisted that all creatures in the Magical Menagerie are only those capable to be familiars.

“You still didn’t say no.” Pendleton narrowed his eyes, suddenly paying attention to the more unusual birds, the unexpected snakes and foxes. “Perhaps someone gave you a shipment of creatures from the depths of Black Forest, guaranteed to be exotic. Do I need to contact the Magical Creatures Department?”

Hermione half-noticed Tom’s polite-cough-that-wasn’t-a-chuckle since she was more intent with observing the cat critically as they debated.

“He’s been a familiar already!” The wizard insisted.

“Really?” Pendleton asked sceptically.

“Yes! I have the papers to prove it!”

“What if I want to see those?” Pendleton’s voice stayed level even as he followed through with a dogged determination.

Why, yes, those jaws do seem rather large than what most cats have, Hermione thought. Even the closed lips could not fully hide his canines and he had more than one visible scar, including a nasty jagged scar that went down his left eye. The cat eyed her lazily with interest.

“There’s probably some admixture with a wild species or two,” she speculated. It would not be unusual and it was hard to tell either way with his scruffy coat with smudged and unclear tabby stripes. Hermione shook her head. “But he wouldn’t tear your neck—what do you think he is, a wolf? No. Small cats are almost always solitary hunters, going after prey that are smaller than them. Only pack animals dare to hunt larger prey.”

“Like humans, you mean?” Tom added casually.

She grinned at him. “Yes, exactly.”

“I’m not carrying him back.” Pendleton was surprisingly firm in his opinion.

“Of course not,” Hermione answered, “I can carry him.”

Oddly enough, the cat’s expression seemed vaguely like a grin.

“Hermione,” Tom began.

“Or well, he could just…follow me.” She stared back at the cat. The tomcat turned his gaze back to her once her attention returned to him. “You can follow me, right?”

The kneazle-cat meowed once, but otherwise he didn’t move from his sitting position on the counter. The shopkeeper stood a good distance away from the cat.

“Are you sure you’d take him? Not that I’d mind—I’d be too glad to be rid of him—” the wizard took another step back when the cat turned around to stare at him. “Sometimes we do favours too, like when a witch or a wizard dies of old age without any close relative and they left behind a living familiar. Well, Blackie here is one. He wasn’t that old when his old mistress died. Probably
only a year or so.”

“You poor dear.” Hermione patted him gently on the head.

Blackie butted his head against her hand and purred loudly, as unquiet as the engine of an old motorcycle. She ignored Tom’s raised eyebrow or Pendleton’s determined distance.

“Yes, I’ll take him.”

True to her first impressions of the cat, he followed her very well walking down the street with only a collar and no leash. Tom nodded with curt approval when he saw that; she was sure he had a checklist he was mentally ticking off one by one in his head about what an ideal familiar was supposed to be like. Hermione tucked her chin down to hide an amused smile. Whatever your complaints about Tom were, he was methodical when accomplishing tasks.

She’d been about to keep the cat’s old name when Tom interfered. It wouldn’t do, he said, since the name represented the bond that his old mistress had with him. ‘Blackie’ might have represented a juvenile cat expected to keep a retired witch company in her peaceful sunset days. Yet the name certainly did not reflect what his bond with an active witch like her would be like, one who does not even blink at having enemies left and right.

“You’ll have to give him a new name, for a new destiny,” Tom said.

Hermione glanced back and saw how the cat had leaped down from the counter. He was circling Pendleton, who eyed him warily in return. When the blond wizard walked away a little, the feline followed behind, his pace unhurried but without slacking either. Tom actually clicked his tongue at that and shook his head.

“When do you think he’d realise that the more he behaves as a prey, the more the cat is going to toy with him?”

Hermione let out a surprised laughter at that.

“You’re actually right.”

“Of course I am.”

She ignored his superior tone. “I do like Blackie. It’s straightforward. The next name that comes to mind isn’t impressive the least.”

“What is it?”

“Shaggy.”

Tom didn’t stop himself from chuckling then.

“His coat is shaggy! And he looks like a small shag carpet.” She defended herself.

“Yes, because ‘looking like a small shag carpet’ is a rare and valuable talent that all familiars should aspire to. Very…unique.”

Hermione gave him a light shove for that dry observation.

“Not. Helping.”
Before Hermione could pick up any of the accoutrements that one also purchases with a new familiar or pet, Tom had already directed Pendleton to carry all of it.

“Well, if you’re looking for inspiration, my familiar is Typhon.”

She snorted. That was so like him to choose the name of the bane of the Greek gods.

It was not like she had his level of conceit. That was why she simply went with Blackbeard.

“Well, if you’re looking for inspiration, my familiar is Typhon.”

“Hermione! We’ve been so worried about you!” Eugenie expressed her concern even as she flung her arms around the brunette.

Hermione’s friends swarmed her the moment she stepped out of the Head Nurse’s office and she was lost under their hugs; it would seem that they’d been waiting for her return at the infirmary for a while. Tom had easily stepped aside as her friends mobbed her.

Lucretia said what everyone had been thinking, her expression somewhere between concerned and fond as she patted Hermione’s arm.

“It’s good to have you back, Hermione.”

“Hey, everyone,” she greeted weakly.

“I leave you for my social life for one day and suddenly you’re facing dementors in the Ministry?” Lakshmi asked in disbelief. “I can’t leave you alone, can I?”

Are you alright? Really?”

Eugenie was the first to hug her and also the one who held Hermione the longest. She had only released her friend now to scan her appearance from head to toe repeatedly.

“I’m fine. The mediwitches and mediwizards at St. Mungo’s are very used to dealing with it. The procedure is pretty routine,” Hermione said.

“I still feel like you’re glossing over several things.” Julia said, ever sceptical.

“You wouldn’t be wrong,” Tom commented.

He received an annoyed side-glance from Hermione and an expression of vindication from the sixth-year.

“And look, I have a familiar!” Hermione quickly interrupted. “I took the opportunity to drop in at Diagon Alley today. Everyone, say hello to Blackbeard!”

The scarred cat meowed at the sound of his name, sitting calmly on the floor not far from his mistress. Pendleton had called for a Hogwarts’ house elf the moment he stepped off the fireplace and was relieved to be relieved of his burden. Lucretia actually cooed at the cat, who preened at the attention.

“He’s adorable Hermione.”

Hermione grinned. “He is, isn’t he? He’s so fluffy too.”

That sentiment seemed to be uniquely Lucretia’s, though. The other Ravenclaw witches stared at
the cat, his off-putting size (he came to Hermione’s knee) and rather grizzled appearance and was
at loss for bland, nice words to say. What does one say when your friend brings a young footpad
that failed to rob them home with the intention of adopting him? Cute was not a word on anyone’s
mind then. What almost all of them could agree on, however, was to level various looks of
disbelief and accusation at Tom.

“You took her shopping?” Lakshmi voiced her incredulity. “When she should be in bed?”

“We got taken shopping.” Pendleton couldn’t help but defend Tom. Lucretia glanced at him
curiously.

On the other hand, Tom raised both of his hands in a gesture of surrender, his expression bland.

“I can either accompany her or she would find a way to do it herself, possibly straining her current
condition even worse. I assure you, she was having a comfortable and filling meal in the Leaky
Cauldron most of the time as Pendleton went back and forth between the establishment and the
Menagerie to ferry cats and kneazles.”

“Merlin helped me, but I did.” Pendleton muttered. It earned him a sympathetic look from Eugenie
as well as Julia’s look of pity. Yet it also spoke of companionship, that he had now joined her in
this incomprehensible journey. The corners of Pendleton’s mouth lifted marginally.

“I’m just a little drained. Really, it’s not that big of a deal.” Hermione said in exasperation.

Of course, at this point, Madame Edelstein just had to arrive and deal a blow to that particular
statement of hers. The nurse thanked Tom for escorting Hermione back, ushered Hermione to sit in
a bed and stay there. Maggie then shooed her friends out by telling them they could visit again in
the afternoon after Hermione had rested. Between all this, she and Hermione argued on the finer
details of what exactly it meant to have hypoglycaemia compounded with dementor exposure as
well as the seriousness of said experience.

“Not to mention that you haven’t lost all signs of your last encounter with a dark wizard!” The
nurse threw the words out in exasperation.

To Hermione’s credit, it really wasn’t her fault that her sense of what was ‘fine’ had been built
from the back-to-back raids on dark zealot raids, during the critical days when the Auror force was
still undermanned and secrecy was important. She was a little too used to pushing her body to the
limits.

This time, she did resign herself to sleeping in the infirmary as Maggie took the copy of her medical
charts that she’d made. At least the nurse did make a concession to allow Blackbeard to
accompany his mistress. The cat promptly made himself comfortable at the foot of her bed.

’-

The Slytherin common room was in a state of hushed anticipation that afternoon.

Francis Flint had large bones on firm and solid frame that already exceeded many adult wizards’
even at his current age. Add his workable coat that did not have that high fashion look many
purebloods’ do, and he might not even look out of place bellowing for order in a rowdy tavern and
smashing tables to those who didn’t listen to him. The fact that he seemed like a boor most of the
time was no reason to treat him as one—that, Tom considered, was just walking right into his trap.
Currently, there was amusement in his eyes.

“You asked for a meeting, Riddle?” His voice boomed. He didn’t leave his wing-backed chair as
he said this.

Tom didn’t make any effort to approach him and stood a nice distance away. Their two groups were tense with expectation, the Slytherin common room mostly quiet save for the crackling of the fireplace.

“Oh, nothing too complicated. I just need to straighten out some misunderstandings.” Tom answered idly, waving a hand at that.

The two of them had met privately before now. They knew exactly what was going on. It didn’t mean they didn’t have to put on a bit of a show for everyone else.

“Really? I thought you were doing a spot of art appreciation this afternoon.” Flint said as he stood up. Even merely standing as he was, his stature was enough to intimidate the faint-hearted.

“I might have.” His answer was careless even as the other Slytherin stalked forward. Tom was talking to the carved snakes decorating the supporting pillars and fireplace edge of their common room.

“Now, I’m just here to give a warning to the more ignorant.” Tom finished.

“What?”

“That small inheritance issue I told you about before.”

Flint stopped only a few steps away from him. His friends at his shoulders and seemed far more prepared for the possibility of violence breaking out than him.

“Francis—” one of them called.

“Quiet.” His voice lashed out against all of them, sharp with command.

The other seventh-year was obeyed immediately. Flint’s attention had never left Tom.

“Ah. You still don’t control the strongest proof, I take it?”

Tom shrugged. “It would come sooner or later. I am content with following our previous agreement, of not officiating things unless I have practically all the evidence. Yet I can’t accept idiots crossing me in the meantime due to their ignorance…simply because they think I’m an easy prey.”

Their gaze met. The Flint heir still had the same amusement he held at the beginning. “Oh, a lesson? Ah, go ahead. I’ll enjoy the entertainment.”

To his companion’s surprise, Francis Flint returned to his seat without further ado. They didn’t have much time to react before the stone snakes on the walls and the fireplace slithered out, settling in vague line in front of Tom. There was more than one yelp of surprise, along with the screams of the few younger years who’d been ignorant of the atmosphere in the common room and hadn’t made themselves scarce.

The calm and steady Pendleton had wordlessly settled himself to being treated as a movable tree by Tom’s almost pitch-black python. If he was put upon, no one could see it in his unbothered expression. There was a noticeable clearing around him as no other Knights stood too close to him. Tom turned to his pet and hissed an order.
“Typhon, pull back anyone who is trying to escape.”

The snake hissed back in Parseltongue while slithering down from Pendleton.

“Gladly, Speaker.”

A blustering, red-faced companion of Flint was a little slow on the uptake.

“W-w-what are you talking about, Riddle?”

Tom turned to face the fool again, a small smile on his face.

“I’ll simplify this for you. I’m the Heir of Slytherin. Don’t get in my way.”

“You’re not—you couldn’t be—”

He tapped the head of one of the stone snakes instead. The animated sculpture turned to him.

“Take that idiot down, will you? Thank you.”

The other Slytherin screamed, senseless with fear, as the stone snake coiled around him with lightning speed. He was wriggling on the floor now, unable to move from the bands of stone encircling him. As Tom gazed up again, he saw the other seventh-years taking an involuntary step back.

“There. Does anyone see that? Parseltongue. Yes, I speak it. Anyone else who think I might just be making fake hissing sounds?”

No one stepped forward.

“I did say that there was a good reason to leave him alone,” Flint idly commented. “And I told you all to leave him alone.”

“You didn’t say you respected him!”

Francis roared with laughter for a moment, before easing off quickly, staring at the mouthy idiot with a flat mien.

“Do you really think I’d leave off someone that I thought was annoying and insignificant?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, brushing the other wizard off immediately. Francis Flint nodded to Tom to signal that he was done.

Mrs. Cole always loved reminding the orphans that it was their manners that would show how civilised they are, how far they are from the common riff-raff. He agreed. Really, politeness costs you nothing and a kind word here and there goes a long way.

“Anyone? Take your time, I’m not in a rush.” Tom asked the room again, pleasantly.

The stone snakes began to circle the wizards, a few were blocking the retreat of several spectators.

Flint leaned back and clicked his fingers. A second-year boy ran off and returned after fetching him a drink from some hidden latch at some point in the room. Tom wasn’t concerned—he’d probably be told the secret by the time Francis Flint graduated.

The dark-haired wizard took another step forward to reduce the distance between them.
“I may not have the absolute evidence for now, but my patience is running out. I don’t know which one of you is responsible for Hermione’s plight, but believe me, I’ll find out.” He spoke calmly.

Balthazar Burke was the only other Slytherin that was sitting down other than Francis Flint, but that was mainly because he didn’t even get up in the first place. He was only loosely associated with Flint, and he’d found his thick tome more interesting than his current House drama. His scruffy head bobbed up; he’d raised his hand in the air even as he shuddered and allowed one of the stone snakes to crawl over him.

“You know it wasn’t me, don’t you? There’s no way I started anything that stupid.”

Tom nodded, a corner of his lips quirking upwards slightly. “Oh, I know, Burke. Can’t let you off without some kind of check since I don’t have unassailable evidence of your non-involvement either. It wouldn’t be fair to everyone else, would it?” He asked, with all the mock gravitas he could summon.

“Drats. As long as you make it quick, then.”

His casual words contrasted with the way he assiduously tried not to look at the snake still binding him.

“Certainly. Sorry about the inconvenience.” Tom kept his tone almost cheerful.

Someone whimpered in the background. Typhon had circled the room and pushed back any sneaking student that managed to slip past the stone snakes—there were no comparing the intelligence of constructs and living creatures, really. Even if they weren’t involved, it did not matter. Young Jonah Rosier handed some of his snacks with ease to a snivelling classmate that had just been pulled back by the python. The first-year opened another bag of Three Broomsticks’ homemade crisps before sighing and passing a handkerchief when he realised his companion was dribbling snot.

There was no leaving once the show has started and that applies to the audience too.

Tom turned to everyone else. This time, he smiled.

“Now, where were we?”

’-

It was only because Hermione was still in the infirmary that she noticed Ves’ incursion into it. She hadn’t woken up for long from her admittedly nice nap. Blackbeard’s ears also turned in the direction of the noise, but he did not bother to stir except to open one eye.

“Ves?”

Ves Starkey stopped skulking his way across the infirmary and gingerly approached her bedside, his hands in his pockets and his lopsided newsboy cap hiding part of his face.

“Hullo, Hermione. How’re you feelin’ now?”

“I’m good, actually. If only Nurse Edelstein will let me go now.” She said.

“Ah, well. A little rest isn’t bad for anyone.”

“Which is the only reason why I didn’t just go back to the Ravenclaw Tower.”
He nodded at her reply. It was only as he rolled back on his heels, awkwardly hanging there without saying another word that she was curious.

“Did you actually break the normal visiting hours just to see me?”

His eyes widened comically at that. “Bleeding hell, no! Tom’s going to turn my guts into garters for th’ presumption. No, I was just…”

“Just…?”

“Nothing. Takin’ a walk for a bit. Nothin’ wrong with that, is there?” His tone was slightly defensive. The colour high on his cheekbones was a lot more entertaining.

She raised an eyebrow. “Because it’s so very easy to break into the infirmary…and avoiding Madame Edelstein’s attention while you do it. All this for a walk.”

“Well, yeah? A little challenge is good for the blood.” He replied.

“Uh huh.” She folded her arms in front of her chest and stared him down.

He shrugged, seeming for all intents and purposes to be casual and uncaring. Well, she already knew that he wasn’t one that would easily buckle under pressure.

“Alright. So, you’ve ‘walked’ to my end. What are you going to do now? Walk back out?”

“I might.” He said, yet he made no moves to do so.

“Fine.”

It was while they were staring eat other down like this that he began to fidget. She noticed his twitching fingers.

“Aren’t you going to do something else?” Vespasian asked.

“Well, I have nothing else to do but sit here,” she carelessly said.

“Like, dunno, *sleep*, maybe?”

He sounded a little hopeful that she couldn’t help but tweak him a little. She didn’t hide her smile.

“What, because you want to keep standing there and watch me sleep? I hear it’s the romantic thing to do.” Hermione fluttered her eyelashes with exaggeration, enjoying herself too much.

*Flap-dragon filled *fussocks* and *hog-grubber gouty goats*—” she could see him biting off more swear words, scratching the back of his head in annoyance so hard that he had to grab his hat before it fell off. He fixed it on his head again, this time a little lopsided to the right.

“Merlin’s underpants, Hermione! You know I don’t think that way, leastways when I’d as lief keep my head and limbs where they are.”

Hermione laughed at his curses and complaints, and the ruddy colouring that didn’t seem as if it was going to go anywhere now. “Oh, fine. Go off and do whatever it was you were about to do. Don’t mind me.”

Ves stared at her with doubt.
“Really, can’t you sleep? Or, well, go to the ladies’ powder room?”

She raised an eyebrow at him and couldn’t help but smirk. “Ves. Really, I’m not going to snitch on you.”

“Uh, right you are.”

“Yes. Go on.” She waved him away, while he couldn’t help but watch her warily, a fox uncertain if he’d avoided the hounds of the hunt or not.

He walked away slowly, back towards the tall doors leading to the hallway, but she didn’t believe for a second that it was his original intent. When he did carefully open the door, she simply merrily waved him goodbye before looking around, hoping that someone had left her some reading materials. There was a bouquet of flowers, which was signed by her friends and Professor Sprout —well, she mused, that explains where they found the dahlias and colourful chrysanthemums. She couldn’t find any book around her bed, to her disappointment, but she did find her box of chocolate truffles.

There was a note attached to it.

*For when you’re bored. Heaven knows I’d want to munch on something delicious.*

- *Lakshmi.*

Hermione grinned. Well, Lakshmi wasn’t exactly wrong. As she opened it and started picking one of the chocolate squares, she realised that it was the one Tom gave her on that picnic day. It was to congratulate her on getting well and leaving the infirmary. It was still surprising for her to realise that it hadn’t been a month.

Ten minutes later, Hermione thought she could recall where Nurse Edelstein kept her Cook’s *Encyclopaedia* and decided to retrieve that for a light read. If she was feeling fine an hour after waking, she was going to check herself out of the infirmary, she decided, conveniently not remembering that if Nurse Edelstein was around, she probably wouldn’t even get the permission to do so.

An hour after that, she was too engrossed in her random reading to remember her initial plan. At one point, she’d decided to check out the common wolfsbane species in the UK and was hopping from one page to another based on that (she thought with some amusement that it was the traditional form of wiki-walking before the age of Wikipedia and its hyperlinks).

The thud of the door closing was soft, but Hermione had gone on enough stakeout for her alertness to instantly rise at the sound.

Her gaze met that of Ves’, frozen at the entrance.

“Hi. About to finish what you started?” She asked nicely.

The Ravenclaw didn’t speak loudly. Yet being the only person in a hall with good acoustics meant that her voice carried well. Even from this distance, she could see that Ves’ shoulders visibly drooped.

“Aww crap, you’re still here.”

“Yes.”
“Would y’like me to escort you back to the Ravenclaw Tower?” As he came closer, he was suddenly all polite attention. She shook her head.

“Nope. I’m happy to stay where I am. I need to get enough rest, you see?” Hermione said with a serious expression. Never mind that she’d been plotting her escape an hour ago.

He drifted to a stop at the bottom of her bed. She opened her box of chocolate.

“Want one?”

He sighed, a hand rubbing the back of his neck.

“Oh, what the hell. Yes, I’d like one, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Hermione beamed when he picked one.

“Swear you won’t tell anyone, then?”

She rolled her eyes. “If you’re not harming people, it’s not any of my business. I’ll just say I was asleep in the infirmary that I don’t know for sure if anyone visited between the time I fell asleep and when I left.”

“Fair enough.”

With that, he plopped the caramel-filled chocolate (she checked the pictures so she knew exactly which one it was) and strode off towards the Head Nurse’s office. Hermione didn’t really understand what he was after. She also wasn’t the stickler for all rules that her younger self was either that she was content to watch him for now. It was only when he walked out with a particular bottle that she figured out his purpose.

She narrowed her eyes. That milky pearlescent sheen, the shade of dark bluebells, was a rather distinct colour for a potion.

“Hold a minute—”

Ves threw his hands in the air. “Oh, come on, Hermione. I thought you said you’re staunch cove —”

“That’s a rather strong painkiller. What are you taking it for?”

If she didn’t know that too frequent usage was going to induce dependency, she wouldn’t have been concerned. He scoffed.

“A body needs it, obviously, and there’s no time to brew one. What? You thought I was going to quaff it meself? Perish the thought!”

“Someone might pay a good sum for it,” Hermione noted.

“And I,” he drolly pointed out, “needed extra quids like a bull needed a pair of tits.”

Her laughter broke free like a flock of starlings taking flight—disorienting and unexpectedly mesmerising. He rubbed his face with his hand as he realised just what exactly he’d said; the tips of his ears were red.

“Right. Let’s forget I said that and jus’ stick to the general sentiment o’ things. I’ll even slip it back once I’m done. Easy peasy.”
There was something unabashed and frank about Ves that showed he didn’t even consider trying to lie to her as something to do. With a discomfiting pang, she was reminded of her Gryffindor boys awkwardly stumbling through their words even as they went in and out of one mess or another. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

“Who’s hurt?”

“Everyone’s fine.”

“Who’s that for, then?” She pointed at the potion still in his hand. She saw the second where his hands stilled, when his feet were not as ready to take flight as they had been a moment before.

“If someone’s hurt, then it’s better if you have an actual healer checking up on them, right? They don’t have to go to the infirmary if they don’t wish to. I can see them.”

“It’s just to help sleep in for a bit,” Ves said. He said this easily, but she was still sure something was a little off. He was sidling sideways bit by bit. “I know it’s a ruddy heavy potion—me gran’s a potioneer, remember? Master Apothecarist too, fer that matter. M’not going to exceed the dose. It’s just for one night, Hermy. Ta!”

He kept ambling away, waving his free hand in a haphazard way at her. She snorted. It was too obvious how he decided to beat a retreat before she pried too many information from him.

Should she be more worried that apparently, some Hogwarts students are a little too familiar with how to use a heavy painkiller? It’s not as if she could throw stones. That accursed scar that Bellatrix gave her needed something stronger than aspirin to numb when the dark magic in it was agitated. It usually happened in the days when she forgot to keep track how long she stayed in the department’s Vault, where they kept the artefacts that they’ve confiscated that were practically dribbling with dark magic. She didn’t know that the high concentration of dark magic ended up seeping in and coalescing with the dormant patch in the wound, but the first time the agony hits was a lesson she wouldn’t forget (neither would St. Mungo’s A&E ward, she suspected).

She had to take that potion the shade of the darkest bluebells just to be able to sleep peacefully. It took downing two bottles to ease it.

Hermione sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Well, I can always figure out who’s actually hurt later. If it was serious, it would last until Monday and I can see who’s not in class.

‘-

Her hand caressed the scar from her fight with Bellatrix. It was a reflex that had become a habit by now when she was idle. She was so lost in thoughts that she didn’t notice the difference until just now.

The skin was smooth, practically flawless.

Hermione couldn’t help but turn her arm and she stared at the bare flesh. There was no scar, no marks of dark magic on her flesh of any kind. The slight ache in the muscle there that happens when the air was too cool was no more, but she was either too occupied with larger wounds and pains that easily eclipsed it or she was busy with her new life.

Motes of dust danced in the air as she kept staring, fingers stroking the skin from elbow to wrist and back again.

“It’s not possible,” she murmured, to herself. “It’s one of the darkest arts. I know it.”
The best of St. Mungo’s had come and seen it. They’ve tried to heal it, to remove it, to extract the dark magic there. It wasn’t possible to remove, though they’ve made progress in draining the taint bit by bit, but that was very slow, almost unnoticeable.

Even if Malina had managed to complete some version of her youth rejuvenation potion and de-aged her body somehow, the scar would still be there, would still brand her like the cattle that Bellatrix saw her as.

But nothing like that existed here. She pinched the skin there to be sure, rolled it between her fingertips. All thoughts stopped in her mind as she gave herself fully to enjoying the sensation of the smooth skin once more, of making observations on the healthy unmarked flesh.

Her mind shied away from further thoughts and speculations for now, almost too afraid of what it might find there.

The prefects were gathered in the Prefect Office.

It didn’t look like much of an office; in fact, it looked just like any other Hogwarts classroom. The only difference was that there was a pile of unused desks and chairs were piled on one side. Mismatched couches and sofa with a smattering of side tables filled the centre over a faded Persian carpet, looking for all the world like a group of auction-house rejects. Every era has made at least one bad design decision for their furniture, such as the tacky 19th century imitation of Louis XV style. For some reason the garish, obnoxious or just plain drab works ended up here.

There was a reason why most prefects scarcely even mentioned the place to other people. Compared to Hogwarts’ standards for their public spaces like the dorms, common room and library, it wasn’t worth writing home about. It was even more obvious for purebloods with antique-filled manors. The prefect’s room was more of an embarrassment.

No, this was not the original prefect room—that one was grand. How it came to be…unvisited anymore involved griffin conservation, a prank, a mountain of pie, and the consequent takeover of that particular corner by nature (red in tooth and claw). But that’s a long story on its own.

For now, we’re back in this patchwork room.

There was one long table with two dozen chairs around it near the wall with the door leading outside, yet between comfort and hard wooden chairs, that was rarely used except for meetings where generating paperwork was inevitable. The side door that would lead to the supplies closet in a normal classroom was actually the archives.

Being a prefect might not seem to require much, but over a hundred years, those routine patrol routes and meeting notes pile up. Nobody could remember the last time anyone needed to construct a patrol route from scratch. Timaeus’ father said that he and his friends just rifled through the old patrol routes for alternatives when people’s schedules clash—and the man had been a prefect in the first decade of the century.

Currently, most of them were tired and spent. They were thus spread rather haphazardly around several couches and sofa. If they didn’t look tired, they certainly looked annoyed.

Andrew Abbott, his tie still in place and golden hair perfectly done, cleared his throat.

“Right. I think we can all agree that we’ve seen problems during patrol that we need to deal with.”
Timaeus snorted but said nothing. Considering the cold-compress bag he was pressing against his arm (from an infirmary visit), his bad mood was understandable. The other prefects were either only waiting or was watching everyone else’s movements.

“I heard that many of us were breaking up arguments.” As Head Girl, Agatha followed up her brother’s statement when nobody did. “What happened? How bad was it?”

The blonde witch glanced around, expecting a reply.

A sigh came from the direction of the Gryffindor sixth-years.

“Some arguing first-years aren’t much to talk about,” Philippe commented from where he was sprawling, red-and-gold tie already loosened and his long braid trailing over the left couch arm. “Their too-serious expressions might even be funny, but it does get annoying by the third fight you have to break up.”

Ceres shook her head from his side on the same couch. Her expression was nowhere as light-hearted as her partner.

“Three fights in one afternoon is a bit too much.” She said.

“You’re not the only who had to do that” A Hufflepuff wizard huffed loudly.

“Well, that just shows how bad it is, isn’t it, Emmerich?” Philippe interrupted the Hufflepuff. His gaze was nowhere as laidback as his pose suggests.

The sixth-year Emmerich Pryce shrugged. “The younger students will always be rowdy. We all know this.”

Julia spoke up from across the main coffee table, arms folded.

“Funny how you fail to mention the topic of their argument.”

“The lower years will always find something to argue about.”

“No, this is unusual” Verrault cut in, staring at the Hufflepuff from his year. His scowl was one that was noticeable for miles. “The number of arguments, the topic, both are unusual.”

Julia nodded. It was one of the rarer times that she agreed with her uptight Ravenclaw year-mate. “I was patrolling right next to you, Emmerich, and I know exactly what they’re arguing about. Even two fights started for the same reason is worth looking into, while what we have here is more than that.”

Her eyes went around the room, meeting the other prefects’.

“How many of the arguments you saw were about the Order of Merlin award?” The brunette asked outright.

“All of them.” Ceres answered, as Pip was more interested in simply dropping his head back on the couch.

“Mordred? Emma?” Agatha asked. Her head turning to the knot of Slytherins who were a little too calm.

“All of them.” Emma answered briskly, apparently speaking up for Mordred Montmorency and Oswin Orpington who sat near her, as they didn’t add anything else.
“Yes, well…they do have a good reason.” Alvis Boot had a face that was as sombre as a crow and it was even graver today. He spoke slowly, methodically, as if a mispronounced word would physically hurt him. The look that the Ravenclaw fifth-year gave Andrew was pointed.

The Head Boy sighed, his usually bright smile dimming. “I’ve turned it down, Alvis. As I’m sure you—and everyone else in Hogwarts—know.”

“That’s not what the newspapers say.” Augusta said.

He frowned. “What newspapers?”

A flicker of disbelief flitted past Emma’s face, but it was gone in the next second that scarcely anyone noticed. Julia’s raised eyebrows, however, was clear for anyone to see as she snapped her head towards Andrew. Philippe had sat up, frowning a little even as Ceres held her left hand firmly in her right. Everyone could feel the rising tension in the room.

“The evening edition of more than a few of them.”

Tom finally spoke up. Heads turned towards him the way other fishes create a path without much thought when a shark was about to swim through.

“What evening edition?” Andrew was still baffled.

“It’s not a regular edition, I know, but the papers do print them in addition to the morning one on extraordinary occasions.” His tone was conversational.

Tom rose up from the modest armchair he’d chosen, the waves of his black hair as impeccable as Andrew’s. In his hands were several of the newest editions of wizarding newspapers, a few were in French. He even had a rare a Polish one mainly because he thought Kosinski would appreciate it (Ves played distraction by chatting up Slughorn about his final project—Abraxas slipped away through his fireplace to buy them in London).

He dropped them on the coffee table. Kosinski, who had yet to speak, was the first to pick one up—the Polish one, as Tom expected. The Hufflepuff’s brows creased. Ceres picked another and soon everyone who didn’t know found out what Tom meant.

There was a grand announcement on how this year’s Order of Merlin award ceremony was pushed forward by a month with regards to the heroism shown in the Hogsmeade attack by a valorous Hogwarts student.

“Dammit, Andrew!” Pip cursed. “I don’t care about mine myself, but you’ve got to admit that Hermione deserves it more than you.”

Even Eugenie Delacour was frowning at the headline. Alvis Boot’s expression didn’t improve.

“I never said yes!” Andrew said.

“But that’s your father shaking hands with the undersecretary right there.” Augusta rebutted, pointing at the front page.

Her Gryffindor year mate, Raj, had no words to spare; he had already thrown the Daily Prophet he’d picked up with vehemence. It laid carelessly on the table. Currently, he was walking in circles behind them, trying to rein back his anger. He might not blame the Abbott heir right now, but it was probably a close thing.
“Frankly, Andrew, if you get one, it’s only fair if Pip and Ceres get one too, and maybe Timaeus.”

Timaeus didn’t look the slightest bit offended at being considered only after the sixth-years. He merely nodded back at Augusta.

“Even Tom would deserve one.”

That Verrault was the one who voiced it still surprised some of them. That he said it through gritted teeth surprised no one.

“Hmm.” Augusta nodded with reluctant agreement, her expression intimidating.

Clearly, she still had some house loyalty as a Gryffindor—a long-time rival of Slytherin—yet she was as straightforward as most of her House and it showed. “I won’t even argue about that.”

“He could decide to award it to all of us,” Andrew insisted.

Daedalus’ smile was entirely cynical. The Ravenclaw turned to his year mate and Head Boy but said nothing, only shaking his head. Even Timaeus exhaled harshly at that.

“What?”

“If you still can’t see it right now, I’m not going to be the one to break the news.” Daedalus said.

“It’s still possible.” He insisted. “I wrote a request about it to the Minister of Magic myself.”

Daedalus simply gave him the same half-smile he had before. As he leaned forward, his bangs partly shaded his eyes, his expression not easily read.

“A letter for what?”

That was Ethel Macmillan. She always had a kind word to say for anyone (and she was also the weaker choice for prefect in her year compared to Camellia Lee by his dispassionate analysis). It was unsurprising to see her asking what Tom considered to be a bloody obvious question.

“A plea that he will instead award it to all of us who had actually participated in Hogsmeade’s Defence. It will be a farce if I was the only one awarded the order—everyone in Hogsmeade knew who was involved.” The Head Boy finished.

Tom had his elbows on his knees, his chin resting just behind his clasped hands as he watched all this unfold. No one saw the slight smile that grew when he saw the Head Boy’s trust in humanity—simply because he was looking forward to seeing it being battered by men’s ambition and stupidity. Such immense trust was an unfathomable state of mind to him.

He himself never had much to begin with.

“Right,” Raj drawled. “Because a letter couldn’t possibly get lost.”

“It’s not just that. We all saw the undersecretary fawning at you in that thrice-cursed meeting.” For all her honesty, Amelia’s tone was kinder to her housemate.

Andrew’s forehead creased. “What is he going to do, force it on me if I said no? He can’t do that.”

Tom was certain he heard Mordred’s indelicate snort. The Head Boy didn’t hear it by virtue being on the other end of the room.
“That’s the wrong question to consider, Andrew.”

Oswin finally spoke up just a chair away at Tom’s right, at the other end of the table from the Head Boy. The room’s attention followed the careful Slytherin. “A better question would be, can you turn down your father’s request? What if he was already so proud about his son, the next Order of Merlin recipient before he’s out of Hogwarts, that he’s already written letters about it to more than one of his friends?’’

“Would you refuse it and turn him into a fool in front of his colleagues, of the other heads of old houses at the Wizengamot? Do you want them to laugh at your father behind his back in this case? Would you cause professional harm to him and reputational harm to your House?”

Andrew’s face quickly paled as Amelia pinched the bridge of her nose.

“This is why I don’t like politics.’’

Emmerich Pryce’s expression was cooler when he turned to Oswin.

“Did you know that all the fights I saw, as well as the one that Casimir saw, almost always involved Slytherins? Funny coincidence, isn’t it?” Pryce mentioned the other Hufflepuff prefect. Tom recalled seeing them chat before the meeting started.

Casimir Kosinski was startled out of his peaceful reading of a newspaper. He had both of his palms in front of him now as he shook his head, a wordless plea of ‘please don’t involve me in this’ that the other wizard seemed to ignore. He sent an eloquent look to Amelia Bones and Ethel Macmillan instead, hoping that the remaining Hufflepuff prefects would assist him.

Amelia did not look too pleased about their housemate’s antics either.

“Yes, it’s a funny coincidence,” was Oswin’s level reply.

“One might think you’re raising a ruckus for a reason.” Pryce retorted.

“If anyone’s raising a ruckus, I’d like to think they do have a reason. It’s more frightening to hear that someone’s spreading chaos with no sense nor purpose to it.” He did not manage to sound as offhand as Tom could, but his levelheadedness was enough.

“Your house isn’t satisfied that Tom didn’t get one and now they’re sabotaging Andrew’s opportunity!”

Tom only glanced innocently back when Pryce turned to him. He made a careless shrug. Who, me?

“That’s enough, Emmerich,” Andrew cut in. His tone brooked no arguments and his opinionated housemate backed off.

It was on time too, because Tom knew that both he and Oswin had been watching Mordred, who had a shorter fuse than either of them. The sixth-year Slytherin was outright frowning at Emmerich for what he considered to be an apparent slight against his house.

The Head Boy seemed a little sheepish as he turned to Tom. “Tom, I’m sorry—”

“Oh, it’s not your fault. If you need the clarification, I’ll tell you frankly that it certainly wasn’t my mess—I already have enough on my hands, remember? Coordinating the search for Grindelwald’s location? It’s not as if I’ve forgotten how he said that my birth isn’t something I can rise beyond.” The way he held himself was relaxed, and he was truly telling the truth there (he wasn’t the one
who had a problem with the Order of Merlin award—that would be Orion Black). At least half of the prefects visibly cringed at the words. Andrew’s expression of guilt was easily readable and distinct.

Tom leaned back in his armchair before crossing his ankles on the ottoman. He was the most relaxed of all of them in the room.

“I see no reason to try changing his mind when it’s clear that it’s one of the things he fully believes in. Trying to convert a believer would just be a complete waste of efforts, wouldn’t it?”

It would keep Pryce quiet for a while, he knew. Even if Emmerich Pryce himself had doubts, and his sixth-year partner was the too-soft-hearted Ethel Macmillan, there was still Amelia Bones who was currently glaring at Pryce to keep his mouth shut and stop making the Hufflepuffs look petty, since the Head Boy and the Head Girl had other things to deal with.

The next time the Hufflepuff sixth-year was about to cause a ruckus, Tom saw Kosinski ‘accidentally’ spilling his tea into Pryce’s lap.

The Head Girl stepped into the gap in the discussion.

“These talks of awards are all well and good, but for most of us, our responsibility is still to keep the peace in Hogwarts…”

Agatha had smoothly moved the meeting forward again for some time on how to address the rise in conflicts among the Hogwarts’ student body.

Tom noticed that the issue that Oswin had raised was not addressed again—not that he thought Andrew would speak of his father’s affairs in public, but he did not even make some sort of overture to talk about it later to his Slytherin year mate. Neither did Andrew assuaged Emmerich’s suspicions against Slytherins completely, as could be seen from the occasional suspicious glance he sent to Mordred. It would certainly be interesting to see how Andrew would face his father, not that he had any hopes of watching when it occurred.

The Gryffindors, however, didn’t manage to hide their dissatisfied expressions as well as either the Ravenclaws or the Slytherins and a small grin grew on his face.

_Time to watch the fireworks._

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Side Story – Jonah’s Bad Day

Mondays were always a pain in the rear, but Jonah Rosier never expected to feel like he was forced into the role of the buffoonish Pierrot in some grand tragicomic act. Of course, he hadn’t the slightest idea about it as the day dawned. Oblivious, he walked out of his dorms with a spring in his step, convinced that his luck was turning for the better since Tom Riddle had given him tasks, _personally_, more than once.

Maybe he was even going to be a Knight next year! Life was good.

The Slytherin first-year had just tightened his green-and-silver scarf as he walked out of the building, chatting with his friend when he heard someone calling his name.

“Jonah!”
He turned around without much thought. It was only once he saw who was waving energetically (Gryffindor tie included) that he had to suppress a groan.

“Do you know him?” his friend asked.

“A bit.”

Blaine raised both of his thick eyebrows. “A bit? Does that count as knowing or not knowing? I don’t think I recognise his face. Is he some Diggory cousin? Crowdy? Some other family?”

“He’s not from one of the old families, alright.” Jonah answered through half-closed mouth. It did not stop him from awkwardly waving back at Adrian Smith. He hoped Blaine would leave it at that. After all, Smith got his name from Tom Riddle, the one student that Gallus did not beat around the bush about.

He couldn’t exactly brush off someone the Heir of Slytherin entrusted to him, could he?

“Not one of the old families?” Blaine sputtered.

“Shut it, Carrow. It’s complicated, right? It’s business I got trusted with through my brother, who got it from the Heir. If you know what’s good for you, shut up. Otherwise, complain to him.” He hissed, before looking mildly friendly again as he turned back to Adrian.

Most people would’ve found the speed his expressions changed to be vaguely unsettling, but his friend was too used to it and Smith was…he had no idea what it was with Smith, actually, as the Gryffindor actually cheered up after Jonah waved back and hurried even more towards them.

Blaine Carrow shut up, even if it made his round cheeks look even closer to a chipmunk’s as he held back a frustrated breath. **At least there were benefits to being a younger sibling,** Jonah mused. Your older brother could pave the way a bit and teach you stuff faster than other kids would’ve learned them on their own. Especially more so when there were rumours that he was involved in some important secret society. Especially when Blaine’s brother was also a member of the same society.

“What is it Smith?” Jonah finally asked, his left hand in his pocket as he leaned back on the nearest wall in nonchalance.

“I told you already, it’s Adrian.” Smith insisted, his expression too genuine to Jonah’s own discomfort. He should stop being so readable.

“Fine, Adrian. What is it?” His tone was lazy.

“I thought I’d say hello. You’re going to Herbology, right?”

Jonah watched him carefully. What was he going on about? His answer was guarded. “…yes?”

“Great! I’m going to Herbology too. We could sit together.”

Jonah had already bit his lip before he could say anything, but Carrow took that moment to groan. He kicked his friend’s shin. Was today one of the rare days when Spore was going to have one humongous class of four houses together because it was less hands-on and she wanted to get the overview out of the way quickly? There was no way to avoid Adrian through the whole class.

He was majorly screwed whatever choice he made.
Jonah took a breath and spoke instead of complaining. “By the way, Adrian, this is Blaine Carrow, my dormmate. Blaine, this is Adrian Smith, Tom Riddle gave him my name.”

“Oh, pleased to meet you!”

Adrian didn’t even blink at Jonah’s words. Blaine, however, understood his message and swallowed his complaints.

“Um. Right. Likewise.”

Jonah wasn’t paying much attention to either of them, as he was suddenly aware of that annoying prickling at the back of his neck. When he turned around, he was greeted with the sight of a group of Gryffindors giving him the stink eye. They might be glaring Adrian, but they sure as hell didn’t stop at Jonah. Not that the Gryffindor seemed to feel that anything was wrong in sitting with the ‘friend’ he has that’s from Slytherin.

Jonah sighed. Adrian really has no idea about House rivalry, does he?

He should ignore them. He should pretend they’re not there at all, as Gallus had told him once on how to deal with idiots. Third-year Alauda told him that it’s because they’re jealous of something he has that they don’t. His older siblings had never given him a wrong advice when it came to Hogwarts stuff, and he would do well to follow their example—

One snot-nosed witch whom he was sure was a pureblood from the shape of her nose was saying something that made her friends laugh or titter, and they were all giving side-eyes in his general direction.

That was it. Like hell was he going to be grown-up about this. What was that thing that Ves taught him? He could use that.

Jonah pumped his right hand upwards from his side, the palm facing towards him. His left hand was at the inner elbow. He unabashedly gave them the two-finger salute.

Up yours, mate.

That pissed them off. There was no way it was going to end peacefully. He couldn’t bring himself to regret it, especially since Blaine and Adrian caught on to what he was doing and tried to copy his gesture (Blaine did it awkwardly while Adrian was a bit too enthusiastic that Jonah had to hold his shoulder to get him to calm down).

He smirked back at the Gryffindors. The varied expressions of annoyance and anger that came over the lions were pretty satisfying.

‘-

Just when he thought he’d find peace in the large greenhouse they happened to be using today, someone else greeted him.

“Jonah!”

He froze. This voice he knew a bit better than Adrian’s. Inexplicably, some part of him still couldn’t help turning around, and so he did even as he regretted it at the same time.

“Ah, I knew it was you! I saw your table still has one seat empty. I can take this one, right?” Light brown hair fell down her back in waves, the vivid green of Hattie Perks’ eyes distracted him for
one second.

“Oh, hello, Adrian.” She nodded to the Gryffindor who had settled himself comfortably at the other end of the table.

“Hullo, Hattie.” He solemnly nodded.

*Wait, that left…*

The seat to his left, which Hattie Perks took without further ado. He groaned inwardly yet *again* when he saw suspicious looks directed his way by some other students with Ravenclaw ties. A couple of them were clearly accusing him with their gaze that he was trying to corrupt their House member. This wasn’t really his fault! He was only sitting here when she came over!

Not that there was anything wrong with Hattie. *She, at least, did not* shout her greeting for everyone all around them to hear and stare. And judge.

“Um, Jonah?” That was Blaine’s voice, to his right. “Um, who’s she?”

“A Ravenclaw,” he answered. He ignored his dormmate’s frustrated look at the technically correct and yet unhelpful answer.

“I’m a friend of Hermione’s!” Hattie declared. “I’m Hattie Perks. And you are?”

She had already shoved her hand in front of Jonah and across the table, stopping right in front of Blaine’s flabbergasted expression. He sighed (again), at her brash and careless ways. *Definitely did not have an etiquette mistress. Might as well.*

“Hattie, this is Blaine Carrow, my dormmate. Blaine, this is Hattie Perks, Ravenclaw and general…busy witch for Hermione Curie.” He had no idea how else to introduce her. It’s not as if he could go on about her family or connections, could he? He had a feeling that she had barely any that was worth mentioning.

“That’s me.” She nodded proudly. Blaine took her hand gingerly, as if afraid it would suddenly spring forward and bite him. Hattie settled easily into her seat after that.

“Thanks Jonah.” She whispered.

“Um, for what?”

“For inviting me over. You’re a good friend.”

Before he could even argue about it (he was a good Slytherin, which meant he kept his word to his house and all that), everyone was occupied with opening their respective bags. He simply gave up and retrieved his own stuff. He had only managed to take his books out when Blaine elbowed him secretly.

“Psst. Jonah! I have to ask something. *It’s important. Family stuff.*”

He forced himself not to stiffen at the words. In his family, the words family business usually gets attached to the words ‘blood feud’ and ‘blood traitors’. His wary reflex was entirely reasonable. *At this rate, I’m going to start dreading the sound of my own name.*

“What is it, Blaine?” He kept his voice low, to match his friend’s volume.

“Did you just say Hermione? As in, Hermione Curie?”
“How many other Hermione do you know of?”

“Merlin’s underpants, Jonah! I can’t be here. I have to run. Hide. Avoid you for a while—”

He had to grip Blaine’s arm before he knocked off an inkpot with his jitters. Adrian simply shifted his belongings slightly farther without a word of complaint, unaffected. It seemed to be serious since Blaine’s round cheeks were flushed.

“What’s wrong?”

“My sister doesn’t like Curie because she thinks she has Ideas Above Her Station and has Greatly Wronged her good friend and is a Fatal Female!”

“It’s femme fatale, Blaine—” he corrected.

“—If she sees me here, she’ll kill me!”

“Your sister can’t see you here! She doesn’t take first-year Herbology!” Jonah complained. His frantic, wide-eyed friend disagreed.

“No, she’ll find out somehow. She’ll always find out! It’s just like that time when I ate her stash of Honeydukes Everfresh Cotton Candy—”

“That doesn’t take skill! I bet you still had some of it sticking on your face like the last time you ate them at her birthday!” He almost threw his hands in the air.

“—and that time I secretly flew on her broom. There’s that time I gave Slurry Stool candy to her owl too. She’s scary.” He blabbered while shoving his books back into his bag.

“You—”

“We’re still friends, I swear. I just have to stay away a bit, right? See you!”

With that, Blaine rushed away from the table as if hounds of hell were after him, leaving him alone with the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. Jonah groaned and covered his face with his hands. His forehead made a soft thump at the table edge.

“What’s wrong with him?” Hattie asked.

“Something he ate disagreed with him,” Jonah answered carelessly, still not looking up. Why would anyone care about Blaine’s latest paranoia about his older sister?

“I heard he ate his sister’s candy stash. She probably booby-trapped them with laxatives. I know I would.” Adrian answered easily from somewhere to his right.

That wasn’t an answer Jonah expected to hear from a Gryffindor. He raised his head and saw that Adrian had another book on his lap that he idly read at times. He saw Jonah’s attention and pulled the covers up. ‘Beginner’s Curses, Hexes and Jinxes’.

He shifted back a little when he felt that Hattie was trying to lean over him to read it.

“Wow. That book sounds interesting.” There was a slight awe in her voice, which he took some issue with. He was sure he still knew oodles more hexes and jinxes than Adrian. Really, he’d bet that the Gryffindor only started reading about magic at Hogwarts—

“I know, right? Tom recommended it to me. It’s great.”
A pox on all your—never mind. He was going to personally ask Tom Riddle for an even better curse book recommendation. He could do that, right? Since he had to watch over Adrian and probably Hattie as well?

Wait, he remembered something else. For the moment, he was thankful of Alauda’s annoying habit of giving him additional reading materials that she would personally test during weekend. His sister could be a real pain; as in, she would start throwing hexes and jinxes whose best counter was the ones she made him study beforehand.

He cleared his throat and summoned the book he was looking for from his bag. Hattie’s interest in his knowledge of summoning spells had soothed his ego a little. It was even better when they saw the second-year DADA textbook.

“You know, the spells here aren’t really that hard. I’ve mastered a handful of them already.” He used his assured and confident voice (he mostly copied Gallus for that).

“Really?” Adrian was amazed. There was no other word for it.

He nodded. “It really helped winning duels in Defence class.”

Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all, he mused.

Of course, he just had to glance at Torger Travers and his group of very Slytherin friends at that moment, staring at him in disbelief. He waved back with a smile as if there was nothing the slightest bit unusual right now. Nothing strange to see here. No, not at all. Let’s move on, people.

The prickling feeling at the back of his neck had started up again, making his wand hand a little twitchy. Inwardly, he cringed.

I take it back. I’m going to regret this soon enough, aren’t I?

As Herbology ended, Jonah mentioned offhand that it was probably about time that they separated to go to their respective classes. Yet when he’d finished packing his bag and was about to set off, he found that Adrian and Hattie walking easily by his side.

Travers had started whispering furiously to his friends and he swore he’d need to trap the other Slytherin’s bathtub with overflowing infinite bubbles tonight or tomorrow. Otherwise, he knew his peaceful days at the dorm was going to end sometime soon.

His two hangers-on were still with him even as he entered the school building.

“Um, look, Adrian, Hattie, don’t you need to head off to your class instead of mine? You don’t want to have to go around the long way from my potions class, right?”

Adrian blinked. “But I’m heading in the same direction as you are. It’s our potions class, remember?”

“What?!”

Apparently, instead of being in the second first-year, Gryffindor potions class, Adrian was in the first first-year, Gryffindor potion class. Which meant that it’s the same one as the first first-year, Slytherin potion class.
“Guess which one that Jonah was in?”

“We’re in the same class!” Adrian sounded much too cheerful for his liking and Jonah rubbed his temples at the sound of his unreserved glee. *O Fortuna, whatever did I do to cross you?* Hattie was actually mulish when she discovered that she wasn’t going to the same class as the two of them, not that Jonah saw much as he was looking back to make sure that Travers wasn’t trying to follow him.

“That’s not fair!” She complained.

“That’s just the class schedule,” Jonah answered with a bored tone. “I didn’t do anything to it.”

“Wait, let me see your schedule.”

It must have been him being too distracted in slinking into the side corridors to dodge people, since he’d handed it over to Hattie before he realised what he’d done. Did she just copy his schedule to a spare scroll? She did. *She absolutely did.* He was annoyed, because he didn’t want her to be able to find him anytime she wanted, but a great Slytherin should always be able to turn any situation to his advantage. Tom Riddle, *Heir of Slytherin*, said that.

Jonah slowly unclenched his hands. He was not going to whine about this. He would not. He was going to turn this into his advantage. *Somehow.* Even if he still had no freaking idea of what he could do to extract himself from this increasingly unnerving entanglement—

“Oh, alright. We have the same Transfigurations and Herbology classes, so I’ll meet you at Dumbledore’s next class, Jonah!” Hattie declared after she’d finished comparing his schedule and hers.

His wand hand was twitching again.

“Great.” Jonah said.

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” Hattie chirped proudly, unaffected by his dead-eyed stare. “Now, Adrian, give me yours.”

Adrian, *the overly-trusting lummock*, already did it before Jonah could give any warning. The Slytherin harrumphed and threw his hands in the air. *Whatever.* The sod was welcome to her meddling in his life if he relinquished it so easily.

“What did you copy it for?” Adrian naively asked.

*So you can never avoid her—*

“To make it easier to schedule study sessions outside of our classes, of course. It’s not as if we get to see each other often in our classes, right? And not even inside them.”

Her shoulders drooped. The sadness he could hear in her voice made him fidget uncomfortably. There was just something wrong in seeing her without her usual level of energy. He settled for patting her arm instead and hoped she could somehow move forward from thinking about things that would just annoy her. Then, maybe he’d stop feeling so unsettled.

“It’s fine. We can still meet outside classes, right? Nothing to worry about.” He said.

Hattie’s nod was firmer now as she pulled herself up again. The brightness of her green eyes was almost blinding. “*Yes. We definitely will. Thanks, Jonah.*”
He didn’t think he’d ever needed to ignore the Gryffindors taking potions even harder than he usually did. Which he needed to do the moment Adrian sat next to him and they started _staring_.

Jonah pretended he didn’t see a lot of his housemates at potions and ignored their questioning looks too, since Adrian had cheerfully said that they could be partners. Considering that he could see neither hide nor hair of the cowardly Blaine, he certainly didn’t have his usual partner. He might be able to ask Gwendolyn Gambol, but he shuddered to think about what she might have asked in return (she was too good at bargaining and fleecing people from the nobler pureblood houses).

So, Adrian it was. Especially since he was very helpful, anyway. He had already gone off to get the ingredients that were written on the blackboard instead of sitting down and trying to divide tasks between them.

The next time Jonah saw Roger Rowle eyeing his cauldron suspiciously, he pre-emptively sent Adrian to get some tails of blast-ended skrewt.

“This…isn’t one of our ingredients, isn’t it?” Adrian had asked. Jonah met his curious gaze easily.

“No, it isn’t.” He stated without blinking.

“Allright.” Adrian nodded calmly.

Before Jonah knew it, he could see Adrian’s brown hair bobbing through the steady stream of other students getting more ingredients. It surprised him. _No complaints or further questions? Nothing?_ When Adrian came back, the Gryffindor only asked him one question.

“What should I do with this?”

“You know the cauldron to your right? That’s Roger Rowle and one of his goons. Once they finished putting in all the bark ingredients and started chopping the leafy greens and flowers, throw it in.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. Leave our potion to me.”

Sure enough, their neighbouring potion exploded within the next ten minutes. Roger screamed at getting a big dollop of the potion on his hair and Jonah couldn’t help grinning back at them. They could spew as many accusations they wanted, but they couldn’t prove that it was him. He didn’t find out when Adrian managed to slip it in either, since the Gryffindor was assisting with the potionmaking all the time, following Jonah’s directions as best as he can. He was slightly impressed. _Only slightly, mind you._

“That was a decent job.” Jonah muttered sometime later while watching the potion slowly change colour.

“Really?” He didn’t have to look up to hear the grin in Adrian’s voice.

Jonah shrugged. “It was nice.”
He didn’t know what to do about the thanks, though, so he just shrugged again. Maybe Tom had a point that he couldn’t see yet with Adrian. Oh well. He better just wait and see, then.

What he didn’t expect on his way out from potions was to come across Hattie yet again. She walked alongside him easily. *How did she even—*

Oh, she’d copied his schedule. He almost forgot.

“Jonah! Adrian.”

“How did you find us?” Jonah asked instead. His left hand was idly scratching his black hair simply to stop himself from fidgeting. The other reason was because he was almost afraid she was going to take his hand and pull him ahead if it was free. She did look annoyed that their walking speeds was a lot more relaxed than hers—she probably considered it as dawdling.

“You have transfigurations next—which is the same class as mine, remember?”

Right.

“Well, Adrian,” Jonah cleared his throat, “I guess we’ll have to part ways here.”

This time, it was Adrian’s turn to let out a long sigh. “I’ll just walk until your transfigurations class before I go off to mine, then.”

The Slytherin first-year rubbed his forehead because he wasn’t going to start slapping it in public. No. He needed his head as well as his eyes if he was going to keep them from the shorter and rowdier route.

One staircase and one winding corridor later, it seemed that his luck ran out because they came across a group of Hufflepuffs. He’d guess they were second years, because their faces weren’t familiar. (Three of them were also taller than him. There was no way that they could be first years. *No way. He’s not that short. He’s…*not. Period).

He would be content with just walking past each other (barely) if it wasn’t for their conversation topic.

“It’s so great, isn’t it?”

“Definitely. *But who had any doubts about the result? Just look at him. Andrew is obviously the most talented and amazing Head Boy that Hogwarts had seen in years! After his heroic defence in Hogsmeade, he’s the one who deserved the Order of Merlin the most!”*

It was Adrian who scoffed loudly at that. The Hufflepuffs stopped in their steps and stared.

“He’s the one who deserves the Order of Merlin the most? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What do you know, Gryffindor?” A redheaded witch asked back suspiciously.

“I know enough. Tom and Hermione managed to capture an attacker and rescue the wounded! What did *he* manage?” Adrian challenged. Two Hufflepuff wizards stepped forward at that, frowns on their faces.
Jonah was seriously regretting telling him that now. It was admittedly great to have a Gryffindor hang on to his every word about the best Slytherin prefect there is, but really… He pulled Adrian’s sleeve surreptitiously, trying to get him to just move away. There were five of them, after all. The Gryffindor didn’t even budge.

“Adrian!” Jonah hissed.

“There’s two of them while Andrew was alone—of course he couldn’t achieve all that!” The Hufflepuff witch answered.

“There’s two of them, right?” Hattie said, and Jonah didn’t bother hiding his groan when he saw her jumping in. “So, they can do twice as much as someone alone can. What about Andrew, then? Did he even manage half of that?”

Adrian looked even more vindicated at that.

“Right! It’s not like Andrew managed to capture an attacker or rescue someone! We’re not asking much, but what, he couldn’t even manage one? Really?” Adrian sneered. “And you call that most deserving of Order of Merlin? Sounds like he got it because he’s a pureblood.”

“What is it to you, Gryffindor? Tom Riddle is a Slytherin, isn’t he?” One of the wizards asked back. Jonah had managed to squeeze his way to Adrian’s side.

“That just shows how good he is, isn’t it, that even a Gryffindor could see it?” Hattie countered. “What does that say about your hero that the only ones who think he really deserves it are Hufflepuffs?”

After that, it really was a matter of time before hexes started flying. Jonah could honestly say (if Gallus ever asked) that he didn’t cast first—he was more occupied in tackling both Adrian and Hattie down from the first set of spells. He was beginning to suspect that you can get Gryffindors to fight werewolves barehanded if someone tells them it was the right thing to do.

The fact that Jonah was inwardly cursing himself, his bad luck and how the world hated him today didn’t mean he even paused before sending jinxes and curses right back.

The main thing that crossed his mind when a Jelly-legs Jinx and a Bird-Breath Hex brought him down was, dammit, Adrian and Hattie are still too slow.

That was how all three of them ended up in the infirmary for the next period instead of going to class at all—they and at least two of the Hufflepuffs.

It was not until later, when both Gallus and Alauda visited him in the infirmary with creases on their forehead that Jonah realised he had been involved in something bigger than a mere hallway scrum. He’d stayed longer than either Adrian or Hattie, because the Hufflepuffs soon started to focus their attacks on him when they realised he was the best caster out of the three of them. It was nice to get out of class, if only it didn’t mean shooting feathers everywhere every time he sneezed or coughed.

That Adrian and Hattie felt guilty was nice too. He made them promise to bring him candies so he’d feel better, even if he was already out of the infirmary. Ha! Free chocolates and candies! Yes!

(They definitely owed him for going through all this crap for them).

Gallus visited him twice, the second one in the evening. That had to be some sort of record. His older brother even patted his head absent-mindedly as he stared at some distant point in the
“What’s wrong, Gallus?”

“I never thought you’d actually be looking for trouble. After I and Alauda taught you how to lay low and to always be on the lookout for ambushes, I can’t believe you just—”

“It wasn’t me! You know how Gryffindors are, I just got dragged into it and—”

Gallus was laughing at him. He folded his arms and settled into a good sulk. Jonah ignored his brother patting his head again.

“It’s good to see you’re alright.” His oldest sibling’s words were unexpectedly kind.

“Of course I’m alright. Why wouldn’t I be?” Jonah complained.

That crease on Gallus’ forehead showed up again, his smile seemed to be only there to appease Jonah. “Because this is how wars begin.”

That startled him. “War?”

“I can tell you that you’re not the only Slytherin that got into a fight with Hufflepuffs, and I’m sure you wouldn’t be the last either.”

It was hard for him to wrap his head around immediately, because the occasional historical lessons he had from their private tutor seemed to imply that wars are great, big things, beginning with actions that starts with a bang. Like the destruction of Boudicca’s home and family that she doesn’t take sitting down. She raised her banners and called men who had obeyed her husband to now obey her. To arms! To arms! Or maybe, it was as romantic and flawed as a self-absorbed handsome prince deciding that he really should get the most beautiful woman in the world, dooming his homeland, Troy, with his selfish decision. But his choosing the fairest goddess of them all? That was also a Great Event, wasn’t it?

Gallus listened to all his thoughts on it, interspersed with the occasional sneezing, at which his oldest brother immediately cast a cleaning charm to promptly remove the feathers filling the air.

“But those are not the only great wars of note, Jonah. Sometimes it was the result of escalating import taxes that began as a simple game of tit-for-tat. Sometimes men began to knife each other in the dark, even before any declaration of war are uttered.”

He leaned closer and Jonah couldn’t look away, both enthralled and afraid of what he was about to say.

“Sometimes, it began with a whisper. A loose conversation.”

Jonah would later remember that day as the beginning of the Order or Merlin War in Hogwarts.

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Chapter End Notes

For the folks still out for the blood of a certain Auror, remember that revenge is a dish
List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Typhon:** (Greek mythology) Greek: Τυφόν, A creature that is generally shaped like giant serpent, son of Gaia and Tartarus, which I suppose at the very least makes him one of the Titanides. Typhon tried to overthrow Zeus and there’s this epic battle in which, not a surprise, Zeus won. To be honest, the first time I was really aware of him is when I played the game *Titan Quest* some years ago.
55 Les explosions à l’école I

Chapter Summary

*Dexter is in the infirmary visiting Hermione once more—he’s starting to get tired of this crap too. Hermione in a Hogwarts Corridor. Several unfavourable encounters. The prefects are very not amused at the state of things. Orion is very proud of himself. Alphard has the subtlety of a bull in a china shop. The week unfolds at a measured pace. Philippe has Plans.*

Chapter Notes

Next chapter in two weeks because I don’t want to lose the momentum for this part. The end of the Second Arc is like pulling teeth. I’m not satisfied with whatever I’m writing. Let’s hope I’ll get past this annoying hump soon.

55 Les explosions à l’école I

Hermione had relented to Nurse Edelstein’s persuasion that it’s better for her to stay in the infirmary overnight. What was one more day to her?

At the very least, she had Blackbeard with her and was thus less bored than usual. An unexpected brunette also dropped in to visit, sometime after the great hall’s supper schedule. At first, she only stepped a little past the doorway and awkwardly looking around there.

Hermione waved at her from her bed. “Julia! Over here!”

“Ah, there you are!” Julia waved back. What had been unexpected was the book bag the prefect carried with her.

Julia took pains to drop in with most of Hermione’s homework. Not that the sixth-year didn’t stay over for around an hour, sheepish expression and her own arithmancy homework in tow. Since Hermione had some arithmancy stuff she needed to go over as well, she only smiled with amusement and welcomed her to take a seat next to the bed. The amused smile resurfaced again and again every time Julia tried to convince her to move up to Advanced Arithmancy II. It seemed that other Ravenclaw just couldn’t help trying even if she knew the odds of success were small.

‘-

Sunday morning brought an unexpected surprise.

Hermione hadn’t gone far into the arithmancy chapter she was reading when the infirmary door opened. The familiar thud of the door being closed caught her attention and she looked up.

It was her Head of House who was making his way through the infirmary. Without anyone else in
the beds, it was hard to doubt who he was visiting.

“Professor Dexter?” The surprise was clear in her voice.

He brandished a fruit basket in front of him, almost like a shield.

“There’s grapes and I think almost all berries I know is here, and probably several more I don’t even know,” he began. Her baffled expression hadn’t changed much. He was scrutinising her with an intensity that was worrying, only to cough sheepishly when Hermione met his gaze and raised a pointed eyebrow. She thought the shadows under his eyes looked even darker today.

“Thanks for the fruits, Professor, but you really don’t need to do this. I’ll probably be out today.”

“I’m glad that you don’t seem to suffer from anything too severe. Phyllida, Albus and Horace had been worried too—she insisted that I carry all this. It’s from Hogwarts’s greenhouses.” He placed the basket on the side table to her right with the explanation. Her inner Daphne was already making a mental note to send all of them thank you cards.

She couldn’t help feeling awkward at the attention, though. Four heads of houses? What had she done to deserve it? Her hands fiddled with her cuffs.

“Um, I’m fine? Really, Professor—”

“Albus spoke with Nurse Edelstein,” Dexter spoke casually as he stepped to the other side of the bed, his attention caught by the yellow and white flowers in their vase (Tom brought them earlier this morning—who else?). He was still gazing at it as he spoke. “Did you know that as a master in transfiguration and alchemy, he has a rather solid grounding in pathology?”

“Ah, no. I have no idea.”

“He enlightened me on what a dementor actually does to people.”

Hermione nodded at that and tried to head off his possible concern.

“Oh, yes. I was happy to stuff myself with food once I woke up. Not that the nurses hadn’t done that to me before, but that was it, really.”

He turned his head to look at her, his smile somehow looking sad. “But your condition could’ve easily been worse than what most people suffer, isn’t it? Much worse.”

She didn’t exactly know what to say and lowered her gaze instead. *Just how much Dumbledore knew, and what had he said to Dexter?* There was that melancholic edge to him right now that reminded her of Remus.

“I know I could survive worse, Professor. Don’t worry, I’ll live.”

The words were not the slightest bit cheerful, but what remains of her old memories was all she had to go on. She *had* survived worse. To her chagrin, his shoulders actually sagged at that.

“Yet you shouldn’t have. That you had to experience all this showed just how much I had faltered as your Head of House—”

“Professor!”

“—for that I’m truly sorry.”
“It wasn’t your fault!” Hermione had snapped out before she knew it.

She bit her lip, but he smiled instead, a light chuckle escaping for a moment. It had all the warmth of a lifegiving star once more, instead of the faded embers of a dying sun. He kindly patted her arm, but the shadow that had hung in his eyes before were still there.

“You’re still young. You’ll have a different opinion once you’re the head of your own house, Hermione. To tell the truth, I’m not here to flog that dead horse. I’m here to assure you that it would never happen again.”

“We don’t know what the future holds.” The brunette disagreed before she could help it.

It wasn’t that she enjoyed being contrary, but she always had a problem when people avoided the truth with her. She preferred to know even when the reality was unpleasant.

“Oh, I know.” He seemed genuinely amused now as he glanced sideways, to her surprise. “I’m aware of how much the future escapes us, considering what I can and cannot read from the heavens.”

Hermione’s cheeks warmed. How could she have forgotten his field? She walked right into that one, didn’t she?

“But we can make plans and do our best. I’m here to promise you that that man will never trouble you again.”

He turned to face her completely now, the flowers easily put aside. She saw that regardless of his pallor, his slightly disordered braid, his eyes were clear. There was a hard, crystalline focus in them.

“He’s an Auror,” she stated.

“I know. It does not mean that I cannot report him, detail his mistakes and his prejudice. Had the situation deteriorated farther, if he brought those creatures too near after leaving you for too long… you could have lost your life in that room.”

His voice was soft but it carried the weight of worlds.

Dexter’s expression reminded her of the time she saw him when she lifted the Sorting Hat from her head. He was so proud then, beaming at every other professor who lost out to him with such a bright cheer that it could easily grate to his colleagues. He was clearly less joyful now, but his gaze was just as deep. She’d realised now that he truly considered her as part of his flock.

“It might not be immediate, but I do have friends in the Ministry who could point me to the right channels to go through as well as all the possible papers required. Albus has people he knows too. I’m sure between the two of us, Blakeshaw would never see anything more than the top of a desk as long as he is an Auror.”

One of these days, Hermione thought, she really needed to find out what the background of every other Hogwarts staff was. Right now, all she wanted to do was smile.

“Thank you.”

He shook his head. “It’s no problem at all. Of course, I’d prefer that he is nowhere near the DMLE anymore, but we both know how the world works for purebloods and those with more admixture in their ancestry. Better to not hope at all and be slightly surprised if things turn out well than hold
excessive expectations—only to be disappointed when they’re dashed.”

It was then that Hermione thought she hadn’t been completely right. The shadows in his eyes weren’t just regret or guilt—the was protective streak in him hid a rather sharp edge.

Another Hogwarts student would be grateful and happy. Hermione, however, had her flashes of memories. Glimpses of several new, bright-eyed Unspeakables she had guided, however limited. The bright feeling of having imparted a particular skill or magical theory into someone else, to be part of a long chain of knowledge—of masters and apprentices, teachers and students—that stretched back to Dee, to Paracelsus, to Morgana and to *Merlin*. It gave her a partial insight, a notion she wanted to confirm with him.

“Professor Dexter?”

“Yes?”

“I know this is rather unconnected, but I’m just, um, curious? If you don’t mind indulging my curiosity a little?”

She could see the corner of his lips rising a little. “What do you want to ask about?”

“Do you have any children?”

“Why do you ask?” He asked back, but his smile was wider.

“It’s hard to describe. It’s just…a feeling? I have this passing feeling. I’m sometimes reminded of my father when we talk—like just now.” Hermione shook her head to head his concern off. “No, don’t worry, it’s not such a bad thing. I don’t *cry* every time I remember my parents.”

Her tone was a little dry in the end.

It was true—she simply didn’t tell him the whole truth. Impressions of her parents only come fleetingly and gave her a feeling of fondness; the memories of her youth were more well preserved than the latter years. What she certainly didn’t want to mention was how the parts of their interactions echoed hers with the younger Unspeakables she’d mentored for who knows how brief. Asking out loud about who exactly have become his apprentices and what specialisations they took was an even nosier question.

“I just…wanted to know, I guess.” She finished lamely.

“I have three daughters and two sons,” Dexter answered with much more ease than she expected. “They’ve all grown up, of course. The few grandkids I already have are cute ankle-biters, but I can’t get them to argue about astronomy yet. In the meantime, I have the entire Ravenclaw House to watch over.”

He tapped her temple lightly when she didn’t answer for a while, surprised and a little carried away in thinking. Dexter, having passed on the assurance he wanted to give her, said his goodbye soon enough and reminded her to have enough rest.

“Take care of yourself, Hermione.”

“Of course, Professor. See you in class soon.”

Hermione smiled was more relaxed now that her guess was proven to be at least partly correct.
The brunette still couldn’t wrap her head around the fact that Dexter had grandkids. He didn’t look at all like a grandfather. Even if he had kids, she’d thought that they would be in the younger years in Hogwarts. She was reminded yet again of how magic altered the flow of age for people of the wizarding world compared to the non-magicals.

She shook her head again. Grandkids. Who would have thought?

Hermione did not really understand why most Hogwarts students seem to underestimate Care of Magical Creatures—you’d never know when you need to escape from a particular location with only a rare magical creature nearby to assist you. Knowing how to show that you mean them no harm and just wish for a ride out is of utmost importance.

Yet as Harry had once put it to her, “Hermione, not everyone spends their spare time trying to come up with 1001 bizarre and obscure situation you need to escape from and how to overcome it.”

“How long have you been here, again? More than a day? Time to pack up and go home, Hermione. You won’t be able to make heads or tails of mysteries without enough rest.” He had said.

She had finally figured out sometime after the War that not everyone was as intensely curious as she was, or whose worry turned into a boundless drive to prepare. And that was fine, really.

(Her memory could recall that particular scene well.

“And what about you, Harry? What are those red and yellow books you’re carrying?” Hermione asked back. “I’m not the one who keeps sneaking into the DMLE archives to bring home case reports from more than a century ago.”

She had just realised that her office, deep inside the Department of Mysteries, was in no way near his. There was another reason he’d be passing by—

“Heck, did you just walk out of our classified cases directory??”

Harry shrugged without guilt even as she gave him the stink eye. He had made no effort to hide the bound reports he had parked at her table momentarily.

“I’ll return them once I’m done, I promise Hermione. I like to stay alive. I want everyone to stay alive. I also like to find more ways to screw up the possible plans of anyone trying to kill us.”

“You’re doing almost the same thing as I do!”

He grinned. It was rather roguish when combined with his eyepatch “I didn’t say I was good at following my own advice.”)

This was why she was walking down Hogwarts corridor on Monday morning with her nose buried deep in a supplemental tome.

It was a book she’d found only because it was listed on the bibliography of their textbook. All of this was part of her effort to pack even more information about thestral into her head. Yes, she knew there was a less-used rule of Hogwarts that forbid students from reading while walking, and she could even give you its precise number. Yet she considered that rule mutable since she’d honed her peripheral awareness for years.
She was half-muttering things as she walked, “…the lack of thestral presence in warm climes has led some people to conclude that they dislike the tropics and anywhere not temperate in clime. This is not true, as there has been sightings of them traversing deserts at night as recent as the memoirs of the wizards undercover in Napoleon’s army can tell us. There are also reports from…”

Hermione sidestepped left, her wand swished out in condensed movements. A shield sprung up to her right. Lime green and orange sparks crashed on it and fizzled away.

“Written records of this can be found as far back—”

Wand lowered down and the shield flickered out. The same quick movements again and another shield was raised to her left.

“—as Hecataeus of Miletus’ notes on the monsters and wondrous creatures of Egypt, not too far from his description of the Firebird of Sun City—”

The hairs on the back of almost all her skin tingled. She ducked with annoyance, casting Protego Maxima as she did so. A transparent dome—visible only from its occasional shimmer—covered her now. Her left hand closed the book with a loud slam as she turned around to see what had been such a bother.

“Alright, who had been casting in my direction just now?”

It was younger students from a variety of houses, mostly Hufflepuff and…Slytherin? That was unusual. They had frozen at the strict tone she’d just used, in various attacking poses (most of them had their wand out and was aiming at some other student).

“Well? None of you will tell me, then?” She raised her voice slightly.

A few of them shuffled their feet.

“Milliphutt sent the flock of sparrows towards you.” A sharp-nosed Slytherin said this calmly, with only the slightest smirk on her face. She cocked her head towards a witch with Hufflepuff tie.

“I didn’t! I was sending them to you!” The Hufflepuff hotly denied.

Another young Slytherin smiled wider at the self-incrimination; it was as sharp as Daphne’s, sending an unexpected jolt of familiarity through Hermione.

“Yes, you were only attacking us, weren’t you?” The second witch drawled.

The accusations, counter-accusations as well as unthinking words started to flow out as the younger students tried to deflect the blame, excuse themselves or drag someone else down.

The Ravenclaw sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. Hermione could just warn them to never disturb her after chewing them off. It would be enough once she’d managed to put the fear of her into them. Yet the prefects would have to face the same problem again if they haven’t learned the lesson yet and get into another scuffle somewhere else.

She can’t exactly ignore that—her sense of responsibility wouldn’t allow her. Hermione took a deep breath and approached them.

“Give me all your names. Yes, all of you, starting from the wizard trying to slink away near the suit of armour. After that, each house is going to choose one student to represent them, and they’re going to come with me to the nearest prefect.” Hermione said.
“We were only playing,” one of them blurted out.

“Well, just tell that to the prefects then. I’m sure you’d have no problem with that, right?”

Little did she realise that it would not be the last of such ruckus that she encountered that week.

The younger students glaring at each other across hallways and the mutterings were something Hermione barely noticed on Monday, the first scuffle she had to break up notwithstanding. She was too busy with either her Care for Magical Creatures reading or the beginnings of her arithmantic calculations. It wasn’t as if Hogwarts was a stranger to inter-house tension and rivalry. The school was rife with it the first time she went and she wasn’t surprised that it also had this problem in the 1940s.

The problems of her time must have roots within this period too.

Come Tuesday, she had to break up several more arguments and fights as she made her way around Hogwarts. Usually, where a loud ‘stop’ fail to get them to disengage, a determined witch between them who had cast a large dome of Protego Maxima would do the job. With her and her shield right in the middle of them, they can’t exactly continue the fight either.

She felt responsible enough to march them yet again to the nearest prefect afterwards instead of just telling them to scatter—it must be old memories of being a prefect that got her. If they went willingly, good. If they tried to run, she’d just wrap them in ropes and float them in front of her until she found the nearest prefect.

On Monday, that had been the nice Ethel Macmillan, who thanked her effusively for her help, to Hermione’s confusion. On Tuesday, one of the closest prefects she’d found was Andrew and Amelia during the evening, who were both kind and professional in taking over the remaining children. The prefect she met on Wednesday afternoon was Alvis Boot. He had an air of faint disapproval, even if his words were still polite.

“I see.” He said.

The fifth-year stared the younger kids down severely that they started to fidget. He didn’t say anything else even as awkwardness began to stretch.

“Err, and?” Hermione asked.

“They will be dealt with.” He said slowly, still with that severe expression. “You may go.”

With that, he turned around and seemed to have stopped accounting for her whereabouts altogether. Hermione gave up and left.

She might’ve thought it was reserved for the kids she was herding, but he had this way of looking down his nose that she couldn’t chalk up to a native surliness (she swore Terry wasn’t as much of a stick-in-the-mud as his grandfather or father seemed to be). Hermione may have slightly regretted not going along with Tom to ADADA class. At least he would’ve been able to interact with the other prefects better.

The arguments and fights had really exploded in the last day or so among the lower years, after the simmering tension earlier. On Thursday, she was now more careful in where she walked—she kept herself to one side of any hallways to prevent accidental or not-so-accidental crashes. It did not matter if, like now, she was in one of the wider hallways.
Then, she saw that long mane of sleek blond hair entering on the other end.

_Ah, what’s-her-name, the Head Stooge._

The Ravenclaw only glanced once to ensure that yes, she did get the witch’s identity right, before continuing to read the arithmancy book she was checking.

(She knew it was silly, but a part of the old student Hermione felt positively reckless for breaking the rules. _Look at Hermione, reading while walking! Someone, stop her!_)  

Hermione thought that seeing her friends getting beaten would’ve made this particular Slytherin heiress more careful. Apparently not. She’d just registered the invasion into her personal space, but the distance was already too close for her to avoid the impact.

That was how Hermione crashed into the Slytherin witch.

_BANG!_  

She staggered, but with her well-practised footwork and boots to stabilise her footing, she stood upright once more after bracing herself with the crash. She supposed she _can_ throw herself sideways so the other witch (*what was her name again?*) would escape unscathed even as Hermione stumbled against the wall. But why would she take such pains to save the twit from a crash of her own making?

Hermione might still care about saving the world; it didn’t mean she was a pushover.

Some quick juggling had been necessary to prevent her arithmancy tome from falling, but that was it. Even her book bag was still slung over her shoulder. In contrast, her counterpart was sprawled on the floor with a disbelieving expression, her bag on the floor with at least a book or two spilled.

She didn’t give a damn about what the blonde thought.

“Are you alright?” Hermione asked. Sure, her tone was too flat to perfectly convey sympathy, but she tried.

“Are you out of your mind?” The Slytherin snapped. _There goes all my sympathy._ Her expression didn’t change at hearing that.

“Excuse me?”

“You did that on purpose!”

“I was _walking_ on purpose. On _this side_. If you still happen to crash into me when you can see me coming some distance away, well, I don’t think I know of any potion that can help with your sense of balance and direction.” She said blandly.

“You didn’t avoid me, on purpose! That’s just so _rough_ and _déclassée_ of you.”

“You didn’t avoid me either, so I suppose we’re even there.”

Her answer still seemed to be not what the blonde wanted or even expected. There was this odd expression of disappointment that was at odds with her pretty face, her rosy lips stuck in a moue. She kept staring at her as if she was expecting more…more of whatever it was. Hermione had no idea what the other witch was aiming for and she wasn’t inclined to fulfil her unknown imaginings.
“I thought I could be generous to you, to give you the opportunity to start anew,” she began.

_Uh, what?_

“To make _amends_, and then you can start your work life with a clean slate.” The witch pointed at Hermione with a pearly lavender nail.

Hermione was half-tempted to ask her if she was high. It was what she would do if she happened to bump into any of the people Harry or Ron had dragged in for flying while under the influence.

“Thanks, but no thanks.” Hermione chirped.

This time, she _was_ sarcastic even as she smiled.

The blonde narrowed her eyes as she picked herself up.

“You—” she cut herself off with a shake of her head. “Never mind. I thought I can be liberal to you, on account of Tom. Well, I tried. He can’t blame me if you fail to get any _job_ after Hogwarts.”

With a toss of her head and shiny mane of hair, she walked away in a huff.

Hermione merely shook her head in confusion. _What was that about?_

“Do you know any nice spots to bring a girl to in Hogwarts?”

Melchior asked Tom this question on Tuesday, during Advanced Charms. As Hermione usually sat with her dormmates in that class, the Nott heir was free to monopolise Tom’s attention then.

“I find it hard to believe that you don’t have your preferred dating spots.” Tom answered, “the ladies in general love you, Melchior.”

The phrase would have been a salute from anyone else, a congratulatory remark. On the other hand, Tom had his way of tilting his tone just the slightest bit that gave a hint of something else to those paying attention.

Melchior sighed.

“Yes, _well_, I want to know the places _you_ find interesting. It’s not guaranteed to match with the places I favour, is it? And you _know_ I’m looking for something outside _my_ usual repertoire.”

“I suppose I should congratulate the lucky lady, then.” He said, unusually friendly.

That only made Melchior groan. “Tom, _please_. I need a place that is a good date material _without_ going out to eat at Hogsmeade or London. I need a place in Hogwarts.”

He tapped a finger at his chin for a moment. “Alright, let me think about it.”

Tom eliminated the greenhouse immediately, as he was not looking forward to sharing the place with anyone else. The astronomy tower was one possibility, but a number of people already knew about it. One cannot say it was particularly _unique_.

“Try the Hogwarts kitchen. The house elfs actually provide tables for anyone who visits the kitchens and wishes to eat there. The dishes they’re prepared to serve are also more adventurous than the ones that end up at the house tables.” Tom finally answered.
Melchior perked up. “Truly?”

“Yes. Do remember to inform me of your plans beforehand. It would be inconvenient if Hermione and I were to intrude on your date.”

The other Slytherin nodded. “True. I’ll send a message once the plans are set.”

“Very well.”

“Oh, and Tom?”

“What is it, Melchior?”

“That book I borrowed last Friday? I’ll need to borrow it again. For verisimilitude.” He said, a slight discomfort showing on his face. Since Tom was beginning to be mildly entertained, he affected a pondering expression, complete with a hand on his chin.

“Ah, which book was that? I do have many books, you know?”

“That…that German book! You know which one!” Melchior hissed the words, just a hair above a whisper. He might not be fidgeting, but his eyes were darting this way and that, as if Flitwick would suddenly jump on their necks just for chatting.

“Ah, was it the German translation of Agricola’s De Natura Fossilium? Or was it Goclenius’ Wiederaufbau zur Verteidigung des Traktats über magnetische Wundheilung?”

He could see Melchior’s left eyelid twitching at this point as his pent-up annoyance warred with his unwillingness to cross his liege.

“You know perfectly well which one it was, Tom, your memory’s better than an elephant! You remember an insult on your honour from four years ago up to the date!”

“I appreciate the compliment,” he nodded with appreciation. “It still does not inform me of which book it was.”

“It was the one Herr Doktor wrote!”

“Who, Paracelsus? He was renowned as a physician too.” Tom’s answer was guileless.

“No, this one had, had—diagrams.” Melchior stuttered out. “That’s it. It had descriptions of certain diagrams and how to…to draw them. Even on skin—”

“And how to contact spirits to do work?”

“Yes!”

“Ah, that sounds like Johannes Trithemius’ Steganographia, though I’m quite sure my copy is the original Latin version, not German.”

Melchior’s eyes were opened too wide at this point, jaws clenched too tight.

“Allright, it was the Blood book! It’s definitely the Faust’s Blood Book!” He said all this in a frantic whisper.

Really, must the slightest mention of a little blood magic push people to come unglued so easily? Well, there goes his amusement. He had a sudden intense appreciation for Hermione’s level-
headedness, an unexpected wish that she didn’t have to sit away from him in Advanced Charms and he could sneak commentaries about blood spells between their actual classroom discussions and no one would be the wiser. It would even be worth her annoyed looks, since her concern for anyone overhearing them never overruled her urge to out-argue him, particularly if she was certain he was wrong.

If Melchior kept acting like someone had lit a fire under his seat, Flitwick was going to drop in sooner or later, curious.

“Well, then,” he said with a sigh. “I mentioned it in passing when I was talking to Rainer—”

“Von Regenstein?”

“Yes. He hadn’t seen a copy outside of that one time he visited a private library in Bavaria and he was very enthusiastic to borrow it. Just tell him that you need it for tonight and that you’ve asked me for it.”

Melchior let out a long sigh, culminating with his head falling bonelessly on the table with a pathetic thump.

“Thank you.”

During Wednesday’s dinner, Hermione had passed a message to Tom through Hattie (whom she assumed would pass it to young Jonah). They had been dining with their respective house-mates then. This was why she wasn’t surprised to see him sitting down across the table in the particular study carrell she’d chosen in the library. She cast Lumos wordlessly and raised her wand near his eye. Tom was amused but said nothing.

She let out a relieved huff when she saw the ring of indigo around his pupils, particularly as the black spots contracted from the bright light. His eyes were ultramarine instead of being a pool of darkness.

“I’m not that careless, Hermione.”

“I had to be sure.”

“I’m not sure how well a bezoar works against something that’s technically not a poison and not at lethal doses either, but Abraxas does happen to have a unicorn horn at hand.”

“That would work,” she nodded, “but that’s only for liquids. I’m not sure how effective it would be for food.”

“Which is why I’ll leave the rest up to you.”

He pulled up his book bag and summoned several things from its depths. The clink of glassware gave away what it was; soon a row of small stoppered vials lay on the table. The labels were attached to the cork stopper, meticulously detailed in a smooth cursive she’d come to recognise as Tom’s handwriting (she was not petty enough to deny that they were much better than hers—she wasn’t a child of the mid-20th century).

They were food and drink samples. Not only the material was described, but also the time of collection (dinner, Tuesday, or breakfast, Wednesday).
Tom unrolled a new scroll and opened his diary on the table. Even upside down, she could see the scheduled meetings there and who was present. Even Hermione’s agenda in the 21st century was not that systematically detailed. She was inadvertently reminded of the fact that most denizens of Downing Street or cabinet members keep diaries, to assist them in writing their memoir when their time in office was done—not that she knew anyone who did that from her own time.

It really was the little things that reminded her that Tom came from a different generation than hers. He cast a modified *Geminio* to copy the text of several pages to the new scroll.

“That would be enough, I think.” He said.

She nodded, gathered them into her bag.

“Yes. Maybe now we’ll figure out who’s responsible.”

After that, their respective activities generally kept them apart. Hermione was scarcely surprised when Lakshmi asked to partner with her in Advanced Potions yet again. Since Tom seems to be occupied with his minions, she simply shrugged and agreed. It was a slight surprise to see Tom conversing with his fifth-year prefect partner, the Head Stooge. His smile might even be mistaken for *pleasant* by the uninitiated. Common sense dictated that he needed to communicate with her from time-to-time for prefect coordination, but she’d never managed to truly understand why he chose to keep an amiable façade.

*There but for the grace of God go I*, Hermione mused. If she was him, she certainly wouldn’t be able to keep her annoyance from her face.

The prefect meeting on Thursday afternoon was…interesting, to say the least.

“The corridors are starting to turn chaotic. We can’t let this be. We have to do something about it even if it meant changing our approach.” Agatha Abbott, Head Girl and Hufflepuff, stated from the head of the table. Her sentence was both sympathetic and determined.

“It’s mostly the younger years,” Daedalus commented.

He was sitting on the spindly and overly baroque gothic revival chair most disliked due to spiky hand rests. Yet with his long legs, most of the shorter seats weren’t exactly comfortable for him.

“But we’re still having a record number of fights! I’ve checked. I certainly don’t remember last year being like this, nor the previous one, and if we go even further…” Agatha turned her blonde head to halfway down the table.

Emma Eccleston stopped casting a modified *Geminio* on a few sheets of paper (she was copying their contents) and looked up. She smoothed the stack of copies she had in front of her.

“I can confirm that it’s the worst in at least five years. I’ve compared it to our records.” She stated.

“So, what’s the plan?” Philippe asked.

“The plan?” Emmerich asked back.

“The plan.” The Gryffindor threw his hands up at Emmerich’s denseness. “Yes, it’s pretty annoying. You know it, I know it, so all that’s left is deciding what to do about it. If there’s none, we might as well break up this meeting right now.”
Andrew laid a hand on Emmerich’s shoulder, holding back his sixth-year housemate before he could stand up from his seat and throw out what would undoubtedly be strong words back.

“That’s what we’re here to discuss.” The Head Boy calmly answered.

“We have to be more active in patrolling the corridors?” Casimir hazarded a random guess.

Tom shook his head as he gazed at the Hufflepuffs.

“Considering the number of classes proceeding in Hogwarts during the day at any given time, that’s not going to work. We don’t have the number of prefects needed. On the other hand, why the Board hasn’t updated our numbers to reflect the growing student body is a pertinent issue but a different topic altogether.”

“If the point-taking for all Houses keeps going at this rate, we’re all going to start at zero again around Christmas,” Augusta said acerbically.

“We might as well start assigning them to detentions with teachers.” Raj added, two seats down from Delagardie. He didn’t seem to notice the looks of surprise and unease sent his way.

“That’s…a little too much, isn’t it?” Julia asked. Her year mate disagreed.

“If that’s what it takes,” Verrault said this with a nod of agreement along with what Tom considered as the Ravenclaw’s usual wooden expression.

“Merlin and Morgane,” Philippe interrupted with a loud harrumph. “Everyone, it’s not going to work, but you know what it would get you? Being accused as fascists.”

“What’s a fascist?” Andrew asked Oswin in low tones, but Tom’s hearing could still catch their words from his right. Oswin shook his head.

“I have no idea, unfortunately.”

“Is it something French?” Andrew asked back to his Slytherin year-mate.

Tom spoke up at that point before the two seventh-year purebloods started speculating even farther.

“Being fascist generally meant being autocratic. In our case, imagine if the Praetorian Guards were to try to usurp control of the Roman Empire from the Senate—that would illustrate our equivalent position well, according to Bernadotte’s viewpoint.”

But really, Bernadotte, the muggle side of your ancestry is showing too much, he remarked in his head. How many people here even cared, much less kept up with muggle politics?

Julia and Casimir nodded in thoughtful agreement.

“That…analogy works.” Julia said.

“Do you have a better idea, then?” Emmerich shot back at Philippe.

“Let the teachers sort it out?” Was Philippe’s too-casual answer. Tom could see it only pricked Emmerich’s temper further; somehow, he didn’t believe that Bernadotte was actually stating his opinion there.

“We’ll try to cover all the corridors when the classes ended.” Andrew replied. Bernadotte dropped
his head back and groaned.

“That’s impossible!”

“It’s very possible.” The Head Boy insisted, his voice a steadying influence. “We have enough time if we plan the routes well. Thank the Founders that they allowed enough time between classes for a first-year to get lost three times from one end to another before getting to class. It’s manageable, particularly for people who’d known the changing paths of Hogwarts well.”

Bernadotte was shaking his head as he leaned forward, his left hand was fiddling with the end of his braid in agitation.

“Yes, but we’d be doing it at marching speed. It doesn’t remove the possibility that the lower years are going to get in trouble after we’ve passed.”

“We can eliminate the advanced classes from the route.” Verrault said suddenly, hands steepled in front of his face in thought.

His eyes were fixed on the compiled report that he had received from Emma and he didn’t even lift it to any of the other prefects, his forehead creased with thinking frowns.

“After all, it’s not the upper years that are giving any trouble.” Verrault finished.

Emma was distributing copies of her compilation of everyone’s reports around the table. Bernadotte glanced at his Ravenclaw countryman.

“That’s just going to give them an excuse to make trouble later when they realise that we’re reducing patrols around their classes.” Philippe said.

“Which would give us the excuse to go after them by then, but based on what actually happened, we can disregard them for now. One trouble at a time, Bernadotte. Don’t go borrowing trouble when you don’t need to.” Verrault said, unaffected by the flicker of annoyance in Philippe’s expression by the use of his last name.

“And that would nicely reduce the amount of areas we need to cover by around a fifth.” Emma concluded.

“So, we can make this new patrol schedule work. Can’t we, Philippe?” Andrew asked from almost the other end of the table, his focus on one person only. The other prefects had started to read Emma’s compilation, now that Verrault had found interesting things in it.

Bernadotte’s sigh was obvious to anyone.

“Let’s try it. If it isn’t as effective as we thought it would be, I’ll promise you that I’d be trying something else.”

Tom found Thursday supper to be mildly interesting.

“Did you hear about the Gryffindor coming to the defence of a Slytherin?”

The fire in Orion’s eyes belied the cool tone of his voice, as did the shadow of a smirk on his face. Tom barely raised an eyebrow, only glancing at him once to acknowledge the greeting before returning his attention to the selection of desserts in front of him.
“Considering that I’m a prefect, I’ve certainly heard of them. This contretemps in inter-house relations took two prefects to separate. It is rather unexpected in the way the pieces fall on the board, yes.” He answered diplomatically.

“Tell me, how is the relations between the Heads with the rest of the prefects?”

Tom didn’t blink at the hint of glee of all things in the fourth-year’s tone. He had a better poker face than Orion’s slightly weirded out underlings. At least they knew well enough to keep their mouth shut. This observation was made while he took a slice or two of autumn fruit terrine.

He allowed himself a flash of a smile before putting on a more concerned expression.

“Well, all-in-all, we’re trying to put duty first and stop this mess from spreading further.” At Orion’s cool gaze, unsatisfied with such bland pronouncements, he went further. “But of course, the Gryffindors are loudly unsatisfied with the ongoing news of Andrew’s singular candidate as an Order of Merlin recipient.”

There was a loud snort from across the table. Tom didn’t need to look up to know who it was—Orion’s freezing look in that direction informed him enough. It was just too bad that his Black cousin’s hide was thicker than a mammoth’s.

“I heard the entire thing from Alauda herself.” Alphard started, munching through his pie under Orion’s frown, with an undisturbed lack of grace or self-awareness that many came to envy. “I asked her the moment I heard the news, mind you. It’s not such a surprise to hear the Gryffindor witch defend her. Alauda and her friends have been arguing against the ‘Puffs about how the two Gryff prefects deserve the Order of Merlin better than Abbott.”

He shook his head, his hair sitting messily on his head. Conversations fell away near them as other Slytherins began to actively listen.

“I have no idea why they’d do that. Not that I have anything against the Gryff prefects—I don’t even know them! But so, these third-years have been defending our rivals in red, arguing for them and,” he shrugged, amiable, “well, Alauda has been very polite with me, but I suspect she hasn’t been very polite about Abbott’s, hmm, shall we say, yellow-bellied attitude of making Daddy Dearest win him that award over everyone else?”

Laughter spread and he smiled, ridiculous, wide and infectious. Even if Alphard was not always in the thick of schemes like his cousins, or even his sister Walburga and her gossip network, he could still work a crowd solely by instinct.

There was always a certain level of cunning in all the Blacks. It would explain how for a family that rose with the House of Wessex, they weathered the change in kings so adroitly with nary a decrease in ranks when William of Normandy came and won. The centre of power, the entire court had changed under their feet and yet there they are among the first ranks once more. All the way to the present.

Alphard scratched the back of his head.

“Don’t know why the third-years did that, though. I’m just happy with the outcome.”

There were sounds of agreements or comments expressing displeasure with Abbott. Tom made no move to defend the other prefect, his expression as calm as still water.

“Yes, because Slytherins defending Gryffindors could somehow happen by accident,” Orion spoke under his breath.
“What was that, Orion?” Alphard loudly asked.

“Merlin, don’t speak while you eat!” Fintan Gambol groaned from his right as he leaned away. From the way he pointed his fork, Tom suspected he was seconds away from stabbing Alphard with it. On Tom’s left, Pendleton merely looked up for a second before dismissing the scene and returning to his food and ancient runes doodles.

“Sorry!”

That, thankfully, was said a few seconds later. Next to Tom, Orion was pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Yeah, weird incident, isn’t it?” Alphard said again, uncaringly loud. “Nice to know that things are conveniently lining up for us Slytherins. Don’t worry, Tom, I believe you deserve it most!”

“It was not an accident.” Orion softly said.

As he observed from the corner of his eye, Tom was unsure whether Orion even realised he’d said that out loud.

“Our house has the damndest luck sometimes. It’s great, isn’t it?” Alphard commented, raising his cup.

“TO SLYTHERIN!” He toasted loudly, proudly. Others followed him easily and with varying degrees of vigour.

“To Slytherin!”

Tom raised his goblet too, a pleasant smile on his face as he followed suit. To people who provide the herd for the shepherds to find and lead, for the wolves to chase down and consume, he thought silently.

For the sheep.

When the cheers and furore had started to die down, Alphard turned to his cousin.

“Our luck is great, right, Orion?”

Tom was certain he’d heard a growl that was conveniently turned into a throat clearing just now. He hid his grin with his drink.

“I wouldn’t know. Success requires preparation. It does not happen just by accident.” Orion’s answer was frosty, though with almost no trace of the annoyance Tom had heard.

“Argh, success this, success that. Really, Orion, you sound too much like Uncle Arcturus. You need to relax sometime before you get a permanent frown on your forehead! See, even without you doing much, our House can take care of itself. I’m glad there are a lot of smartass here, not just in Ravenclaw.”

Orion’s smile was stiff—not that Alphard seemed to even notice that.

“Smartass,” Orion enunciated slowly. His cousin shrugged.

“Well, y’know what I mean. It’s a good thing, really.”

Two cousins with the striking bones of the Blacks, from very similar upbringing. Yet they could
not be more different. Pendleton made a polite cough to break the tension.

Tom decided that he could afford to be diplomatic just then—Orion would thank him and owe him a favour for this.

“Alphard, I see that you’re done with your dinner.” Tom stated, his voice a breeze.

Alphard glanced at his plate. “Ah, yes. Mostly. Why?”

“You asked me to introduce you to Hermione earlier, didn’t you?”

His eyes lit up. If he had a tail, he would be wagging it right now. “Truly?”

Tom humoured him. “I’m sure we can walk over to her table right now. She’d always taken dinner early.”

Alphard stood up suddenly, his elbow almost knocking another fifth year who cursed him out loud for it. Fintan loudly told him to watch it. Alphard seemed unconcerned even as he vaulted out of his seat, his movement frankly acrobatic. There was little wonder as to why he was the Slytherin Seeker.

Tom had been out of his seat in half the time and was just waiting for him to be done. Pendleton had stood up as well without a word.

“Great! Let’s go!”

On Friday morning, as Hermione headed to her Advanced Transfigurations class from Herbology, it was not difficult to notice the free-for-all melee currently taking place in front of her.

A few students already down were trying to escape the frenzied exchange of spells going around by skulking down or even outright crawling. A few prefects were trying hard to separate the kids. There was a much put-upon Daedalus who had resorted to physically placing himself between two students with a Protego in front of him. Not far from him was a Slytherin witch whose name escaped her who raised her voice and yet still wasn’t listened to—the younger students were busier dodging or attacking their rivals (or both). At most, they treated her as another barrier to hide behind or circle around. Round and round they go.

The witch reached her limit and threw a limb-locking charm at one and was trying to do the same to the second. The girl dodged easily and avoided the spell by ducking under the prefect’s arms.

“Why, you little—!”

More still were currently beyond the attention of any prefect.

Hermione saw the entire mess, from walls dripping with ooze and slime pools at random points of the hallway to errant snakes, all thanks to the pack of children running amok.

She didn’t hesitate.

“Aguamenti Maxima.”

The Ravenclaw cast it out loud. She did the full, complete wand movement instead of the shortened one she had adapted to and routinely used. She pushed all her focus and visualisation on a flood. All this increased the spell’s power.
A wall of water did descend upon the corridor.

Screams were heard—people certainly did not expect to be suddenly wet. The Slytherin prefect in particular sent Hermione a death glare even if she was half a corridor away, as her beautifully coiffed hair was now a dripping mess. Yet even as the children spluttered and spat water, they’ve stopped fighting.

In contrast, Daedalus simply walked to her, drenched robes and all, and then dropped a cold, wet hand (and soggy sleeve) on her shoulder.

“Thank you for your assistance, Hermione.”

His smile was a little too wide to be genuine and the water was trickling uncomfortably down her back. It’s not as if she could complain about all the water…

“Aren’t you going to collect all of them now?” She asked instead.

“Oh, certainly. I could use an extra wand hand to help dry them too.” If his side-eye was any more pointed, his eyeball was going to slip out.

Hermione sighed. “Yes, of course I’ll assist Daedalus.”

“Thank you.”

She walked in the same direction, following him back toward the mess. If the Slytherin witch was a gorgon, Hermione would have been turned to stone from the force of her cold glare.

“Ah, Clytemnestra! Look who’s assisting us today!” Daedalus greeted his current patrol partner with excessive cheer. Her death glare was now transferred to him.

“It’s her fault in the first place, Daedalus.” She bit out.

Hermione was content to ignore Gamp (sixth-year prefect, she reminded herself before the name slipped away yet again). It was similar to the way the Slytherin hadn’t bothered to greet her beyond the glare. After drying her own shoulder, she set off finding a few of the lower-year brats. It wasn’t long before both prefects were doing much the same thing, starting with their own clothes first.

“Are you alright, Hermione?”

She paused, the question taking her by surprise and she turned around again.

“Alright? Of course, I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Daedalus didn’t immediately answer, tilting his head slightly to the right as he continued thinking. His gaze never wavered from hers. “You just came out of St. Mungo’s last Saturday, and you weren’t discharged from the infirmary until Sunday afternoon.”

Ah, yes, that happened, didn’t it? She shrugged, even though she knew he had a point. “Well, I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“Really.”
“Would Madame Edelstein say the same thing if I asked her?” He asked back, his tone wry.

Hermione sent him a pointed look at his not-so-subtle threat to snitch on her. “She admitted that I’m clear to attend class on Sunday, thought I still have to drop in at the infirmary every other day or so, just to be sure.”

“Good, then.” Surprisingly, he actually looked more relaxed after that. “Take care of yourself, Hermione.”

“You too, Daedalus.”

Hermione spent the first half hour of her lunch break in one of the smaller potions lab that were open for the upper-years to use (as long as you fill the appointment book and get in line). A series of empty glass vials rested on the long table behind her. Instead of working with one primary cauldron, she had five smaller ones, small enough that they were all placed on the table, with small oil burners right below them instead of good old firewood.

She couldn’t help her snort the first time she saw it.

Anyone thinking that the wizarding world was completely separate from the non-magical one was delusional. She’d found mentions of whale oil usage in some of the older potions journals she’d read (she was checking the alternative methods for a particular potion). Seeing the oil burners and sniffing at their contents, there was no doubt that the oil inside was no longer whale oil. It was a petroleum by-product. She’d eat her hat if anyone could show her that the wizarding world has their own oil refinery.

Odds are, whoever is responsible for Hogwarts’ purchasing went to various markets with a list of things to buy, and chose the cheapest object they could get that still fulfils the requirements. Regardless of whether they liked to think about it or not, their economy was inextricable from the non-magical one.

But that was neither here nor there. What was here, was several testing potions made in smaller batches, all designed to detect the different aspects of Amortentia. She certainly didn’t remember it out of hand—this was why the back table was filled with open books she’d borrowed from the library, all open on a particular potion formula and recipe.

She’d ground the food portions with mortar and pestle to ensure a more homogenous consistency. Then, she carefully split each sample into equal weights. After that was allocating them to their own small saucer and she set to work.

Almost half an hour later, none of the food or drink changed.

“What? Impossible!”

Maybe she made a mistake? Mis-brewed? No, the colours of the potions were correct. The scent was correct. The consistency was still within what the books asked for. And yet nothing in the food or drink reacted with them. Nothing changed. Too long a time had passed? No, not really. A stasis spell can easily last for a day for something that small.

Maybe that was the result? That the poison didn’t come from the food he took at meals? She snorted.

As if.
Hermione sighed. She set out writing a report on it, just for reference. Several of her coloured inkpots lay on the long table with books, allowing her to record the colours of the potions and experiments as closely as possible. *A polaroid camera would really come handy,* she thought, and then shelved it for later.

After all this, the only thing left was to find Tom.

‘-’

Hermione didn’t really think much about approaching the Slytherin table in the middle of lunch, ignoring the curious, confused and surprised looks sent her way easily. She had seen his black hair from afar, the dignified way he held himself. Tom was dining with the Knights and that meant that she can certainly approach him with ease. Pendleton didn’t blink at seeing her walk their way. Ves took a second glance but that was it. Most of the others she knew were too focused on their food or did not react much. Tom turned towards her when she was almost next to him.

“I have the results from the, hmm, potions experiment I said I’d do.” She began.

“You don’t look happy,” Tom observed as he stood up. He made space for her and Abraxas stood up while telling other people to his right to move farther. Melchior was doing more-or-less the same from Tom’s left.

She exhaled a breath, taking the moment to gather her thoughts. “I get no answers, of course I’m not happy.”

“Did you fail the brewing?” He asked.

Of all the things Hermione would fail, it was *not* following instructions from several *books*. She gave him a warning gaze. Based on the slight grin he had, she knew he was baiting her. She accepted his offered hand and sat down next to him.

“The potions were *great*. I bottled the reminder and you can test them yourselves if you don’t believe me.”

He nodded, accepting her point.

“But…?”

“But nothing!”

Tom mulled over the answer she gave him without a word as he sat back down again. As Abraxas shifted his plate’s and Tom, there was enough space for another between the two placements. True enough, a new plate had just manifested right there along with the accompanying silverware. Tom wordlessly picked two jugs and offered them; Hermione chose the one containing grape juice.

“It plausible that it’s still a valid result.” Tom said.

“Well, only in the sense that we still have *no idea* which samples were adulterated.” She replied.

The Ravenclaw easily ignored Starkey’s expression, as he seemed dying to know which potions that they were talking about but had enough good sense to hold back from butting in when Tom hadn’t given his say so. The other Knight’s curiosity was less burning than his, but Abraxas’s gaze did flick in her direction more than once.

“Consider, Hermione, the curious incident of the dog in the night time.” Tom calmly replied.
She had only started opening her mouth to speak before closing it up immediately, being rather familiar with that particular case of Sherlock Holmes.

“That’s…” she abruptly turned to him. “What did you do? What are all the things you did after the infirmary and before you started collecting those samples?”

He didn’t answer her immediately, pointing out various dishes on the table and everyone else’s opinions on them. Ves chimed in and vigorously agreed on the glazed ham. Gallus recommended the soup. Hermione might thank them for the recommendation or give a reply or two, but half her attention was still on Tom, watching his reactions. When her plate was filled with food and she was beginning to despair of ever hearing the answer, he replied, though it certainly wasn’t what she was looking for.

“I think this is the point where I say you’ve done enough and you can let it go.”

Undeterred, she stared him down. “We are going to talk about this later. In the library.”

Two Gryffindor prefects were walking down a corridor near their tower. One was a tall witch with a forbidding expression and the other was a wizard with an easy grin whose long braid trailed behind him as he walked. Where she was all curves, he was mostly lines and elbows. They were a study of contrasts. It was clear from their body language that he was trying to expound his idea while from the way she was closed off from him, she was having many doubts about it.

“But—” she began.

Philippe raised a hand to forestall her complaints, his hands were animated and open, a plea for her listen. His red-and-gold tie was barely knotted already. “Look, at the very least you can agree with me that what we’re doing is not working, right? I don’t think we actually managed to keep order in Hogwarts in the last few days!”

Augusta Delagardie’s fist tightened around her wand before relaxing again.

“No, it’s not working. We might as well jump straight to the detentions with teachers.”

“Considering that it would be recorded, I’d rather not. I don’t want to burden the students with more marks against them than necessary.”

She folded her arms in front of her chest, her eyes darkening. All she needed to do was start tapping her pointy boots and she’d be the exact picture of displeasure.

“What, then? Did you look for me only to whine?”

Philippe snorted. “Of course not. I have a plan.”

“And the reason you’re telling me this instead of Ceres is because she always knows when you’re up to no good.” Her left eyebrow rose up as she asked this. His grin was slightly more rueful then as he admitted to her suspicion.

“She’d think it was a crazy idea.”

“What makes you think I’d be down with your crazy idea if she isn’t?”

“Because it might just work.” His answer was firm, the voice of a man sure of his own mind. “And
I know you don’t care about being too nice like Andrew and Agatha care about if we can actually get something done.”

“You’re going behind them,” she accused.

“I’m thinking that it’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.”

Her dead-eye stare could probably rival several vultures in inducing terror, but Philippe held his ground even if his jaw muscles tightened for a moment. After a while, Augusta shrugged.

“Very well. Let’s hear this plan of yours, then.”

His speed picked up at her answer, excitement bleeding through.

“First, we’ll have to check Emma’s data first. It’s even better if she had already updated them based on the more recent fracas.”

“What for?”

“The scene of the crime, of course. That, and I suspect some places are more prone to fights than not—the corridors near any double classes between Hufflepuffs and Slytherins, you get the idea.”

“Ah, I see. And?”

He rubbed his hands with undisguised glee. “After we get the reports comes the fun part…”

Emma Eccleston barely blinked when the two Gryffindor prefects approached her in the Prefect Room, asking whether she had any information on the fracas and fights the prefects have had to break up and report in the last few days.

“And you’re curious about all these now because…?”

“We need to update the information you’ve given us before,” the French wizard with the too-wide grin cheerfully waved the parchment he was holding in his left hand. Augusta only sat beside him and vaguely nodded her agreement.

Emma watched the Gryffindors across the table even as she found the reports that she’d just written from the pile of papers in front of her.

“I’ve only finished this now and I’m about to hand these to Andrew and Agatha so they can see how much of a difference our new patrol routes and schedule makes.” She pushed her glasses higher on the bridge of her nose, her gaze measuring. “Yet why would either of you need it immediately?”

“Because we need it to plan things?” Bernadotte answered.

Augusta was rubbing her forehead at his straightforward answer.

“I don’t know what you’re planning.” Emma bluntly replied even as she copied her reports, rolled the parchment and then handed the scroll to them.

“Oh, I can tell you about it. It’s pretty simple actually; it’s about—”

Bernadotte missed Emma’s widening eyes and her subtle shake of head. Augusta, though, didn’t.
They’ve met each other in different pureblood gatherings. Even if their families weren’t exactly of the same circle, they knew each other enough.

This was why she stomped hard on Bernadotte’s foot.

“OWW! What the hell was that for, Augusta?” He yelled.

“You’re talking over poor Emma, you idiot. She said she didn’t know what you’re planning, and we’re going to make sure it stays that way.”

“It’s good of you to understand. I appreciate that.” Emma nodded.

Philippe was wincing, but he could see what Augusta was saying, now that he was observing the Slytherin across them carefully enough to see the unquiet in her eyes. “Ah, I see. Pardon me, then. If we succeed—”

“I’m sure you’ll know.” Augusta finished.

“By the sounds of the explosions, Gryffindor?” Emma’s tone was dry.

Augusta grinned, “What else, Slytherin?”

Chapter End Notes

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Hecataeus of Miletus:** (History, Greek history) (Greek: Ἑκαταῖος Μιλήσιος; c. 550 BC – c. 476 BC), an early Greek historian and geographer. He wrote many works of which only two are known today since those few are the ones whose fragments have survived to the present day. One is “Journey round the Earth” / “World Survey” and “Genealogy” / “History”.

**Paracelsus:** (History, philosophy) The honorary name of Theophrastus von Hohenheim*, Swiss physician, alchemist and astrologer of the German Renaissance. He’s one of the first medical professors to recognise that physicians needed to have a solid academic knowledge of the natural sciences, especially chemistry. He’s a good candidate to be a wizard because he’s recorded historically as an alchemist.

*To FMA fans, yes, this historical guy is probably the spark that begun the idea for the character Hohenheim.

**Sun City:** (History) I swear I was trying be droll here, but ignore it if I failed completely. I was trying for a direct translation of the Greek name of the Ancient Egyptian city of Heliopolis. I didn’t even come up with the idea first—picked it up from Neil Gaiman. The surface of the ancient city is actually located several metres underground of modern Cairo. Heliopolis venerated the Bennu bird, a deity linked with sun and rebirth (might even be the bird that inspired the Greek’s phoenix mythology). Taking that into account, the sunbird mentioned in-text is obviously the phoenix.
Additional Notes:

**Goclenius’ Wiederaufbau zur Verteidigung des Traktats über magnetische Wundheilung**: A real book written by a physician and professor of medicine among other subjects at the Philipps University of Marburg. He’s famous for his miraculous cure with the Powder of Sympathy* and published proposition of using “magnetic” cure to heal wounds. Powder of Sympathy is a remedy that is applied to the *weapon* that caused the wound, with the purpose being to heal the injury it had made. Yeah, weird…

**Johannes Trithemius’ Steganographia**: This is also a real book, I assure you, on steganography (among other things) written by a Benedictine abbot. Steganography is the knowledge on how to incorporate a hidden message inside a plaintext (obvious and uncoded) one. He writes large parts of it as a mystic text (with mentions of sending messages through spirits), and as such got his book handily banned by many anti-witchcraft movements. One of Hohenheim/Paracelsus’ teachers. In a world where magic actually exists, well…

*If you’re still interested to know more about more random trivia about Powder of Sympathy, Sir Kenelm Digby was a proponent of using the powder to solve the longitude problem in navigation by synchronising the effects of the powder (because presumably, you can get something close to a regular clock that would help with navigation if you have a wounded person/creature on board that shows reaction from the application of Powder of Sympathy to the weapon that harms it no matter how far you are across the ocean—comparing that to the current night sky and a star chart would give you your current longitude). He even wrote a leaflet on this. This is also one of the weird plot points in Umberto Eco’s *The Island of the Day Before*; somebody was trying to circumnavigate the world with a wounded *dog* as their *clock*. (I read that book more than five years ago. Can’t believe I still remember that).

**Jan Verrault (OC)**: Sixth-year Ravenclaw, a stickler for the rules. He’s (rightly) suspicious of Tom and rather annoyed at what seemed to be the Slytherin prefect’s Teflon reputation (you can throw practically any accusation at him and it wouldn’t stick). Julia’s prefect partner, though she’s frequently exasperated at his obsession with enacting *all* the *rules*, no matter how trivial it seemed.

Jan is the Dutch version of John (and also the version of John in Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Czech… the list goes on, but he’s of Dutch descent). Basically, I picked it because a) it’s a really common name and b) together with his last name, tangentially echoed a different character that inspired him (*not* a HP character).
56 Les explosions à l’école II

Chapter Summary

A mundane prefect patrol—not. Hermione and Tom witnessed Bernadotte’s Solution. Tag with Starkey. The cracks are appearing among the prefects.

Chapter Notes

Work project is finally easing up/approaching the end, and my weekends don't get eaten up by it anymore. I've just finished (first draft!) of the current arc and did see that it really is a whodunnit in the tradition of mystery/detective fiction. As my sister pointed out, not everyone has a brain already used to keeping track of details borne from a hobby of reading/watching detective fiction, so I suppose I'll have to plan the chapter after that with some quasi-explanation. Still thinking how to do it. Tom, after all, isn't in the habit of showing all his cards (a magician never reveals his secret).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

56 Les explosions à l’école II

Hermione was too impatient to wait that she had followed him right out of their ADADA class and started asking once they were in obscure enough corridors. They were still somewhat heading towards the library, albeit at a rather circuitous route.

“You already know who did it, don’t you?” She asked. “The person or persons who dosed your foodstuff?”

A pause. “I wouldn’t say know precisely. I only have suspicions and guesses.”

“Then who…?”

She could see him closing his eyes for at least a second from the side before he opened it again. He probably sighed just then, a quiet, barely noticeable sigh.

“What happens in Slytherin House stays in Slytherin House.”

“What?” Her voice rose. His, however, stayed at the same even tone.

“That’s one of our House rules, Hermione. What happens in Slytherin House stays in Slytherin House. I can’t tell you exactly.” He stated this frankly, but his expression was more bored than insistent. Clearly, he did not think much of it but was not willing to go against his house to break it—not for something that he apparently considered too trivial. “It’s not as if it’s actually important for you. You’ll manage.”

He was watching her with a rather insistent look, though, as if he was expecting something.
The brunette tilted her head to the right, watching him right back as thoughts whirl in her head. They started out as a cacophonous noise, but as she eliminated the more outrageous suspicions, a more reasonable idea began to form.

“But if I were to find out on my own, no one can complain.” She stated.

Tom nodded, a small smile finally appearing. “Exactly. Truthfully, it’s nothing too important. I’m not even moving against the suspected perpetrator right now because I don’t really have the time to deal with some small-fry, first-time sneak right now. It would hold if I decide to come back to it later. I’ve probably scared the life out of the fool or they’d do something worse sooner or later.”

“Well, let me decide whether to pick this up or not, then.” Hermione answered. His nod was easy.

“Certainly.”

“Can you tell me about what you’ve been doing in the last few days?” she asked back, hopeful.

He chuckled. “Now, I’d be omitting or misdirecting on many Slytherin House business, and I’m sure you don’t want to hear that, do you? That would fall under the heading of lying to you. I’m afraid you have to find your own sources of information.”

Hermione grumbled. She knew it was a long shot, but she was half hoping that it might just be that easy.

They didn’t end up going to the library at all, now that the entire conversation was done with, far faster than she’d expected.

“What are you going to do now?” She asked, curious.

“A short patrol, I suppose.” His answer was lackadaisical. “We—the prefects—have been increasing the length and frequency of our patrols lately.”

Hermione had seen the mess that was the inter-house relations this week, particularly among the younger years. She’d overheard a Ravenclaw prefect she wasn’t familiar with raise her voice at Oswin and say that this war had better stop now, the Slytherin out of words to give. The rumour mill of Hogwarts had come up with the Order of Merlin War as the name for the current series of fights and animosities and it had stuck.

“You’re not going to patrol alone, are you?” She asked worriedly.

“Haven’t you heard? Prefects always go in pairs.” He replied unconcerned. She narrowed her eyes at him but said nothing yet, having more patience to wait than she did in her youth. The pause stretched for a while before he spoke again.

“That’s not to say that I wouldn’t wander a little by myself before I meet up.”

“Why?”

“For the freedom of it. I don’t always get a…hmm, understanding partner, do I? It’s admittedly tedious to have to hold back a little too often, especially in such lively situations as these. Clearly, I have more liberty to act when I move alone.” He dismissed his own explanation with a bored flick of his hand.
“Really, you know how most people are. Rigid. Unimaginative. Fearful. Use a little unconventional magic and fear grips them.”

It was the honesty that stunned her a little; for once, there was none of the elegant phrasings that misdirected people from his nature. This was not the words of the perfect student, who’d blended seamlessly into the magical upper crust as if he grew up there. That impatience was genuinely Tom the ambitious orphan, the one she knew with that particular darkness in his soul. This was the young wizard who was a scholar of blood magic and speaker of dead tongues; in a different world, he would have considered sacrificing more and more people’s lives for his own eternal life already.

“Lively situations?” She asked instead, successfully keeping her tone casual.

“Fights. All-out magical brawls. You know when it’s time to take off the kid gloves and start casting serious spells, yet in general, these amateurs are held up by their impractical rules. They flap about like headless chickens that even a younger student can mow them down in no time.”

Ah, and there was the general contempt for the intelligence of most people we all know.

He couldn’t just give her a compliment without displaying his misanthropy, could he? She huffed. By the ease with which he glanced at her, quirked a half-smile and then returned his gaze ahead again, she knew she probably had a completely inappropriate smile on her face. It was impossible to not feel flattered. It didn’t matter even if a part of her was trying to convince herself that anything pertaining to Tom Riddle was Serious Business and she better be sombre about it.

Oh, what the hell. She can be serious without having to look like someone just died. Hermione didn’t want to turn to Verrault, for goodness’ sakes.

“I’ll come with you, then.” The brunette said. She wanted to help keep order at Hogwarts. It was probably some residual prefect instinct/guilt that she had.

He nodded, but his smirk was more than a bit irritating.

“What?” She couldn’t resist asking.

“I was waiting for you to say that.”

Hermione had fallen into step with him and she didn’t hold back the urge to roll her eyes. “So, you know me that well, do you?”

“No, but I’ve gotten some very good examples of your busybody nature.” Tom replied idly.

Gazing at his side profile, she could see his long eyelashes with the flicker of his eyes. At this point, noticing his good looks only annoyed her more. It was just one more edge he had to charm people with that she never had.

“Ha ha,” was her sarcastic reply, her steps not slowing down the least.

Some way into their walkaround of Hogwarts, the commotion on the other end of the corridor made her look up. Loud, rapid steps was followed by a wizard in a newsboy cap. She didn’t know why she was surprised to see Ves running down the hall, waving his arm at them even when he was still at the other end of the corridor. The urge to tell him not to run warred with her awareness that she had to shout to do that and she knew there was a rule against shouting in corridors and—
“Tom! You too, Hermione!”

Hermione rubbed her face. She should’ve figured out that Ves would shout sooner or later.

Ves dodged several people in his way, one of whom was cursing loudly at him as he shoved the other wizard carelessly. Ves made with a rude sign with one hand even as he ran without looking back. The Ravenclaw sighed again as she convinced herself that she wasn’t a prefect and it wasn’t her business if some fifth-years or so exchanged curses in the hallway.

Other than that case, Ves generally weaved skilfully around the people in his way.

Tom raised an eyebrow but saying nothing, content to keep walking at his current pace as his underling made his way.

“What’s the hurry, Vespasian?” Tom asked.

Ves’ breathing was slightly faster, but he wasn’t even out of breath. “First floor Charms corridor. It was amazing and I regret not being there right now, but then I recall you askin’ to be immediately informed if blue moons are rising and whatnot—and if the floor collapsing into mud pools isn’t extraordinary, I don’t know what is! Bernadotte is right in the thick of it, mark my words.”

He was as excited as he was proud.

“Could you start from the beginning?” Hermione asked.

“I’ve no ken of the beginning!” He said brightly, nary a care in the world. “Yet to wit, there are these bogged down fourth-years who are mudslinging, literally.”

“Bernadotte?” She repeated, uncertain about that image of rampant glee.

Ves nodded with the same wide grin. “Splitting his sides like a loon.”

“Who else is there? Give me a list of the upper-years, if you will.” Tom said.

“Well, there’s some…Ravenclaw? Some sour-faced bird I don’t know.” Ves answered with a nonchalant wave of his left hand. Why he was holding a quill in it, she had no idea.

“A prefect?” Hermione asked.

“Nah.” He adjusted his cap tighter over his curls. He had this slightly dumbfounded expression when he realised that he was still holding the quill in his hand and carefully returned it into his left pocket.

“No one else?”

“Ah,” he thought carefully at Tom’s question. “There’s a few of the usual nobs of our House, useless morts getting in the way, trumpeting shrill demands, the like before they pull a runner. There’s…this other Gryff who’s too foxy, doin’ nothing and eyes on everything like ‘twas a great show.”

She could see the moment Tom’s thoughts came to a focus, sharper.

“Redhead?”

Ves shrugged. “Some Prewett, Weasley, MacDougal or one o’ the Irish families, not sure. Damn sure the bloke’s not our year.”
Hermione caught his gaze easily; she had no doubt that she had the same look of realisation that he did right now. “Paul or Peter?”

“Who else?” He asked back. “Lead the way, Vespasian.”

“I *did* warn you,”

They heard Bernadotte’s voice as the three of them turned into the first-floor Charms corridor.

There were kids rushing back, and she saw at least two hiding behind a suit of armour and a pedestal respectively. It looked less like a Hogwarts corridor and closer to a mud pool—a couple of pigs would’ve fitted in perfectly. She stopped herself before stepping into the mud, with Tom and Ves catching themselves to her right and left.

Some kids were still stubbornly hexing each other.

Two wizards, taller than the rest caught their attention. There really weren’t that many wizards with a waist-length braid falling down his back, so she recognised Philippe instantly.

“Since some people still aren’t stopping…Paul! Launch!” Philippe gave the order.

Both Paul and Philippe had their wands out and cast *Protego* to their sides, and Paul only after he cast some other spell before.

That was when Hermione noticed the lines of miniature trebuchets by the sides, launching their payload after Paul’s spell prompted them into motion. Her own *Protego* had flickered to life the second they moved by sheer reflex, even if she was still outside their target range. A multitude of red balls criss-crossed the air, like a ballet of shell-less watermelons. Then came the explosions. There were a few screams of surprise as the younger kids (fourth years?) were splattered with jam as they hit.

“*Accio* wand.” Bernadotte cast at the kid nearest to him, and then repeated it at least three more times, collecting wands as he went.

Hermione had just cast a water-proofing spell on her shoe when she saw Tom casting *Glacia* instead towards the mud. She quickly joined him and a walkable surface soon began to form. Add Ves’ efforts not far behind, and they can walk over towards the Gryffindors as if it was another normal corridor.

“Thanks for your help.” Bernadotte’s grin was wide as he offered his hand to his year-mate. Paul shook it.

“Don’t mention it. Really, don’t. I’m still not sure about what the other prefects think of this, so as long as you’re the one to take responsibility for it—heeyy, fancy seeing you here, Riddle.”

Paul’s tone went up by half an octave as he noticed their arrival. His grin was more awkward than friendly. Tom’s prefect badge gleamed back at him from the prefect’s lapels.

“Bernadotte, Prewett.” Tom greeted back, smiling slightly.

“Curie, um, whoever-you-are Slytherin fifth-year. Nice to meet you. I still have people to meet, places to be, so…see you later!”
With those words, the redhead dashed to the trebuchet at the very end, shrunk that, and then ran off with it in his hands.

Hermione had winced at his first hurried steps because he’d splashed some mud to her robes, and Tom narrowed his eyes slightly at the Gryffindor fool, not that she blamed him for hightailing it out of there at the first sign of trouble. Ves muttered unflattering words when he saw the mud on his own robes.

“He’s not taking the rest?” Ves’ tone was curious as his gaze drifting to the remaining two lines of trebuchet.

“My guess is they’re all the result of the Geminio charm. No need to look after the doubles if you know they’d disappear again after some time, right?” The Ravenclaw answered.

“Ah!” Ves nodded in realisation.

"Urgh, does Paul really need to kick the mud that high? Hermione scrunched her nose at the splatter over her skirt.

"-"

As Ves and Hermione looked around and chatted, Tom had turned his attention back to Bernadotte.

“Interesting…method you have here.” Tom said.

“So, what brings all of you here?” Bernadotte asked cheerfully as he gathered the shocked and defeated students. Hermione was quietly casting Scourgify on herself—Vespasian did it for Tom.

Starkey’s answer was blunt. “You. Mighty fine work you did ’ere. Didn’t know that prefects can explode things. I would’ve tried better to be one if I’d known.”

“Well,” Tom began, “technically, we’re not given any more leeway to break rules than other students.”

The muscle in Bernadotte’s jaw tensed for a moment before relaxing again, his smile was as easy and casual as it had been.

“And why are you here, Riddle? Come to give me a warning? Tell me about what sort of example I’m setting?” There was an obstreperous edge to his tone, his stare direct and hard.

Tom shrugged, his body language still casual. “I don’t see anything I need to warn you of. Maybe we should get the students in line and return their wands first?”

He waited for a reply. His calm demeanour got him a nod from Bernadotte. He noticed the relaxing shoulders before the other prefect handed him half of the wands he’d collected to distribute back.

“I’m not any good at this either, but we have to give some sort of lecture to tell them off for fighting in the corridors.” Philippe said with a sigh.

The Slytherin prefect cleared his throat and turned to the students from lower years who were quite mainly because they were still rather shocked and jam-covered.

“Alright, everyone, gather around. We’ll return your wands soon, but I hope that you can consider this experience as the warning that it should be. Even prefects can get tired of having to maintain order in the face of adverse conditions. Some, like the fine fellow to my left here, can be
exceedingly creative because of that.”

“And I’ll get even more *creative* if you haven’t learned your lesson, *if you get what I mean.*” Philippe warned, his tone was hard. Some students flinched. He sighed.

“Look, I don’t want to have to send anyone to detentions, right. For Merlin’s sake, do you actually *want* your parents to hear what sort of trouble you got into? Are you asking for a howler? Because that’s what you’re going to get once the parents hear that you were part of some extended inter-house war.” The Gryffindor’s serious tone seemed to have put the message across, as some of them paled.

“That’s why I did this, alright? It’s enough of a warning without bringing the adults on our heads.”

“Especially when you’re foolish enough to make enough noise for a herd of hippogriffs and get caught.” Tom added. His glance easily found the Slytherin among them, their demeanour embarrassing their own house.

Several heads were lowered.

He turned to Bernadotte to allow the other prefect to pick up where he left them. The brunet only shrugged.

“That covers all we need to say, I think. I’m really not cut out for long speeches.”

Hermione had already taken over the wands Tom was holding and stepped forward in front of them.

“Allright, who has a hazel wand?” One arm shot up, a sour-faced Ravenclaw whose expression morphed into sudden delight once he saw Hermione. He went from looking like a younger cousin of Draco to a cherubic youth. The transformation was extreme enough that it surprised her.

“Come right this way and wave it slowly so you can prove that it’s yours. Yes, that’s right. Ah, there it is,” she nodded knowingly. “A match. You can go. Next up is rosewood. Anyone?”

A Hufflepuff kid raised her hand awkwardly.

“Step right up and extend your wand arm this way. Right, hold it and give it a small wave.”

Orange sparks spun in the air like petals, along with a sweet and tangy fragrance that was almost tropical.

“Well, it certainly recognises you. Next is…”

She was so effective at distributing the wands while still keeping order it that Bernadotte surrendered the wands in his custody to her as well.

“I can’t argue that your method isn’t effective,” Tom began, looking around the corridor, “but I don’t think this would fit within—”

“Prefect protocols?” Philippe asked. He snorted while his right hand twirled his wand over and under his knuckles.

The Gryffindor sighed. “I know. I know that all too well, dammit. Look, I can leave less work for the caretaker to do. Paul recommends that I hose down the corridor when I’m done and I can do that. After that it’s just a matter of using *Scourgify* repeatedly. Yet I got the job done, didn’t I?
Stopped the damned fighting cold?"

Tom recast *Glacia* underneath his feet when he heard Hermione casting it and Ves following her behind him. A look back made it clear that she was herding the younger students away from the corridor. It amused him to see her take responsibility for them without blinking, even when there were two actual prefects around. It didn’t even cross her mind to ask what should be done with them—she’d even roped Vespasian to help her watch them and make sure they’re not starting anything *again* before they split up.

“But Hermy! I’m not a ruddy prefect! We’re no bloody prefects!” Ves’ complaint could be heard somewhere at his back.

“The measure of a person is how they would step up when *responsibility* comes to them.” She answered with asperity.

“Well, *I’m* not responsible. I’m no good prefect candidate. Look, I’ll even spit on those words to prove it—”

The last thing Tom saw was Hermione swatting the back of Ves’ head before he could actually spit. Of course, it could easily be argued that he wasn’t in any position to make the floor any dirtier than literal mud pool, but he suspected this was one of those actions that are ‘bad in principle’ according to Hermione. He was rather glad that most of the time she was more concerned with great ideals than minor technicalities of what constitutes good behaviour. Else, their interaction may be a little… inconvenient.

Bernadotte was staring at the iced-over surface that and shook his head, muttering ‘why didn’t I think of that’ before he started casting the ice spell as well.

“Vespasian told me that there were some…Slytherin upper years here before? Who certainly disagreed with your methods?”

Philippe shrugged, his left hand idly flicked the end of his long braid. He was sliding his wand in and out of its holster repeatedly.

“Ah, yeah. There was some yelling about my ruining their outfit. Clothes can be washed or spell-cleaned, right?”

The Gryffindor’s tone was firm and he moved with a confident swagger. Yet Tom saw more in the minute changes to his expression—that momentary crease between his eyebrows.

“I have to admit that you certainly stopped them from fighting.” Tom confirmed, keeping his eyes on his fellow prefect, his voice was still dulcet. “And yet…”

“I don’t give a damn about the rest.”

His gaze flickered sideways for one second. Tom Riddle kept a diplomatic silence at that, even as his gaze said many, many things. Some were things that he knew Bernadotte had already suspected himself. Most were things that were not good news.

‘-

Tom had mused out loud in front of Hermione about what Oswin and Emma might have picked up about Bernadotte’s ‘experiments’ with Prewett of all things, particularly how it might have gone down with Abbott. He was dead certain that the Gryffindor prefect did not consult the Head Boy or Head Girl about this beforehand.
“Really?” She had asked.

“If you were him, would you ask if you thought you’d be denied permission?”

“Ah,” she had nodded, understanding. “Easier to ask forgiveness than permission.”

“Exactly. Now, it would be interesting to see how the other Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws would take this. The Gryffindors aren’t too challenging to predict—most of the time, they’d understand their fellow Housemate’s impulsive and ‘courageous’ deeds.”

His mention of her House had surprised Hermione. “What, you wonder about us Ravenclaws too?”

Vespasian was tossing his newsboy cap in the air and catching it again. She would’ve thought he was bored, but he hadn’t voiced a complaint as he walked by their side.

“You do realise that Verrault is from your House, don’t you? He may have been out of the ordinary, but not truly that unique.”

Tom continued his enumeration and speculation on the characters and traits of both particular prefects and Houses. The brunette witch only shook her head with a fond smile, too familiar now with that glint in his eyes that spoke of various scenarios he was running in his head with the same deftness as a black jack dealer in Vegas shuffled and cut her cards.

“You can go and find the Slytherin prefects to exchange information and get all your plans in a nice row. Yes, really. I can amuse myself without your company, you know?” Hermione said all this while trying to repress a grin. Go on, I’m sure you’re not concerned about working yourself well into Friday evening.

He’d had offered the palm of his hand by then, an implicit request that she didn’t even know she’d understood until she had placed her hand in his. She’d expected him to kiss the back of it (she still made weird faces whenever he did that, but she was getting used to all the affectations he was partial to).

She hadn’t expected him to pull her towards him and catch her in his arms for a peck on her lips before leaving. She blinked, and the first thing she focused on was his eyes. Still indigo, she thought. And did that smile just reached his eyes?

“I’ll see you later, Hermione.”

She’d stared. Vespasian had gaped before exchanging disbelieving glances with each other.

“-

This was why the two of them were currently standing still in the middle of a corridor. Hermione looked around, and Ves glanced around too, curious about what exactly might have caught her attention.

“What are you looking for, Hermy?”

“People. There’s no one here but us.”

“Well…yeah?”

“Then why would he do that? He doesn’t need to put on a show for anyone!”

“Hermione,” Vespasian spoke slowly, hat held respectfully in front of him; he’d already marked
her as the Lady in his head the same way Tom was his Lord. “d’you think Tom’s faking it with ye?”

She shook her head. “Oh, I know he’s far more attached to me than anyone else he knows, but these…” her hands made vague shooing motions, her expression oddly of…annoyance? What?

“…public courting displays isn’t something that either of us actually enjoys. I’ll be happy enough to have company to talk of books and magical theory with and he’s always been pragmatic.”

“You think it’s a show?” He asked, confused.

The Ravenclaw rolled her eyes. “Oh, I know it’s a show. I just don’t know who he’s making it for when there’s no audience.”

She’d started walking again and Vespasian trailed by her side.

“Hermione…”

“Yes, Ves?”

“Tom might just be doin’ that because…he likes you?”

To his surprise, she laughed, before turning to him with an odd smile on her face. It was nice, but he didn’t understand the hint of regret or sadness in it. Why was she looking at him as if he was someone she’d known who she thought was dead? He’d even turned around once to make sure there were no ghosts passing behind him.

“Sometimes I forget your age. You’re cute, you know that?”

Before he managed to shrink away from her, she’d already messed with his curls and he cursed out loud. He hated his curls. There was a reason why he wore a hat (and most teachers won’t be able to peel it away from him either).

“Hermy!” He growled. “I don’t care who you are—you’ll pay dearly for that!”

With a mischievous grin, she ran from him. “You’ve got to catch me first!”

For a while, Hermione was able to conveniently not remember that there was a Hogwarts rule that prohibited running in the corridors. Vespasian clearly didn’t care. Neither did he care much about the rules that prohibit general spellcasting—and since he didn’t care, she definitely wasn’t going to make it easier for him to hit her. She’d Accio’d complaining suits of armours between her and Ves to take the brunt of several spells he casted, apologising profusely while she ran on. She’d cast Gecko Feet Charm on her shoes and dodged several other spells by running up and then down the sides of the wall.

It did stop him for a while as he stared in awe. The spell wasn’t very strong when cast in a hurry (with slightly sloppy movements as she’d forgotten it a bit), so you can’t really stand on walls, but it worked just fine when you were running. Hermione couldn’t help telling off several staring first or second years that happened to be passing the corridor that they better not try it because the spell took months of trying to get right as well as practice. The children simply nodded dumbly.

She was getting pretty concerned when they were running down the grand stairways that ended with the double doors leading to the castle grounds—Ves was so determined to catch up with her
that he cast *Glacia* on the stair bannisters, then jumped up to stand on it and slid down with a pose that would earn approving nods from a snowboarder.

“*Vespasian!* That’s at least a *three-story fall!*” She yelled back.

“Pffft. It’s fine. I’ve done this before—and it’s *Ves!*” And he leapt easily to the next set of bannisters. She started raining hexes on him just to get him to yelp and duck and thus jump back to the stairs. Then, she set off again.

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They both started flagging when the chase reached the ground floor. Well, she could *still* run, but she wasn’t exactly in the mood to any longer, because the more of the younger students she’d met, the more that she felt that she had to set a good example, etc…

“Why are you following me, anyway?” She’d finally asked from a corner (just because she didn’t want to run didn’t mean she wanted to just let him hit her).

“What?”

“You. Following me. Don’t you have other things to do?”

“What, I *can’t* spend my time with you? I thought we’re friends, Hermy?” He asked in a wheedling tone. He sent a curse her way when she poked her head out, but it fizzled against her shield. Hermione couldn’t help it—she smirked.

“Yes, but there’s something else about this afternoon, though, so don’t treat me like I’m too stupid to get it.”

Ves gave up as he approached her, hands in his pocket.

“Is tag over for now?” She asked.

He muttered imprecations under his breath, clearly reluctant to end it but knowing she would probably just slip away if he didn’t. “Oh, *alright.* Yes, it’s over.”

“Good.”

“‘Was wondering on what tests you did for Tom.”

“Tests?”

“You said you were testin’ stuff that Tom gave you with several potions.” He said. She could see the drops of sweat beginning to collect on his temples, but he wasn’t even out of breath. She was impressed. “What did you look for? What did ‘e look for?”

“Urgh, nothing important.”

Ves was sceptical. “*Really?*”

“Well, from the easy way he dismissed it, it might as well be.”

“I could help,” he pointed out. She perked up a little at the prospect, brown eyes shining so much that he had to take a step back with worry.

“Potions lab, then?”
“Yeah. Potions lab it is.”

-  

They hadn’t even made it to the Potions lab Hermione had used when they turned slightly. Starkey needed to bottle the potions he’d let stand since the morning. He drew his borrowed key out of his pocket, complete with its numbered keychain. She had followed him out of curiosity to the Potions lab that he’d been reserving and using. She was not surprised to see the pearlescent liquid the deepest shade of bluebells in the cauldron, but she was surprised that he managed to make it quickly.

He only shook his head at her comment.

“Nah, din’t make it from scratch. ‘Twould take me some time. Lucky me, I could jus’ ask someone from home to owl the precursor potions.”

“There precursor potions aren’t stable,” she pointed out. Ves only shrugged.

“Just means I need to brew on the day I got ‘em.”

Hermione helped him bottle the potion, half of which he would smuggle back into the infirmary while the other half is ‘for emergency purposes’ he’d said. The brunette could already imagine a slew of her old emergencies where she would ensure her stock was adequate and…she didn’t quite want to ask him of his own details. Her memories, although patchy, could turn her mood sombre if she dwelt on it. Besides, it was enough for her to know that the Knights weren’t outright thieving potions from the infirmary’s supplies.

“I can’t believe they keep mother-of-pearl in the potions ingredients cupboard, though.” She commented, knowing very well the ingredients required for the potion.

Starkey laughed. “‘Twas there, but I wouldn’t ruddy use it for all the tea in Cochin China. Better to jus’ buy yer own.”

“…why?”

“Slughorn keeps track of who uses the ingredients. Use some gillyweed or bindweed? Piece o’ cake. Now, boomslang skin? Powdered unicorn horn? You can bet your wand he’ll be watchin’ you carefully”

That was…a very interesting statement. Hermione mused. Does this mean that Snape actually had an idea of what she, Harry and Ron had been up to in their second year? Why didn’t he interfere, she wondered, or was he too jaded even then to care?

As Starkey whistled cheerfully to himself and placed the bottled potions into his bag, she saw that he didn’t only pick up the bluebell painkillers. There were other potions that she assumed he’d made before that he’d left on the table that he was now picking up. She recognised the long line of Fortified Pepper-up Potions, having made them herself in her own time. It was the last two bottles, tucked in a corner behind a large jug that caught her attention.

A splash of vivid pink. Light magenta. Not many potions were of that obnoxious shade, and as she slowly drifted towards the table, in the guise of helping to pass him more bottles, she could catch the cloying scent of overpowered rose oil and honey, among others.

“Yes, you don’t mind if I take off, do you?”
“What? What about your potion tests?”

Hermione turned around abruptly, facing him. “Oh, I was just trying to find out who spiked Tom’s food with Amortentia. I just realised that if the tests came back negative, that meant he’d dealt with it and it’s no longer an issue, is it?”

She could see that she’d surprised him with her insight and blunt question, but he didn’t seem wary at all.

“Oh, *that*. Yeah, it’s bein’ taken care of. So, you don’t actually have an interesting conundrum on your hands, then?” He actually sounded disappointed. She smiled.

“’Fraid not, Ves. See you later.”

“Ta, Hermy.”

He went back to piling potions into his bag (she wouldn’t believe him if he said he wasn’t a potions supplier).

“Yes,” she called from the door, pausing.

“Yeah?”

“Is there anyone you’re currently interested in? A pretty girl, maybe? Or is it a boy?” She asked.

He snorted. “No one ’ere’s that *interesting*, Hermione. You know how it is. Only Tom—and you too, I s’pose—are the most interestin’ people I’ve seen in *ages.*”

His tone was clearly of boredom and annoyance. *He wasn't hiding anything.* Yet as she walked out, the potions she’d saw stayed in her mind.

*Amortentia. For what purpose, exactly?*

Andrew was shaking his head; his usually relaxed handsome face was strained.

“You can’t just turn an entire Hogwarts corridor into a total mess—”

“Oh, spare me the lecture. They stopped, didn’t they? If they had no regard of the rules before, at the very least, I could put the fear of *me* into them. I kept the list of names of the students involved—if more than two of them get into any more fights after this, I’d be surprised.” Bernadotte cut in.

Tom was down the length of the table from them in yet another prefect meeting. Not close enough to interfere, but in the perfect position to watch it unfold. It was interesting to note that whenever he took the seat at the foot of the table, no one else minded. Most of the other prefects were too busy watching Abbott and Bernadotte going head-to-head.

“The Hogwarts caretaker isn’t your personal servant.” The Head Boy cautioned.

Bernadotte huffed with impatience. His left hand slipped carelessly in his pocket. “I helped him out cleaning a bit. Yes, I didn’t stay around for all of it, but we all have classes to go to, don’t we? I also checked back after class, right before going here.”

Andrew pressed his fingertips to his forehead; his expression was that of tested patience but he controlled himself well. He wouldn’t look out of place as a saint in a stained-glass window. Even
his eyes were still beseeching towards Bernadotte than angry. A twinge of loathing bloomed in Tom’s mind at Andrew, merely because he was aware that even if he gave all his efforts, he would still not manage to perform the emotion the Head Boy felt and channelled so naturally and without effort.

*That saddened disappointment, that noble expression of a leader doing his best to understand!* Tom mocked in his own mind. *None is ever as perfect as he is, isn’t it?* He so detested coming second in critical skills.

Hatred was completely normal in this situation.

“…in the end, you can’t do this again, Philippe. We’re the ones calming Hogwarts, not bringing it into further uproar. You even brought Augusta into it.” Andrew had said, his voice level.

_Ah, the conversation has gone on._ Tom was certain that whatever other sentences he’d missed in the interim wasn’t too important.

Augusta Delagardie was blatantly rolling her eyes at the idea that anyone could have brought her into anything she didn’t want to, but said nothing. He could even see Rajesh Setalvad’s lips quirking slightly. Tom’s own smile faintly grew.

“What, you have a better idea? Is that it? Tell me what your plan then.” Bernadotte asked.

“We’ve already changed the patrol schedule and increased the frequency.”

“And it’s still *not enough*!” He snapped. Bernadotte leaned forward, his eyes eagle-sharp. “Why am I the only person taking this seriously? Do you actually enjoy the increased tension in Hogwarts? Is that it? Assure that no one ever forgets the first Head Boy to earn an Order of Merlin Award? The single-handed *saviour* of Hogsmeade?”

Tom smothered his own grin as second-hand satisfaction rose. *Good hit, Bernadotte.*

“Philippe!” Agatha’s eyes were wide, surprised and also disappointed.

“You were out of line, Bernadotte.”

Daedalus said this with a sigh and a tired look, unaware of Agatha’s appreciation directed his way. His slouch and annoyed expression told all that he considered doing this entirely as a chore—he wouldn’t have said anything if someone else had spoken up the same thing.

“Was I?” Bernadotte’s answer was half a growl.

“But you’re also correct. We need to try other methods too and why not sooner rather than later?” Daedalus finished. The blond shrugged at the glances sent his way, his head lazily leaning against his hand as Bernadotte speechlessly shut his mouth again.

“He *does* have a point.” Daedalus said.

“Exactly. He might be a bit of an arse, but he’s not wrong.” Delagardie spoke up, her seat not far from her fellow Gryffindor and last partner-in-mischief.

“My parents have forwarded me the invitation for it tomorrow.” She unrolled a scroll, opened it flat, and pushed it across the table. “It’s an Order of Merlin dinner, even if it’s not explicitly mentioned there.”
“Then it might not be—” Andrew began.

Delagardie huffed. “And pigs may fly. Dream on if you wish, Andrew, but the rest of us aren’t as delusional. My parents heard it. Even Bernadotte and Victorinus heard it, though they didn’t get the invites.”

She nodded to the two French Gryffindors who acknowledged her.

“I’m sure Daedalus knew too.”

“Yes. Pater said it was for the Order of Merlin.” The blond seventh-year confirmed her statement from a little to Tom’s left.

Delagardie’s back was as straight as any swordswoman’s where she stood. Her gaze did not wander from Andrew and she threw out her challenge.

“Do you want me to start asking everyone else from the old families here? How many of them have heard that whatever this Ministry Dinner is called, it is the Order of Merlin award?”

Check, Tom thought idly as he raised his cup of tea. Your move, Andrew. He was still sitting even as several others had stood.

It was rather interesting to see everyone seating themselves according to their House affiliation today. Apart from the Head Boy who sat at the head of the table, the lions and badgers sat across each other on opposite sides of the long table—to his left, beyond the Ravenclaws were the Gryffindors, while the Hufflepuffs were on the table side that was to his right, beyond the main cluster of his own House.

Two factions negotiating a truce, he pondered at the positions.

“It’s a misunderstanding,” Andrew seemed more tired usual. Internally, he couldn’t help a malicious grin at that.

Emma spoke up with her usual cool, precise diction and a steady gaze behind her spectacles. “I don’t think it is. I think I’m the one who had misunderstood things so far. I suppose I should’ve stopped hoping that my house would get one.” She turned to Tom—Oswin leaned back so he wouldn’t be in the way.

“I’m sorry, Tom.”

Her tone was still a little flat, but it didn’t surprise Tom—Emma never did quite manage exuberant emotions.

“Oh, don’t be. I never had any expectations in the first place. It comes down to my last name, you know? Not convincing enough.” His answer was mild, his expression one of understanding. “But I understand why Crouch might have expected differently—he’s old family too. I don’t think they should be able to brush away his efforts that easily, not like they did with mine.”

His words were enough to get most of the Gryffindors to narrow their eyes at the Hufflepuffs. They were surprisingly in sync, like a pack of wolves—or a pride of lions, to follow that imagery.

It was Crouch’s turn to huff. “If they didn’t consider your actions worthy of an Order of Merlin, then mine damn sure doesn’t deserve it.”

The Slytherins were generally being very good spectators at this point, while the Ravenclaws were
a mixed bag. Amelia Bones stood to Andrew’s right with her arms crossed over her chest. Her words were short and clipped.

“Decline it, Andrew.”

“I already did,” Andrew answered, the beginnings of annoyance seeping into his tone. Yet as he took a deep breath, it disappeared once more as he held on to his level mood with a grim determination.

“I already did because it's not right.”

Tom found it more difficult than usual to hold back his sarcastic snort. Yes, yes, we already know you’re a champion, Andrew. Must you keep repeating that? Afraid we’ll forget it otherwise? He found it hard to believe that being nice and good was worth tolerating Fudge. He’d take a mangy, flea-bitten dog over that man. Tom would prefer to tie him down in a chair, clamp his head down to stop excess movements and hold his eyelids open before making him watch a red-hot needle being slowly inserted into his eyeball.

“Well, apparently the Undersecretary couldn’t understand that no means no. Someone needs to teach him a lesson about it.” Amelia muttered.

“What else could I do?” He asked, before returning his attention to Bernadotte again, his brows heavy. “And don’t think you can distract us from our current problem of your use of excessive magic on the students.”

“Cette connerie est exactement le problème!” Bernadotte snapped back. Not even Victorinus was complaining about his language as she simply stood by his side. The shorter Gryffindor was watching the expression of everyone on the other side of the table from them.

“This issue is still related. If you actually have enough guts to hold your ground and defend it, we wouldn’t be in this position by now.” Philippe finished.

Tom knew the exact moment that Andrew’s shoulder’s stiffened, turning him closer to the Greek statue that his admirers tend to compare him to instead of a man of flesh and blood.

“If there’s any accusation you’d like to make, I’d rather hear you say it frankly to my face than hide it behind other words.”

A sarcastic chuckle. “I wasn’t even hiding it.”

Ceres Victorinus took a step forward before extending her hand in front of Bernadotte to bar him. The Frenchman gave a grunt of annoyance but let his blonde partner step in.

“Pip is worried about the constant fights in Hogwarts,” Ceres spoke up while Bernadotte bit back his words. Well, that's mildly surprising. He didn’t think the Gryffindor would give ground so easily.

“If he was, he wouldn’t be adding yet another fight on top of it.” Andrew’s comment was pointed, as was his look just now.

“Philippe is certainly against the rules. It would be fully within your rights to reprimand him, Andrew.”

Verrault piped up, all angular cheekbones and judgemental eyes. Both Andrew and Bernadotte turned to him almost as one, with expressions that were far from happy since he settled back down
with a disgruntled expression.

Bernadotte and Andrew had settled back to the uncomfortable tension as they faced each other again.

“I don’t fight them.” From the rigid sound, the words probably came out through gritted teeth. The Gryffindor sixth-year tried to speak slower. “I get them in enough jam to actually stop and listen.”

Tom held back his sigh at the awful pun.

“Oh you’re just adding more problems without solving the ones we already have. Violence is not always the solution.”

It wasn’t just Bernadotte whose back stiffened—surprisingly, Victorinus did too.

“Melior and Melusine! Violence? I can’t believe you! Have you actually seen some violence? That’s nowhere near violence!” He snapped. His voice was rising, his cheeks flush with colour.

It only took Tom two seconds to realise why—he’d remembered just now that Bernadotte had family in the army. With France being what it is, he probably knew more than most of the realities of war.

Possible conversational paths available to them were closing up as Bernadotte and Abbott pricked at each other’s sore spots, leaving confrontation and conflict threatening to be the only path available—Tom could see it clearly in his mind. The French wizard weaved his arguments around Abbott like a wolfhound baiting a slow to be roused, yet now increasingly annoyed bear. They were both athletic and intelligent enough that without having seen either of them in action, it was hard to guess who would be the victor in a fight between them.

A sniff from a completely different direction.

“Patricia told me that at least one second year cried.”

Jemima Avery unexpectedly spoke up just then, her glare was cooler than anyone would expect if it was just a random second year she found. Tom surmised Patricia herself probably distressed about the mud she had to slog through and her dorm mate heard it. The Head Boy did not have to turn far to face her, as she’d been sitting between the Slytherin and Hufflepuff area.

“You know who they are?”

The blonde nodded. Lips the shade of strawberries curved in a perfect pout that Tom was unimpressed with; he was certain that she practised in front of a mirror.

“You know who they are?”

The blonde nodded. Lips the shade of strawberries curved in a perfect pout that Tom was unimpressed with; he was certain that she practised in front of a mirror.

“Of course, I asked Patricia. She was helping the younger years because she knew how hard it is to get mud out of velvet and she volunteered to help them.”

When he spoke next, Andrew’s tone was disappointed. “That mess was unbecoming of a prefect.”

Philippe’s hands were clenching into fists.

“Well half the lot of them would have been crying if I actually let them all fight! You’d rather we all just sit on our hands with our thumbs up our backside—”

“Pip,” Victorinus warned.

“—pardon me if I bow out of it.”
Emmerich Pryce stood up from Andrew’s left and butted right in with the grace of a pit bull.

“There’s a reason that prefects go around in pairs! If you hadn’t split up with Augusta, one of you can handle the situation while the other calls for the others! Who’s making a mess of things now?”

His Hufflepuff pride would not allow him to stand aside when he saw the Head Boy being insulted.

This time, it was Rajesh Setalvad who stood up from the Gryffindor contingent as Bernadotte was still subtly trying to go around Victorinus who’d stepped somewhat in front of him at this point. Tom had realised belatedly that Setalvad had successfully reined in his temper while his French colleague was going at it hammer and tongs…up to now.

Setalvad’s answer was as pointed as his grey gaze. “Certainly, Pryce, as if they’d all just sit nicely and wait until the cavalry is upon them. You could be left with several bound for the infirmary with the rest already escaping.”

“All speculation!” Emmerich said.

Rajesh pressed both of his hands on the table as he loomed forward.

“Oh, you want a fact? How about you’ve been sitting ducks for several days while the corridors run in chaos?”

Mordred made some clucking sounds, raising the temperature of the room by several degrees. All that was missing was some arm-flapping to match the chicken imitation. Tom was amused at how easily they all returned to their traditional tendencies. It had been something he had entirely expected, being the cynic that he was, but not at such rapid speed.

_Pro domo sua, serviemus._ ‘For our House, we will all serve’.

Emma’s wands oh-so-accidentally gave Mordred a head full of chicken feathers in place of his hair. He winced even as he gingerly felt the top of his head.

“Oops. I’m sorry, Mordred. My wand slipped my hand.” Emma said tonelessly.

Away from them, the main argument still continued.

“Ah yes, that is your House motto, isn’t it? Charge first, regret later?” Emmerich barked. “Or it’s fine if other people regret it as long as you don’t?”

Setalvad’s face might be slowly gaining the colour of beet, but even Crouch and Delagardie had turned and fixed their eyes immediately on the fuming sixth-year. Even Crouch’s partner, an unassuming witch as Gryffindors go, was frowning like her other housemates.

“Would you like to repeat that, Pryce?” She asked softly.

For all the quietness of Frederica Creaseworthy’s voice, there was still a core of steel inside. The unfamiliar sound of her voice surprised even the other Gryffindors.

“Emmerich, take that back right now.” Agatha put her foot down, the usual friendliness was absent from her voice. She had pulled them all slightly back from the brink.

Yet it would only be temporary.

“I’m only saying that they’re reckless—” Emmerich defended himself.
There weren’t enough cooler heads around, or at least cooler heads who actually cared. Tom’s gaze drifted towards the Slytherins—Oswin had outright left the table to brew some tea, while Mordred was more occupied with trying spells to return his hair to its previous condition and failing. The other two witches were talking in low voices about who-knows what.

The Head Girl was still staring at the other Hufflepuff with her arms folded in front of her chest, he huffed and faced the Gryffindors again. “Alright, I take that back. You probably still cared for your friends.”

“Probably?” Delagardie muttered under breath. Tom only heard that because he sharpened his hearing at the beginning of the meeting.

“Doesn’t mean I’ll let your insults at Hufflepuff pass.” Emmerich said again.

“The truth is never an insult.” Setalvad’s answer was as sharp as it was sure. He held his ground and yet he mainly ended up raising the temperature all over again.

Tom glanced around the room to assess the other prefects on the side-lines. Julia Goldstein was pinching the bridge of her nose—she’d never quite understood all the prickliness along house pride and family honour and was all too-aware that she had no idea where to begin. The downsides of being a halfblood raised in a too open-minded household, he supposed. Delacour was torn simply because she regarded everyone as her friends and yet no one seemed to have her reluctance for interpersonal conflict that she was flummoxed; she was the perfect picture of a kind soul holding back a heartache. Other than Daedalus, none of the male Ravenclaws had much in the way of charisma to be able to speak up and be heard—Alvis Boot didn’t even try as he had more sense than Verrault.

No one else seemed to notice that Emma had actually let a verbatim quill take everything down. He was sure that it was not going into the Hogwarts’ prefect records—her personal one, then. Any Slytherin with a brain would agree that it was always useful to keep track of people’s buttons. Hmm, perhaps he’d ask for a copy and ensure that Emma was equitably compensated for it.

“Look, I think we should all sit back down and talk about this calmly…” Kosinski pleaded to the room.

The Polish Hufflepuff made a bid for peace that seemed to have been ignored by practically everyone else. If Tom wasn’t controlling his reactions so much, he would have laughed.

*Other people are starting to get dragged into the argument, aren’t they? He noted with interest. If this continues, it would devolve into a loud row. The prefects might even end up being permanently divided until the current sixth and seventh years graduated. It would not do. After all, he had no plans of presiding over a divided prefect body.*

But he could not interfere before it all seemed increasingly dire. He’d gain no admiration that way. Just now, Philippe was about to go around the table to face Andrew down even if some of his friends were trying to bar his way. Tom decided to set his tea down.

The clink of Tom’s saucer and cup on the table was heard by everyone in the entire room.

(It was a small trick he’d learned from fourth year).

Tom stood up.

“Gentlemen, Ladies, please. This situation is not without a solution. I may have an idea.”
List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Geminio Charm:** The doubling charm. Yes, there’s the Doubling Curse in canon, but how hard is it to make the useful version of *that*? I reckon that just doubling an object once than continuously would’ve been an easier task to accomplish.

**Completely random speculation:** I can’t imagine how much different the production of goods in the wizarding world, or even purchase of said goods from the muggle world, once the doubling charm was invented. Like, holding an emergency dinner party in your apartment? Don’t worry, you can temporarily multiply your only two plates there to serve however many people you need! Same with cutleries! What, not enough glass? What about that nice crystal one you took from home with you? Multiply that and don’t even bother using the real one. That way, you don’t even need to worry about anyone breaking anything either. Washing dishes? What’s that? All you need to do is stack them all on the sink and cancel the spell. They disappear and whatever remnants of food was on top of them would fall on the sink.
57 A Ministry Dinner

Chapter Summary

The library—Hermione and Tom and Camellia Lee along with a bunch of Hufflepuffs. Passing through the Potion Master’s Office. A discussion on opportunity. The Art of Arriving but not Attending. Here comes the Blacks. Fraternal disagreements.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

57 A Ministry Dinner

“Hermione,”

“Yes?” She turned to Tom, his hair still jet-black even under the hundred lights of the library. She envied that intensity of colour. His right shoulder leaned against a bookshelf and Hermione did not think she’d seen him this casual before.

He had an odd smile on his face, his eyes bright with an inner amusement as he continued to say nothing.

“Done with your prefect meeting already? What is it?”

“What do you think about sneaking into tonight’s Ministry dinner?”

“Um, alright?”

She actually managed to get him to raise his eyebrows at her casual answer. “Alright? That’s it?”

Really, with all the things she wanted to do in the 1940s, the last thing she cared about right now was some fancy-schmancy dinner just to rub elbows with the upper crust. Yet she had no idea what he was planning this time. As the last thing that Hermione wanted to show was uncertainty, she shrugged as she leaned back on the opposite bookshelf, and replied with a carelessness that she didn’t feel.

“Well, you know me, the vigilante. What’s a little party-crashing compared to that?”

His grin flicked out, switchblade-quick and with an edge just as bright and dangerous. He approached, his hand reached out to hers and became entwined easily.

“Even better, then. Come with me, Hermione; let’s watch the play of the world from the backstage.” He crooned. Charmer, went a random thought in her mind, and not only towards snakes.

Before she considered the offer carefully, a simple ‘yes’ had tumbled out of her lips. He nodded without surprise and pulled her along with him at a walking pace.

’-
It started in a rather banal way, with both of them picking up on their respective reading. At least it did before she was distracted.

They found a seat by the windows when she asked the question. Hermione was more interested in staring out of Hogwarts than read the open book in her hands. It was almost November, Hogwarts’ grounds and even the Forbidden Forest lit up in shades of yellow, red and brown with the changing leaves.

“What do I need to wear?” She glanced back at Tom.

As questions go, Hermione thought it was normal. She knew what Hermione Granger, Unspeakable and one of the heroes of the last war would wear to any Ministry events or dinners, no matter how annoyed with them she was or wasn’t. Some appearances needed to be kept, as Hermione had said more than once to Harry.

“What?” Tom asked.

The book he was holding was still closed in his lap, his chair turned facing her instead of his desk. Huh. She could not quite read his eyes, as they were half-lidded.

“The Ministry dinner?” The brunette prodded. “We’re getting in tonight, right?”

A Minister of Magic, Draco had pointed out, can be kept on his toes if they can see just who is popular enough to chat and connect with people. Never hurts to remind him who can easily replace him, if they really wanted to, he’d told her once with glee. At least one or two people from their circle should always take the effort to mingle.

It sure never hurts when the annual budget review came around either.

But Hermione Curie was just a student. She wasn’t sure what she needed to be yet in this new place.

“Just dress as you would prefer to dress.”

She blinked. That certainly wasn’t the answer that she’d expected him to give. It was too carefree; yet his gaze was as unburdened as his tone. She could not understand him then.

“Um, Tom, it’s a formal dinner held by the Ministry.”

“Yes, I’m quite aware of that,” he replied. He continued on before she could complain about the non-committal answer. “Pick a formal dress, then, but no need to overthink it. Aren’t you tired of playing by other people’s rules all the time, Hermione?”

His hand idly caressed the book’s cover even as he kept his attention on her. Up and down it went at the corner of her vision and slightly distracting her, his nails barely exerting any pressure.

“What other people’s rules?”

“The dinner. It’s a display of power, filled with people who either have them or desperately wish to. Most would not see us for who we are, and aren’t you tired of bending to them?”

Tom leaned forward, picking up her left hand, his thumb drawing light circles on her palm. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingertips without breaking his gaze from hers. She could drown in his eyes, the indigo shade reminding her of the fathomless Pacific. He gently bit her wrist, his tongue sliding against her skin smoother than silk and sweeter than molasses, lighting sparks
all the way to her elbow. Hermione released the breath she didn’t even know she held and swallowed a non-existent lump in her throat.

“They thought they could make you dance to their tune once already. We should stop that particular delusion of theirs before it grows—why should we participate in their pageantry?” He asked.

“I thought we were going to attend all the same?”

“I have an invitation and you will come as my partner. It does not mean we have to follow their boring dinner plan.” Tom had yet to relinquish her poor hand. The caresses were disconcerting precisely because they were as delicate as a feather and slowly unrolling her sleeve upward.

It was making it difficult to think.

“We’re not sneaking in…and yet we’re not participating?” She asked.

He smiled. “Yes. Precisely.”

For some reason, she had an image of the two of them watching over a party from a balcony, present but uninvolved. She did not have the time to ask him, to check whether their plan was indeed similar to what her imagination came up with, because Tom had laid his book on the table and stood up from his chair to be able to cover her lips with his.

She opened her mouth to ask a question, but she forgot it entirely under tongue that was heat and hunger and Hermione closed her arms around him without thinking. The hand on her hip had a grip that might have been uncomfortable if she was someone else, but she was starting to read his behaviour the way he was learning hers. Even as her head was comfortably fuzzy as his lips trailed open-mouthed kisses and bites down the side of her neck, she belatedly remembered that they had immediately dived back into their own lives and packed schedule that they hadn’t had time to themselves since last weekend.

Tom hadn’t had the time to come to terms with her detention and dementor attack.

Well, this can get really hot, she mused with half a mind as she pulled his tie loose and she knew he was pushing her robe off her shoulder. She didn’t have many memories, true, but she still had three thank-goodness-we’re-alive/you’re-alive sex as a pleasant post-battle experience that she was looking forward to it even now.

A pointed throat clearing made Hermione turn and remember that they were still in the library. She was certain that she had blushed to the roots of her hair. Tom, on the other hand, simply stood up and offered his hand to her to assist. He did not seem to care that she had made a mess of his hair. It was unfair that he still looked like a handsome devil while her hair was probably a mass of curls around her head.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t care if you were to continue with your, ahem, activities.”

Skin like porcelain, rosebud lips and the yellow-and-black of a Hufflepuff tie; Hermione could recognise Camellia Lee from a hundred paces. She stared at Hermione without any compunction.

“Um,” she began.

“It’s an outrageous public display of affection by my standards, but then that is the way things are here, isn’t it? Everyone is shameless. I have to force myself to just…ignore it.” Lee looked away for a second before she stared at Tom without wavering. Her expression was nonplussed, her nose
winkled slightly and was that a light blush? Yet for all that, her tone remained even.

“We apologise for disturbing you.” Tom replied, his smile still a little more roguish than it usually was.

Camellia nodded slowly, formally.

“Very well. I accept your apology and thank you for attempting to understand other people. There are no rules against...” her hands fluttered in the air as she tried to find the words as she stubbornly forged onwards, tightened jaw and all. “…against, hmm, courting activities in the library, only against excessive noise. What I do notice is that you’re distracting the fourth-years studying in the table behind me, while some of the younger students have started asking me questions that I’d rather not answer. I can herd them out, I suppose, but Casimir has been waffling for too long. I decided to give him a hand.”

That was when Hermione noticed the second person in front of them, standing slightly to the left and a step back from Camellia Lee.

“Have we met?” She asked.

“We’ve met, at Hogsmeade’s prefect meeting, yes, but we haven’t been introduced.” His rounded face and large wide eyes made him look younger than he actually is and his awkwardness didn’t help. She couldn’t help thinking that he was as adorable as a puppy, if a puppy can have apple cheeks. If it wasn’t for his prefect badge, she wouldn’t think he was a fifth-year or older.

“Hermione, this is Casimir Kosinski, fifth-year Hufflepuff prefect and partner to Amelia Bones. Kosinski, this is Hermione Curie, fifth-year Ravenclaw.” Tom made the introductions, and Hermione nodded and expressed her pleasure in knowing him. Kosinski bowed over her hand, stood back and fidgeted on his paws again (feet, Hermione, feet! He’s human!)

There was a slightly awkward silence for a few seconds. Camellia moved to Hermione’s side and the brunette caught the passing fragrance of peonies. The Hufflepuff witch gestured her arm out towards a particular table.

“There, see? Those fourth years are my juniors. If you do have to...to snog, please do it far from their impressionable minds.” Hermione saw her nose crinkling yet again in the middle of that sentence as she failed to completely suppress her shudder.

Hermione felt the urge to drop her face into her hand as her face heated up once more. Half the fourth years there were pretending they weren’t eavesdropping on their conversation and the other half was staring, no, gawking. They were practically all Hufflepuffs. It didn’t help when Hermione saw that Tom bowed to them as if they were on a stage giving a show, before giving them a charming smile. She thought she heard giggles and she even had the phantom pangs of anticipatory migraine coming up.

(She’d had enough dealing with the fans of Harry, or Ron, or Draco, or Neville... the list goes on).

“Camellia!” Kosinski cried out. His cheeks were rather red.

“You did intend on asking them to stop, didn’t you? I am doing exactly that.” She replied. For all the gentleness in her voice, she still had a backbone.

“Yes, but that’s, um...we don’t need to embarrass them more than necessary!” He said it so quickly that the words almost ran into each other.
“Well, I think it’s fair game to do in return since they’ve already embarrassed me. You were worrying for too long. It’s better to do this as quickly as possible and get it over with.”

Her voice had started to pitch higher before she cleared her throat and put it under control. Hermione noticed that Camellia’s cheeks were still ruddy. The sixth-year had turned to them both, her expression mostly one of annoyance now.

“There, now can you please let the younger years study in peace? You do realise that this is still a public place?”

“Of course, we can do that, Camellia.” Hermione finally answered. She understood now why Camellia was a strong contender to be the female Hufflepuff prefect of her year. Her sense of responsibility was simply that great.

Camellia let out a long sigh, shoulders dropping slightly. If it was possible, her dark eyes were a little less flint-like.

“Thank you.” Her reply was soft.

“B-b-but we don’t mind.”

“Yeah!”

A few of the younger Hufflepuffs were heard to comment. Camellia sharply turned around.

“Mr. Peterson, Miss Hitchens are you volunteering to teach some second years that may stumble here about the birds and the bees? Is anyone volunteering?”

“N-no!”

A chorus of noes and vigorously shaken heads followed.

“Exactly.”

Nodding firmly after she had stared down the rest, almost challenging them to say anything else, Camellia turned to face them again. Her eyes almost challenging them to mention the high colour on her face. Consequently, Hermione said nothing about it.

“You’re about done, then?” Tom asked.

“Yes.”

“Ah, allow us to remove ourselves from your presence and ‘snog’ somewhere else then.” Tom replied, unexpectedly mischievous. Hermione didn’t trust the side glance with which he eyed everyone else or the slow, almost sensual slide that he did when he slowly loosened his tie. She noticed that Camellia was keeping her eyes determinedly away from him even as she huffed in dismay. One of the younger Hufflepuff wasn’t, and Hermione could see the witch’s breath coming in shorter gasps even as her eyes looked like she was trying to devour Tom whole.

Their answer was only in the form of a groan from Kosinski and Camellia’s brighter cheeks as she took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Riddle. In the name of the younger years of Hufflepuff, I fear I have to ask you—”

“We’re leaving! Like, right now!” Hermione yelped while pushing Tom’s shoulders so they can start putting a lot of distance between them and the Hufflepuffs.
“What was that?” Hermione asked once they were clear from the library.

“What was what?” Tom asked back.

“That! I didn’t know you were an exhibitionist!”

“It was just a kiss, Hermione. Are you telling me you’re prudish?” He gave her that sly glance from under his eyelashes, the one that had almost made that lower year Hufflepuff hyperventilate.

“Pffft. You know I’m not. It’s not as if you weren’t aware of them even before you kissed me. I don’t think you didn’t remember that we’re in the library—you’re not smitten Tom, so don’t try to give me the mushroom treatment.” She was standing in front of him now and thus stopping him from walking further.

“Mushroom?” He raised his eyebrows with curiosity.

“Kept in the dark and fed a lot of shit.” The brunette replied blandly.

There was a surprised snort from him. “I did promise you the truth, of course I’ll refrain from that.”

“Thank you. So? Explanations, please?”

“I thought it was necessary to make a point about our association.” He said. It took a second for her to translate that.

“We needed to show that we’re in a relationship in public?”

“Yes. You do remember your fall from the staircase, don’t you? If our relationship had been more established, more obvious, there would have been no question of its existence and no one would have dared to even try touching you.”

Hermione closed her mouth in surprise. She had…well, she hadn’t exactly forgot about it, but she’d pushed it so far to the back of her mind that it wasn’t much of a difference from forgetting. She had a feeling that telling him how the stooges were très unimportant wasn’t going to change his mind in any way. While she was still surprised, Tom had linked their arms together again and started walking once more.

“Um, so, what about the Ministry Dinner?”

“We’ll wear something formal enough to not stand out, but there is no need to make an impression.”

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Hermione had no idea that students can actually leave Hogwarts from the teacher’s fireplaces.

“Please, Hermione. Do you think the teachers enjoy being confined and cooped up with students all week?” Tom asked.

“Well, no. But students leaving are a different matter!”

They were walking in the direction of the Slytherin dungeons in wizarding formal wear. A peach-coloured dress courtesy of Eugenie for her and a black dress robe that was understated on him—
respective enough, but nothing too fancy or extraordinary.

“Students have always been able to leave Hogwarts in the case of an emergency, such as a St. Mungo’s visit, for example.” He gave her a pointed glance that she gave an innocent, wide-eyed look in return.

“This is just a dinner.” She insisted.

“Ah, but it’s a very important formal dinner. As long as you have the invitation, I’m sure you’re allowed to go.”

Even as Tom knocked on Slughorn’s door, she wasn’t sure she’d understood the distinction. The door swung open and the affable Potions Master greeted them in his chambers. His slippers were mossy green and fluffy and even his dressing gown looked comfortable.

“Tom, Hermione! Welcome, welcome! Come on in and let’s shut the draft out. My goodness, you’re both excellently turned out tonight, aren’t you? What a good-looking pair you make!” He ushered them in with a soothing flow of chatter.

Even from the first glance, Hermione could already see the abundance of pillows on his sofa and armchairs. It was cozy, and a rather stark contrast to her since she was more used to seeing the quarters the way Snape kept them—spartan in his preference, his distaste for coddling the flesh bordered on the masochistic.

“Why, thank you for the compliment, Professor.” Tom thought faster on his feet than she did. Hermione followed awkwardly.

“Ah, yes, thank you. I didn’t think I managed anything extraordinary—”

Slughorn raised one hand, his thick brows lowered as he wagged one large finger in front of her. “No, no. No beautiful witch is going to bring down her own charms in front of me. I forbid it, do you hear me? It is absolutely forbidden here.”

His attempts to look grave only ended up being comical, but perhaps that was the idea. She couldn’t help but chuckle at that.

“There, that wasn’t so hard, was it? Now, what’s the occasion? I’m sure none of you had dressed up to dine with me tonight.” There was self-deprecation in his voice.

Hermione felt an unexpected pang of guilt, which was rather ridiculous because he wasn’t even her Head of House.

“Um, I’m sorry...”

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all! Let me guess, then, is it the Ministry dinner that is on tonight? You’re both attending, then?” The professor was rubbing his hands together in excitement.

“No.”

Tom’s answer and the firmness of his word surprised both Hermione and Slughorn. He didn’t prevaricate or even avoided answering. He stood his ground, reminding her of the Tom Riddle she’d only seen in ADADA class and scarcely in Hogwarts most of the time.

“No?”
“Ah, but you forget that I’ve seen you, my boy. You left with your prefect friends earlier. I didn’t know that you’ve returned, but now I remember that Hermione’s still here, so it is only natural for you to pick her up. That you’re both leaving for the party now does not surprise me at all.” Slughorn noted with cheer. Hermione was reminded that for all of his jovial nature, he was still the head of a house that was noted for its political animals. He was not unobservant.

“We’ll be there to watch, because it is the spectacle of the season. I simply refuse to subject Hermione to the gawking masses or do the social dance on our day off.” Tom answered.

“We have off days?” She asked in mock surprise.

“Of course, we do.” Tom raised Hermione’s hand and turned it around to kiss the palm. It took her off-guard simply because she hadn’t expected him to do that in front of a teacher.

Slughorn simply looked nostalgic.

“Ah, young love. Well, you are a credit to your House, Tom. Do you need some Disappearing Potions?”

Hermione stopped in surprise. Those potions were complicated to make, so much that most people who need to be unseen on a regular basis just settled with getting a lesser invisibility cloak. His generosity got to her.

“I wouldn’t impose on you too much, Sir. An expertly-wielded Notice-Me-Not Charms would do. Add another to redirect people and we’re set.” Tom replied.

“Very well. Have a good night and enjoy yourself!”

“I believe we will.”

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“Did he just allow us to Floo to London because you showed him your invitation to a dinner?” Hermione asked in disbelief while stepping out of one of the back fireplaces of the Leaky Cauldron. Tom had entered ahead of her and helped hold her hand as she avoided the grating just now. She sneezed out some stray pieces of ash that had swirled upwards with her arriving step.

“It was a Ministry Dinner. Those are Very Important, you see,” he said solemnly.

She huffed. Her hands would have been playing with her hair if she didn’t remember that she took some effort to style it.

“We’re a boarding school! And people just get in and out willy-nilly!”

“I have no idea that you’ve managed to transform into Hogwarts recently.” His remark was far from innocent. She swatted his arm.

“Oh, you know what I mean.”

“Well, the teachers would have put their foot down on a weekday. This being Friday night means it’s practically weekend.”

“But he doesn’t even know for sure that we’re going there! We might have gone to, to… a club! A jazz club! And then we might decide to go drinking until the wee hours of the night at some pub!” She had to whisper-yell the last part because she hadn’t realised that she’d been steadily raising her
voice when people started to turn towards her so she dropped her voice entirely. They were currently crossing the dining area of the Leaky Cauldron.

Her outburst amused him for some reason. “Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Do you want to persuade me to change my mind and go gallivanting to a jazz club instead and perhaps a pub afterwards?”

She sighed. “Not really, no.”

“That’s exactly what Slughorn sees.”

It was inevitable that her scepticism showed in her mien, as Tom continued his explanation.

“Do you really think that he’d have given us leave so easily if I wasn’t a Slytherin prefect and you weren’t the practically-theoretical stellar student? Perhaps the genius of a hundred years?”

“The fact that I’m standing here next to you clearly shows that I’m not theoretical. Plus, I don’t think I’m the top one in a hundred years—there is still Dumbledore.” Hermione stated as they came to a pause. Tom barely took a beat to adjust to her answer.

“Still, the answer is, no, we probably would not have received the permission so easily if we are not who we are. It might not end up being given in the end at all. Teachers do try to determine who are responsible enough to not abuse the trust given instead of giving passes willy-nilly.” He finished, opening the door to the back alley and holding it open for her to pass. She nodded in thanks before she did just that.

She barely blinked at the little courtesies of the day and she’d started to pick up the ways to thank people for them instead of making a fuss. Of all the things she could complain about the 1940s, it was rather harmless. It was merely a habit of the times and she’d accepted that there were other, far more important things from this era that she could be bothered with than that. They waited a little to the side as a small group of people were walking towards the Leaky Cauldron through the opened wall from Diagon Alley.

The fact that Tom Riddle was giving her a small lecture on responsibility and trust, for example, was a lot more unnerving. It would seem that casting Cruciatus on someone and cutting them for torture was something he didn’t even blink at, but playing hooky with Slughorn’s trust is just not done. She would’ve sniffed at what looked like dissonance to her if it didn’t also sound hypocritical coming from her, the teacher’s pet, of all people.

The cooler, more analytical part of her mind that she considered the part of her that was Unspeakable Hermione and Auxiliary Auror had to remind her yet again that the more successful monsters are always the ones that know how to follow the rules civilisation sets for them and not breaking them unless really necessary.

For one, it allowed them to go and hunt another day.

“It still feels unfair somehow,” she muttered. “That we can easily get a permission for things that other people would need to put in more effort.”

She still remembered Harry’s inability to go to Hogsmeade just because the rule said that he had to have permission from his current adult guardians. Even back then, she’d already thought that it was unfair.
“Ah, you don’t see it the way they see it, Hermione. It was actually your Head of House who taught me about it a few years ago.”


“I was in my third year. He gave me the key to a classroom in the astronomy tower, in case I wanted to study by myself.”

“That’s…unprecedented.” It was usually the upper years that was given that degree of trust. She didn’t know anyone so young being given one of the spare astronomy keys.

“He saw that I was always trying to understand better, to study more even if it went beyond what the class covered. He said that at least half of the pureblood he knew have their own observatories at home. The other half at least knows someone who can lend them theirs. The only thing he’s doing is to even out the odds a little.”

“After all, even if a teacher doesn’t give the permission to attend the ministry dinner tonight, I’m sure most people in my House can Floo-call home and tell their parents about it. The end result would be them visiting Dippet’s office and the head of their house asking to take their child away for a night for ‘an important family dinner’.”

“I would’ve put my foot down if I was headmistress.” Hermione’s reply was mulish because she couldn’t actually argue against his point. She thought she could hear a murmured ‘indeed’ that was ironic from him before he spoke up again.

“There’s the slight issue of the student being taken out of Hogwarts and moved to Durmstrang or Beauxbatons…along with whatever endowments the family had given.”

“Ah. Therein lay the crux of the matter.” She nodded, unsurprised and cynical.

“Where else would the crux be?” His reply was rhetorical.

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It was oddly comfortable to sit against the walls of the hall, half-hidden by the velvet curtains.

Tom truly did not lie about having an invitation and her coming in as his plus one, but they cast notice-me-not charms not long after they entered. Add a little keep-away charm and people went around their particular corner without bumping—they had pulled chairs from the nearest table at that point. She can float foods and drinks from trays whenever she felt like it and they were under no obligation to socialise with anyone. Add a pair of opera glasses to watch over any table she liked in higher detail (which Tom had borrowed from Oswin), and it was not half-bad arrangement that they have.

Tom had pointed out where Andrew sat with his parents and twin sister. The Head Boy didn’t look comfortable and the Head Girl only marginally less so.

On a table not far from their spot were the Bones; Daedalus had dropped his head on the table and Amelia was flicking the water in her glass with a spoon to…wake him? To which he only turned his head and flattened his face against the table further. She couldn’t help harrumph at that. If he didn’t even want to be here, why did he come in the first place? Tom turned to her at her exhale.

“Hermione?”

“Nothing. It’s Daedalus. Why did he even bother?”
Tom leaned back on his chair even as he raised the opera glasses he held, finding the Bones’ table. “Ah. Perhaps his parents would not accept no for an answer.”

Yes, that would explain it, wouldn’t it? Her gaze drifted away to other people. She’d found Augusta talking to that sour-faced Gryffindor witch that Hermione remembered to be in her Advanced Transfigurations class. Before she looked further afield, it wasn’t long before she felt Tom’s hand gently redirecting her gaze back to the front; the stage.

“Look, the show’s starting.”

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Apparently, the awardees were awarded separately instead of in one go. Several people wizards and witches have gone up and received their awards, and now came the one they were waiting for.

“Let us give an applause for the Hero of Hogsmeade, Andrew Abbott!” Undersecretary Fudge called out.

For all his smile as he stood up and walked, Andrew looked more than a little awkward. She didn’t even need to use the glasses to see that.

The Head Boy reached the stage, this golden boy of Hogwarts. The undersecretary praised him to the skies, holding him with a proprietary arm across his shoulders as if the Hufflepuff was a life-sized trophy he was showing off to the whole room. It was something that she couldn’t help but be amused at, especially with all of Andrew’s uncomfortable side-glances that Fudge somehow missed.

It was only after he was handed the Order of Merlin that Andrew spoke up.

“Excuse me, are my friends also going to be awarded their Order of Merlin today?”

Apparently, he’d cast the *Sonorus* Charm himself. Everyone in the entire hall had heard him. Even at the corner of her eyes, she could see Tom’s smirk forming.

“But Andrew, you were the one to lead them all!”

“I led nobody. We were all acting separately, and they were all just as heroic as I am.” Andrew had said. “I’m sorry, Mr. Undersecretary. If they’re not going to receive anything, then I will freely decline mine.”

The hall quietened in a heartbeat, as if everyone was holding their breath.

The Undersecretary made no move to take his award, even as his smile had started to look a little fixed. Andrew had cornered the young wizard who’d been carrying the award earlier and pressed it back into his hands. The wizard yelped, but didn’t manage to pass the award back. The award didn’t even fall from his hand when he opened his grip and neither did it budge when he tried to shake it.


The Undersecretary was staring at everything in disbelief. Andrew was opening and clenching his fists.

“Well,” he cleared his throat. “If that’s it, I’ll take my seat.”
She couldn’t blame him for doing what looks like for all intents and purposes an outright retreat as he fled the stage. Silence still blanketed the room, the audience trying to understand what on earth had just happened. That is, until Augusta stood up and clapped, ignoring the adults staring at her. Then Amelia did so, with Daedalus following in half a second. Then it was Augusta’s Housemate, then there was…Shafiq? Oh, she didn’t know he was invited—then again, his family was Sacred 28, wasn’t it? Daedalus and Amelia’s parents have started clapping—they were…DMLE people? She couldn’t recall the exact position that her parents held, though.

Mr. Abbott Senior’s face was rather grim and pale and Andrew didn’t meet his gaze.

She could hear Tom chuckling. When she turned to him, he only gestured towards the undersecretary on the stage whose face had now reddened.

The first adult who had stood from his table was Timaeus Crouch’s father, with the prefect accompanying him. Hermione couldn’t hear them from this distance, but Crouch Sr. had extended a hand to Abbott Sr., one that the latter grudgingly took. Amelia was prodding her father too, and he was standing up not long after to do much the same thing. After that, other adults were standing up, some she could even guess was partly by curiosity and partly by fear of missing out as they saw several high-ranking Ministry officials approaching Abbott Sr.

Fudge, she noticed, was rather ignored by many on stage. She still couldn’t bring herself to pity him.

“I would have loved to greet him right now and congratulate him on his principles, but I suppose it’s wiser to lay low.” Tom said with a regretful sigh.

“Oh, no gloating for now?” Hermione’s tone was wry.

“Not yet. For now, the show is over and Abbott is being praised for his ‘integrity’ right now.”

“Oh, is that what they’re doing?”

Tom nodded. “Yes. That’s the alternative I gave them in the last argumentative prefect meeting where the Order of Merlin came up as a topic. It is possible for Andrew to decline the award successfully, but he would need the support of other adults in the face of his father’s interest that he accepts it. The easiest adults to persuade for this would be everyone else’s parents’.”

“Ah,” she nodded slowly as she saw the shape of the plan.

“Well, now that the gist of the play is over with, would you still like to stay or return?”

Alphard was grinning ear-to-ear. You would have thought that he’d just seen the first spring sunrise in the north pole from how bright he was.

“Tom!”

“Alphard,”

Hermione thought that Tom’s tone was deceptively mild, especially given the way he had slipped out of Alphard’s reach when his Housemate went for a bearhug. Suddenly, Tom was already standing to his side and had firmly taken his hand in a handshake.

“It’s good to see you. Did you come here with your family?” He asked.
Alphard sighed. “Of course, with who else?”

“Excellent. In the meantime, can I impose on you to accompany Hermione for a while?”

“Not a problem at all—”

“Thank you. Do you want some drinks, Hermione?”

“I don’t really need anything.”

Tom raised his left eyebrow and Hermione huffed as she figured out what he wanted.

“Alright, a drink would be nice.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Tom left immediately. Hermione would’ve been less amused if she hadn’t seen how quick Tom’s dodge was, or Alphard’s moment of confusion before Tom’s replies distracted him.

“So, what are we doing?” Alphard asked her. Her reply was droll.

“People-watching.”

Because really, they’d only been leaning against the wall during the intermission and talking before Alphard spotted them and Tom suddenly took off. Then again, Alphard struck her as someone who would be too happy to hug everyone he knew.

“I still can’t believe it, you know? I came here with the intention of seeing a fight break out! Not to see everyone’s parents hobnob endlessly with each other! I can see that on any weekend home! Or I’d get dragged to some social occasion for exactly that reason!”

A thick head of black hair and a pout that shouldn’t be adorable on a teenager (and yet still does), Alphard Black was leaning across the doorway to one of the side rooms. He slouched against the doorframe, a curl of trailing down his forehead like a dark crescent moon, and she cannot tell whether he was trying to induce swooning in passing teenagers or if he was trying to stop himself from swooning from boredom. Hermione didn’t think that he was even aware he was taking up space and possibly blocking people’s path because he was so caught up in his own misery.

“Why must Tom mention this, then?” He mulled over it, disappointed.

Alphard was annoyingly good looking, in a way that Hermione was used to seeing in Hogwarts by now and sometimes just piss her off than anything. Ancestors who can freely choose which attractive people to marry over generations, an easy life and a boatload of money to take care of yourself and afford you a sense of style will do that to you. It really wasn’t the result of anyone’s efforts.

“Did Tom actually drag you to this event?” She asked. The brunette thought she was rather patient all things considered.

“Well…no. But he said it was Order of Merlin Awards nights—and that there had been arguments and outright shouting in the prefects’ office before that!”

“People have disagreements—” Hermione began.
Alphard shook his head.

“Oh, but the prefects are rather good at avoiding them and being ‘grown-ups’ about things that they’re all boring.” He huffed with a dismissive wave of his hand. Yet determination shone in his dark eyes. “That they’d dropped even their goodwill and all that shite meant it was something huge! Humongous! As inevitable as a trainwreck!”

Tom was currently off to get some drinks, when she didn’t even think she needed any. She’d only guessed now that it was some code for…minor socialising he intended to do? Rubbing elbows? Going off to say ‘Hello there, random influential person I accidentally met, fancy seeing you here’? Who the hell knows for sure? She thought. Certainly not her.

“And yet, it’s all resolved peacefully.” She noted.

“I know! It’s such an anti-climax! If I’d known that, I’d have gone to the Globe tonight.” He complained. “Merlin, the ennui, the misery.”

His hands were dragged down his face, a ragged groan following. It was a performance worthy of a relative waiting for bad news in St. Mungo’s rather than a young wizard at a social event. This time, Hermione didn’t stop herself from rolling her eyes and reply with the flattest tone she could muster.

“A little boredom isn’t going to kill you, Alphard.”

“Who even says that? Maybe the people who die of boredom just outright faded, their magic evaporating their bodies!” Alphard was raising his hands in a way that he probably thought was spooky. “Poof! No traces! Nobody would ever know!”

Hermione knew she didn’t hide her disbelief. Her arms were folded in front of her chest already before she knew it.

“If that was the case, that would be records of such methods of assassinations used in the wizarding world. Prisoners would all have scheduled recreation time with several forms of entertainment because to let them waste into boredom was as good as giving them the death sentence. The Malfoys would have a completely white padded room for ‘unspecified purpose’. It’s a softer oubliette for locking away people you really need to evaporate.”

“Well, um, I have to say that I’m flattered you thought we actually have that much power.” Someone said from somewhere over her shoulder

With a sigh, Hermione turned and saw the bright hair of one sheepish but pleased Abraxas, dressed in impeccable black. Next to him was Tom, who did hand one flute to her.

“Abraxas.”

“Yes, it’s always fascinating to see Hermione come up with novel ways of killing people.” Tom drawled.

“What are you talking about?”

She accepted the glass from him. Might as well. She would also be lying if she said she didn’t enjoy Tom’s gallantry and habitual pampering.

Alphard had straightened up at this point as he stared at them unabashedly, something she had doubts he’d do even if it was Slughorn who came around.
“Oh, you know, I didn’t even know that it was possible to kill people with intense and continuous fear before today, but Abraxas had enlightened me of what you told the Slytherins at breakfast.” Tom answered. His gaze was still on her and he raised his glass in a salutation.

“Yet another thing I never knew and still don’t think I need to know,” the Malfoy heir spoke under his breath.

She can recognise Alphard’s awed gaze as he beheld Tom—The Knights all had held varied versions of it at one moment or another to their liege. What surprised her was the impressed look Alphard also spared her, with a drop of wariness dotted in the middle strengthening it like a dash of firewhisky in tea. Abraxas actually looked proud for her, you unexpected softie, Hermione couldn’t help think.

“You can kill people with sheer dread?” Alphard’s question was one of horrified curiosity.

Hermione winced. The Slytherin’s voice broke at the end due to the pitch he’d just reached. She was more exasperated at Abraxas for spilling the beans and seeding the speculation in the first place.

“Did you actually tell him that it’s theoretical? Physiologically, the chemical pathways are there. Yet managing that in real life is pretty far on the plausibility meter.”

“Uh, maybe?” The blond hedged under her stare.

“You actually spend time theorising on how to kill people?” Alphard’s wide eyes were still on her.

“I don’t even need to do that because there are already too many ways to kill people that’s established! All you have to do is pick up the books and read.” Hermione ranted. Really, as if she even had the spare time to do that when she already had too many things to do. Tom had the gall to grin. The glare she’d worked up didn’t seem to have the slightest effect on him even as the other wizards watched her with care—he stepped closer instead.

“Uh huh. So…you just read up about many ways to kill people. Alright. That’s fine. That’s an absolutely fine hobby to have, yes.” Alphard was nodding a little too quickly.

“That’s not really—”

“It’s alright Hermione. We know that you didn’t win in our Defence fights because you were trying not to kill me.” Tom said.

“I wasn’t trying to kill you.” She had to insist.

“Exactly. A couple of gut-ripping spells and you don’t even need to finish it to know I’ll end up dead.”

He sounded so frankly appreciative and giving the impression that it was so easy for her. Well, yes, it was, but she was always careful to not always choose violence unless it was necessary!

“Oh please, Tom. You know Pythonis Ictus. You have more than just mere cutting curses in your arsenal and I’m sure you can mortally wound in one hit if you put your mind to it. Don’t think I missed how you wield the flame whip easily, like another limb. I’ve read records of someone being flayed alive using that—it does require an unholy amount of finesse, I’ll admit. Most of the time, you just get burns inside open wounds.”

If she thought her sarcastic tone was going to put him off, she was never so wrong before. Tom
might not reply further with words but his smile was so wide as to be beatific. There was the gossamer touch of something light and ineffable that resulted in an expression she’d never before seen in him. Michelangelo would have asked him to model for David if he could see him now.

“You’re too kind,”

“Really, I know that—wait, what?”

His reply was entirely unexpected and threw her off her stride.

Tom had raised his palm to just below her jaw, not quite touching but already raising tingles to her skin there, her senses somehow working hard to feel him precisely because he kept that vanishing half inch of air between them. Once she started doing that, she began to be uncomfortably aware of how close they were—the sixth sense that was her magical senses lit up in small sparks with the vicinity to his magic running so close, just under his own skin.

She shuddered at the sensation. His eyes were once again fathomless oceans, inviting her to the loveliest drownings.

Alphard broke the tension with a huffing sigh.

“Alright, I get it! I don’t need to hear all the torture details you usually chat about! I have no idea why Lucretia has to defend you every time Walburga starts repeating the rumours she’d heard. You should just talk to her—you’ll both get along excellently.”

Abraxas made a rueful chuckle. “I’ve never really thought about that much, but they do have interesting things in common, don’t they?”

“Also, please spare me from witnessing your very scary foreplay,” Alphard murmured, but not low enough for her to miss. Abraxas clearly heard it as he was suddenly (fake) coughing, futilely trying to cover it.

Hermione was embarrassed with the realisation that she’d forgotten there were two other people around. Tom was surprisingly unconcerned as he brought his attention to everyone else after one disappointed sigh. She’d thought that Alphard would be annoyed that she’d been distracted, but his gaze was surprisingly…wistful? Why would he be wistful?

Tom, on the other hand, maintained a slight distance from Alphard—which she now figured the reason for when the Black wizard slung a casual arm over Abraxas’ shoulder. Tom was definitely out of arm’s reach.

“Maybe you can make the introductions,” Abraxas said.

He nodded. “You’re right, I think I should. Lucretia would thank me for it. Don’t go anywhere!”

With a casual wave, he loped off on his long legs, not even giving Hermione enough time to complain or tell him not to bother.

“I have no idea why you Slytherins always end up introducing me to more Slytherins. At this rate, I’d know more people from your House than my own!” To be honest, she was more amused than annoyed, but she did wonder.

“Because we like you, Hermione.”

Abraxas’ answer was surprisingly open, particularly for a Slytherin talking to someone from
outside the House and without any appreciable pureblood ancestry to boot. She’d already thought of the current Malfoy heir as his own person now that she knew him, but there were times when Abraxas did remind her of Draco. The unexpectedly unguarded honesty he showed from time to time was one (particularly because Draco had a fine sense of when anyone else was listening and when it was just the two of them talking).

“Um, so you introduced me to your friends because of that? Show them the transfer student that’s your new friend?”

He was shaking his head, not a little amused. “No, to show them that we’re willing to put our reputation on the line as we’re the one who’s introducing you personally. That means we vouch for you, you see?”

“No, not really. Why is that putting your reputation on the line?”

Abraxas frowned. “Wait, let me try something else…”

Tom placed one of his hands around her hips slowly, waiting to see whether she moved away or not. She didn’t.

“How about this? This person is one of mine,” he spoke. His voice was richer than his usual speaking tone, each word said with care.

If there weren’t other people passing, she suspected he would have laid his chin over her shoulder, as his hand was not a mere touch but an encompassing embrace. Hermione kept her gaze at Abraxas because she had the feeling that if her eyes met Tom’s, they would start ignoring other people yet again. And that would be bad because they still have things to do.

Abraxas brightened when he heard that, oblivious to the dilemma she was subduing in her head.

“Yes, exactly! It’s exactly like that.”

“To warn people off,” she murmured.

“That too.”

It was Abraxas who laid a hand over her arm and stopped her from drifting away. Hermione narrowed her eyes into the distance. That impeccable black hair, that particular set of shoulders.

“Hermione?”

“Look, I’ll just catch up with Tom,” she said.

The blonde shook his head, “That’s not—look, Tom was going to get you a drink, and that’s back into the hall, not that way. We might as well go back in as well.”

Her glance was a little disbelieving. “Really, I know how Tom looks like, that’s—”

She didn’t see Tom in the other end of the hallway anymore, and that was when his voice entered her awareness.

“Alphard had secured us a table inside. What do you think, Hermione?”

“Tom?”
His smile didn’t waver with the scrutiny that she gave him; he merely offered an open hand, and she had taken it even before she thought over it. It was turning into a reflex, she thought with a flicker of annoyance, but the feeling was gone as soon as it had arrived.

“Alright, let’s see this table of Alphard’s then.” She said out loud.

Abraxas brought up her other side and the three of them made their way back to the hall.

She was a tall witch that might have been beautiful, her black dress carefully hemmed and detailed with the most intricate lace that made it seem as if she was trailing frothy ribbons of darkness in her wake. There was a fan hanging from one wrist. Not that Hermione saw any beauty to be had, because the forbidding frown didn’t do any wonders on the friendliness front.

_Hello, Queen of the Night_, Hermione mused. If the witch started singing “hell’s vengeance boils in my heart”, she wouldn’t be surprised.

“You’re Hermione Curie.” Her tone was pointed.

“Why yes, I am.”

Since the other witch didn’t extend a hand or tried to curtsy, she did the courtesy of doing neither. The young woman stared her down. It was nothing to sneeze at when done standing from her height towards someone who was seated, as Hermione was just then. The brunette merely raised an eyebrow at this but didn’t bother saying anything either. If the other witch had something to say, she would say it and that was that—considering the witch had raised her hand earlier to stop Tom and Abraxas from standing up, she suspected that the other woman didn’t intend to stay long.

“Good grief, Walburga, it wouldn’t kill you to say hello.”

Alphard had caught up to her side just now and Hermione wasn’t surprised—Walburga didn’t strike her as the sort of person who would wait for anyone.

“Let me make the introductions—”

“You’d _make_ introductions, little brother?”

It was impossible to not notice the twitch of Alphard’s nose when she said that. She didn’t even know that Alphard could do an emotionless smile until he did one just now—he’d struck her as an impulsive and happily emoting wizard, but he moved just like the purebloods she knew in this moment.

“Walburga, this is a friend of mine, Hermione Curie. She’s a fifth-year transfer into Ravenclaw this year. Hermione, this is Walburga, my older sister and Slytherin seventh-year.”

His bow was pitch perfect, but a part of her detected a rising wave of antipathy coming from him. Walburga turned to him, fuming.

“You—you _dared_—”

“What did Alphard dare, Walburga?”

The cool voice calmed almost everyone’s nerves. Lucretia had just walked up to their table, _probably because she sensed that her cousin’s about to make a scene_, Hermione thought
uncharitably. Lucretia had seen Hermione, and had nodded to her with a small smile. The brunette nodded back at her fellow Ravenclaw with the same friendly expression on her face.

“I did not give my leave to be introduced!” Walburga hissed.

Hermione rubbed her forehead to stop herself from rolling her eyes. *Please, there are no events on stage right now and everyone’s mostly eating, I can hear you just fine.* There was a slight crease between Lucretia’s eyes. Other than their black dresses and that refined way of carrying themselves, Hermione couldn’t see any obvious similarity between the two cousins and Black heiresses. Well, she supposed there was their indomitable air and beauty.

*Ah, that was it, wasn’t it?* Whereas Walburga was the sinister Queen of the Night, Lucretia with her soothing grace was more akin to Titania.

“Really? I thought you’ve agreed to my request for it?” Lucretia’s voice was steady.

“That was you. This is Alphard. If there’s anything that would guarantee even the slightest bit of my aggravation, then I’m certain he will do it. This is just another case of that, Luce.”

Alphard gave a loud snort of disagreement from Lucretia’s other side, but he didn’t try to step out from behind his cousin.

“Really, not *everything* has to be about her.”

“Of course not. Not when it was all about you.”

“Why would I need to do that when you do it already, *all the time*?” Alphard’s reply was snide, but Hermione could hear the insecurity underneath it as well.

Walburga’s grip on her fan tightened and she wondered whether it meant that the Black heiress would hit somebody. Lucretia extended her left hand behind her, carefully finding her way over to Alphard’s arm before slipping down easily into his hand. Hermione could see Alphard slowly calming down with Lucretia’s grip anchoring him, not that it was visible to his sister. Her dormmate’s whole body was still angled towards the other Black witch—a human shield.

“Walburga, did you remember what you said you could do for Orion?”

“But this is *Alphard*—”

“Walburga, please. My friend doesn’t need to hear the entire saga of the Blacks tonight, does she? And if you can make peace with Alphard, you can get along with anyone.”

Walburga closed her eyes, clearly trying to get herself under control. Hermione didn’t mind either way. The Slytherin witch could walk away or she could sit down, but it’s not as if she’ll lose anything without the acquaintance. Hermione was done trying to gain approval from people who were never interested in giving them in the first place. It was surprising what mere two years or so out of Hogwarts could do for the young, book-smart and yet insecure witch she once was.

“Let’s try this again from the beginning, then. Walburga Black.”

She extended her hand straight towards Hermione instead of curtsying. Her expression was only marginally less stone-like. The Ravenclaw met her halfway by standing up and taking her hand.

“Hermione Curie. It’s my pleasure to know you.”
“Is it really?” Walburga asked, her tone sardonic.

“Well, notice that I didn’t say that five minutes ago,” Hermione replied, just as dry.

It didn’t even get a chuckle, and barely the slightest change of her lips, but the brunette thought that Walburga’s eyes weren’t as hard.

“Very well, then. I suppose you’ll do.”

“I suppose you’ll do too.” Hermione couldn’t help herself from replying.

“Really,”

She nodded before the other witch went frigid yet again, “the rumours give the impression that you might as well be one of the Gorgons, but that is mere exaggeration.”

“I see.”

They sat down, with Lucretia sitting between Walburga and Alphard.

“What is this that I hear Alphard babbling about, that I would not find it hard to talk to you?” The other Black witch asked.

Tom and Abraxas had just finished whatever it was that they had been chatting about before while the Black-related drama had played out.

“She was complimenting Tom on his technique in handling flame whips. She was sure that he’s capable enough to flay people with them.” Alphard relayed with an unexpected amount of enthusiasm.

Hermione had barely opened her mouth then, still too surprised to say anything; Tom actually replied to his fellow Housemate.

“Ah, Hermione is very complimentary, but I’m afraid I’m not that skilled yet. I can’t skin a cow flank in one continuous movement.”

“The skin gets cut, then?” Walburga asked with a knowing look in her eyes.

Tom nodded agreeably. “Or too burned. It’s not the most manoeuvrable of tools. I’m still much better at skinning with a knife.”

And on that uncomfortable factoid—

“Of course. But we’re not talking about you, Mr. Riddle. I’m sure we’ve all heard enough about your talents.”

Hermione almost couldn’t believe that Walburga wasn’t even being sarcastic when she said that. Tom should appreciate that she no longer had the urge to roll her eyes every time he played being the humble and gracious student in front of her.

“I’m here about Curie.”

She sat up slowly at the mention of her name. “What about me?”

“What cutting spells would you recommend?” Walburga’s question was direct and fast.
“Depends on your need, wouldn’t it? Would you need to cut someone open to retrieve something from their guts? In that case, you need something that is sharp and fast. No messy tears that would increase the odds of a scar. Is it just to open a small hole to insert something inside?” The Ravenclaw was thinking more in terms of a catheter with the last one, even if that wasn’t what the wizarding world was used to. Honestly, if she picked up field medicine, she was certain to want the muggle side of things as well for comparison and thoroughness, at least for the basics.

“Very good. But what if it’s just to hurt?”

That was a question she’d never had to answer before. Lucretia was calmly drinking beside Walburga—she didn’t even bat an eyelash at the question. Abraxas was staring unabashedly at Hermione, too curious about what her answer would be.

“To hurt?” Hermione repeated, impressed with herself that she’d kept her voice steady.

“Oh, come on, you cannot be that innocent.” Walburga’s fingers was tapping the side of her glass with impatience. “Are you? That innocent?”

“You want to cut people to hurt them? That’s…” find a Slytherin answer, Hermione. She cleared her throat as she pulled her thoughts together. She had to be memorable to Walburga, right?

“That’s so messy and inefficient. Why not use some pain spells? I’m sure you can find a bevy of them from your family library.”

Walburga was looking down her not insignificant nose. “Messy? Really Curie, you can’t work without expecting to make a little mess in the process.”

For some reason, Tom’s words at the early days of her recovery during their library spat came to her then. She took his hand underneath the table to grip. It didn’t matter what he thought about it because it was just a need like any other and he was the one here with her rather than her other friends. The physical sensation grounded her in the here-and-now as well as helping her think.

“Yes, but to inflict physical damage simply to cause pain meant that you have to fix that physical damage repeatedly and fix it to at least near-perfect conditions. Why? Because if your healing skills are even slightly below standard, you might destroy the nerves with every iteration. With each healing, they feel less and less.”

“Your cut, then, becomes less and less painful with every attempt. See? Ineffective.” She didn’t stop herself from adding a measure of scorn into her answer because that was what it deserved. If Walburga didn’t hold back on her opinions of Hermione, she reserved the right to be just as frank.

“Why would you make a mess of things instead of relying on good old magic?”

Hermione wouldn’t have realised that she’d taken Tom’s right hand if she didn’t just see him calmly drink with his left as if he did it all the time. (Did he? She had to wonder now). The glimmer in his eyes told her that he was quite aware of the source of her argument. She had to duck her head for a second because otherwise the shared camaraderie between them was so absurd she’d laugh (over torture no less, what on earth would Harry think?)

The grudging nod that Walburga gave her was slow, but it was also undeniable.

“An excellent point, Curie.”

“Thank you.”
“We’ve only begun. Now, what about some potions that can unsettle a person’s stomach and give them no respite, no rest…”

The brunette let out a silent groan inside her head as Walburga droned on. *I knew it couldn’t be that quick. A harmless night out with nothing much to do! What a great idea!*

Hermione should’ve known that it was impossible right from the beginning.

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Chapter End Notes

Forgot to drop Orion and Alphard’s bio in their earlier bickering chapter. I thought I might as well make a Black-family end note altogether here.

**More Black Family Members Bio:**

**Children of Arcturus Black (III) and Melania Macmillan:**

**Orion Black:** Fourth-year Slytherin and Heir to the entire Black family. Siblings: Lucretia (older, 7th year Ravenclaw). Oldest son to Arcturus Black, who is the current patriarch of the Black family and cousin to Pollux Black. Arcturus is more enigmatic than the usual outright bigot that one expects from the old pureblooded families, more pragmatic than most. This is relevant to note as Orion takes very much after his father in character, even if his looks still carried some of his mother’s softer and kinder-looking lines. He is one of the Slytherins who does not underestimate the Hufflepuffs because his mother was one. Betrothed to his second cousin, Walburga Black.

**Children of Pollux Black and Irma Crabbe:**

**Alphard Black:** Fifth-year Slytherin. Siblings: Cygnus (younger, currently in 4th year) and Walburga (older, 7th year). A playful Slytherin, people misinterpret his character and think he’s courageous. He’s not; he’s just gregarious and has a taste for adrenaline-pumping sports. Cygnus is calmer than him and follows his mother’s instructions better than his brother, hence why Alphard is practically the black sheep among his siblings. Walburga’s habit of berating him loudly does not help any, especially as neither of his parents had issue with it.

His favourite family member amongst all the Blacks is certainly his cousin Lucretia. She was considerate where Walburga is harsh, and prefers to listen to him than talk over him.

**Walburga Black:** Seventh-year Slytherin. A dark-eyed, handsome seventh-year with a most impressive scowl and the powerful pair of lungs that the Blacks are known for. If Lucretia was tall and elegant, then Walburga was solidly built like a Valkyrie, though the plus size of that meant that she was generously endowed and curved. Firstborn of Pollux Black and Irma Crabbe, she is betrothed to her second cousin, Orion Black. Since she’s a strident termagent, as Alphard will honestly say, and the oldest child of a cadet branch of Blacks, not many people has had the guts to gainsay her. As a result, her personality might be kindly described as *intimidating.*
Hello, Queen of the Night, Hermione mused. If the witch started singing “hell’s vengeance boils in my heart”, she wouldn’t be surprised: From Mozart’s Opera, the Magic Flute, the Queen of the Night is the main antagonist. Her aria is very challenging to sing, to say the least.
On Blood and Heartbeats

Chapter Summary

Pillow talks and blood magic. A gathering of pureblood ladies breakfasting on Saturday. Even Stephanie Selwyn has her enemies. Tom. Auguste. Hogwarts’ carriageway. In which Hermione realises that there might be some things that Tom’s not honest with himself about.

Chapter Notes

Happy Ramadan to the Muslims out there...though I'm not sure that's actually the correct phrase to use. I mean, a month of daylight hunger pangs and thirst doesn't sound all that cheerful to me, but that's just me. Good luck to your fasting if you do, especially the farther north in latitudes you are. Story-wise, I'm pretty sure there are some other things that might be useful to add to the end notes, but my brain isn't cooperating right now. I'd be freer by next week, though, so that at least is some good news.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Blood and Heartbeats

It was the light kiss at the back of her neck that woke her.

Her eyelids flickered open as Hermione slowly drifted to awareness. The light was low in the room. She was lying on her stomach with her face on the silky linen pillowcase. Fingertips stroked scribbles on her naked back. She still didn’t bother to move as she remembered intentionally staying in the Royal Suite after they arrived back from the Ministry dinner. The next kiss on her spine raised the goosebumps on her arm and she shivered with delight.

“Tom?”

“Hmm.”

“What are you writing?”

“I was thinking of writing a locator spell in my blood here.” Hermione could feel the lightest touches at her waist.

“I hate those blood pens. They always hurt.” She murmured, still only half-awake.

“That’s not actually a necessity—only the blood used as ink is the requirement. A brush would do as well if the preparation is right.” His tone was low and hypnotic.

“You need some anti-coagulant mixed in the bowl.”
She could hear him scoff. “I know. I’ve done this before, Hermione. Otherwise, I’d be trickling clumps of blood clots instead of blood. Not exactly conducive to a legible handwriting, is it?”

Hermione had the oddest realisation that she preferred it when his voice was roughened by sleep. It was probably because his usual polish and façade were gone and she second-guessed herself less about what exactly he meant behind his anodyne words.

“What’s the sacrifice? A couple of deer? A warthog? Perhaps a short trip to Europe to find a wolf?”

She closed her eyes again. The straight lines he was making earlier was recognisable to her as probably something runic. The ones he was doing now as he went higher still used straight lines, but they were…different. Not the verticals and angled-lines of the runes, but she didn’t know what. Never mind. I’ll probably realise what it is once I’m more awake.

“Ah, it didn’t occur to me to find a wolf. Yes, that would be powerful, isn’t it? Especially if you try to fight it somewhat fairly instead of trapping it? To emerge victorious in a martial combat.” He mused.

“Mmmhmm.”

Hermione still couldn’t stop feeling bad for the poor critters that would end up dying this way, even if she knew it was a necessary component of blood magic. There was a good chance that she’d probably end up digging graves for them, gravestone included. The brunette didn’t really care if he would think that it was weird or too sentimental.

She ignored the occasional detours he made lower, to her hips and backside. It was nice, but she was still too lazy to move.

“Are you sure I can’t persuade you to use an Azkaban convict about to be Kissed as sacrifice?”

“Tom!”

Looking over her shoulder showed one innocent-looking and unrepentant Tom, lounging on the bed, hair falling over and almost covering one eye.

“What? They were going to die anyway, Hermione. We’re just making sure that they die for a higher purpose. It’s efficient.”

“Dammit, I’m too sleepy to start quoting Beccaria.” She plopped her head on the pillow again.

“Then don’t.”

He was a warm presence at her back when he kissed her shoulder and she arched back, her skin seeking his. Tom didn’t stop her when she turned around, staring back up at him. His hand had been carefully creeping upwards following the curve of her hips and then inwards.

“Look, by Utilitarianism, punishment is of the greatest use when a) it happens close in time to the crime, to emphasise its cause and effect in the mind of the criminal, and b) that it can act as a deterrent to other, future possible criminals from doing the same. The problem is after a certain point of ‘heavy punishment’, the human mind doesn’t always assess increasing punishment linearly and just considers it more-or-less the same.”

She was getting distracted by his questing fingers and he knew it.
“Your point being?”

“Capital punishment—being killed—might not really be considered by most people as that different than being jailed for 30, 40 years. And yet death takes away a potentially productive member of society too, something that imprisonment does not.”

Hermione had sat up to gain more focus, but his hand still followed their previous path up her thighs. His tousled hair and that smirk still managed to get her heartrate up.

“But it’s not our fault if the wizarding world still wants to use the Kiss as punishment.” He pointed out.

“Yes, but if our idea took hold, of making the deaths productive, it would be the beginning of a new wrong on top of the old one, doubling it.”

“How?”

Tom was so close that the question might as well be whispered to her lips. She took a deep breath (faint...oak, with a hint of citrus and something cooler that’s distinctly Tom), her head feeling light with his scent and closed her eyes as his fingers slipped in again. Not truly active, but merely a casual caress.

“In production, the priority is in the availability of raw materials for productive purposes.” She accepted his kiss easily, understood the way he still wanted to assure himself that she was still here. Hermione could lose herself in him yet again, as she had several times already earlier—he was nothing if not a meticulous and observant lover, but they were in the middle of a discussion here and she hadn’t forgotten that. Reluctantly, she drew away.

“If you turn people into raw materials, even people condemned to death, then there would always be those trying to ensure there’s a steady supply of such people. The prison becomes a production line—Ah!”

She took a steadying breath, a single drop of sweat trickled down her temple. Her hand went down to grasp his wrist. He complied with her wordless request to pause for now.

“Conflict of interest occurs, because I’m sure someone would start to…incentivise the court in some way to keep the supply of guilty people coming.” She sighed.

“Even if most of the Wizengamot are good people, all it takes is a few rotten apples to get the scheme started.”

“Incentivise...that’s a nice word to use. I’ll remember that next time.” Tom mused.

Hermione snorted, deciding that she wouldn’t feel guilty merely because she had just led him down the road of Orwellian words that she knew as 20th century management-speak.

She shook her head, even as her hands explored his chest, affixing him in sense-memory. “I refuse to be the beginning of such a system.”

He sighed to her neck, his breath light on her skin. “Too bad.”

“Mmmhmm.”

He curled his fingers again once she deepened her kiss.
Words floated away for a few moments as Tom went for the practical test of his powers of observation—just how fast he could make her orgasm with only his hands. The answer was that he could definitely do it faster if his mouth was the one most active, but she was far from complaining. Not when her head was still pleasantly fuzzy.

It was when he was on top of her and about to enter her that she remembered the question she had earlier.

“Why choose a locator spell?”

“I’ll always be able to find you if you were kidnapped again.”

Hermione knew he was partial to her, but that was an abstract knowledge. She was still surprised whenever she could actually see that fondness reflected in his eyes—or when they lost themselves in each other like now. It felt like an impossibility when compared to the Voldemort she knew in the future. Everything felt slightly less real, as if she was merely dreamwalking all this time, or had somehow lost herself in an opium den.

She gasped when he sheathed himself in her to the hilt. Her thoughts had begun to lose the sharpness of their focus as the light buzz of pleasure started to spread.

“I’ll consider that…if you’d consider allowing me to write the same blood spell to your back, written in my blood. That way, I’ll be able to locate you too when someone kidnaps you.”

He huffed. “Stubborn witch.”

Tom hadn’t tried to move yet even as their breath was quickening. She hadn’t realised how much she enjoyed this game of seeing how long they can keep a normal conversation up (mildly torturous for both of them when he was already in her), until she was actually in a relationship with him.

“If I’m tying myself to you, it’s only fair if you tied yourself to me.” Her voice was low and breathy, and she didn’t miss the way he was distracted by her lips then.

It truly wasn’t an issue of the blood magic to her (and even from the beginning, she’d already predicted and later confirmed that he was neck deep in studying blood magic, hadn’t she?)

“If that was to be the case, I think it’s simpler if we get married now. There are dozens and dozens of rituals tying to parties together in blood and I’m sure half of them has a sophisticated locator spell woven in.”

“Marriage?” She asked in mock outrage. She couldn’t stop her voice from turning into a purr, and neither did she miss the movement of his Adam’s apple a moment before he spoke.

“Please. It’s what most of those…blood rituals binding different parties together are actually titled.”

It was hard to stop her eyelids from closing as the pleasure rose when he started a single retract and thrust in agonisingly slow motion. Just once and nothing more before they were staring each other down again.

Tom wasn’t wrong. That was what old magical marriage rites came down to—blood rituals to tie the involved parties together with varying degrees of entanglement. Sure, some had love as part of the component, but she was cynical enough about human nature to know that love wouldn’t have even entered the equation for most of the rituals. After all, who would’ve been most obsessed with
tying people in blood? Old pureblood families. And just how often does a society marriage involved love, particularly at the beginning?

She felt like laughing right now, perhaps tinged with hysteria, simply because a small part of her has yet to be reconciled with the idea that she was Tom Riddle’s lover. It didn’t help that it was the best and most pragmatic plan of hers once she realised how he was still sane. The situation was made worse (better? She was in no position to judge) when she realised that he was a witty, intelligent and attractive wizard—he was uncomfortably placed in the middle of the Venn diagram of her personal preferences for a lover.

“I don’t know,” she mused out loud.

He raised his head, “Are you regretting giving me your years?”

“No, it’s not that. But you don’t even trust me—oh, I know you do, Tom. You wouldn’t have introduced the Knights to me. But I wasn’t talking about the usual trust.”

Hermione grabbed his backside and slammed him in. Hermione heard his sharp intake of breath, saw the way the muscles of his arms tensed as he struggled to kept himself up. It was rather rewarding to see him taken off-guard that she didn’t care for his unamused expression.

“You don’t trust me fully, not yet,” she whispered to his ear. “Not for the very important things. Which is fair, because I still struggle with the big trust when it comes to you too.”

Her left hand was running through his hair, caressing. “And that’s alright—we haven’t really known each other that long, have we? Not much to do…but to let more time pass. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us before we’re both truly comfortable with it.”

She’d surprised him again with her frankness. Hermione didn’t consider that a bad thing. Raising herself up on her elbows to kiss him, he responded instantly, his mouth devouring and his whole body now pressed fully against hers with a desperation she was starting to feel.

There were no more conversations to be had between them for a while.

’-

“How’s your sleep?” Lakshmi asked Hermione when she entered her dorms, her tone deadpan.

“Oh, very well, thank you.” Hermione replied just as casually as she opened her oak chest and picked clothes from it. “Proper sleep is very important to memory formation and knowledge retention.”

Lakshmi snorted at that. “Like you’d remember that when you’re kissing the life out of someone.”

Hermione only blinked innocently back, even as the corner of her mouth kept twitching upwards. She was starting to get used to Lakshmi’s style that she was getting startled less these days.

Lucretia had only looked up from her correspondence to greet Hermione good morning, which she promptly replied, before she turned her attention back to her letters.

It was Eugenie who was surprised when she stepped out of the bathroom.

“Hermione! You’ve just gone back? I didn’t think I see you last night!”

“Well…”
Lakshmi came to the rescue. “Ah, you know how Hermione is, Eugenie. She’s usually off to who knows what meetings with the Society, and even if she’s not, she feels there’s nothing wrong with waking up in the middle of the night to go brew a potion just to get the optimum hour, or go picking some herbs. Take your pick.”

“I see.” The blonde nodded thoughtfully.

Hermione couldn’t completely shake off the guilt of misdirecting one of her friends that way.

“Actually…” she began, before floundering at the words. What was she supposed to say, anyway? Yes, I went out to sleep with Tom Riddle last night? Eugenie was curious.

“Actually?”

“Actually, if I was her, I’d drag Tom Riddle to a spare classroom and shag his brains out. I’m sure even Hermione is thinking about it. But I don’t know whether she has the guts to do that or not.” Lakshmi winked at Hermione.

“Lakshmi!” Eugenie cried, her cheeks turning beet red.

Hermione had no idea why she was still stupidly blushing about it when she’d been guilty of worse. (How many people would even guess that their ties were doing double duty other than as neckwear? Add the oh-so-very useful Geminio Charm and you were set for a lot of things). She was sure she didn’t imagine the smile on Lucretia’s face when she tidied up her desk.

“Hermione?”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind having breakfast with me and Walburga?”

“Um, well, I don’t really have that many plans for this morning…”

“Excellent! I’ll let her know that you’re coming with me.”

The figure sitting daintily on an armchair in their common room was as out of place as a Dresden figurine dropped there. She was too well-turned out for the comfy sitting room that was nonetheless used often and with surfaces worn by thousands of hands. The layers of lace at her sleeves were as intricate as snowflakes, exquisitely laid that they form a mesmerising cascade.

Stephanie Selwyn crinkled her patrician nose the moment she saw Hermione walking next to Lucretia. Hermione herself only raised an eyebrow at that but said nothing.

The Black heiress must have an interesting expression on her face just then (not that she could see it from her position), as the Stephanie hastily rearranged her own expression not long after. Currently, Hermione was more distracted by the fat curls Selwyn seemed to prefer styling her hair in. And here I thought those hair sausages went out of style with the French Revolution…

“Are you going to Walburga’s, Lucretia?” She asked.

“Yes, Hermione and I are going there. Are you coming with us?” Lucretia’s tone was casual, but Hermione couldn’t help but consider it a gauntlet thrown as she included Hermione with herself in the sentence. It was challenge.
Squaring her shoulders, Stephanie nodded firmly. “Of course. When have I missed it willingly?”

“I thought,” Stephanie began in low voice. “That this is a pureblood gathering.”

Hermione didn’t bother showing any evidence that she’d heard that, other than a slight heavenward gaze.

“Indeed, it is.” Lucretia answered without losing a beat.

A few seconds passed before Stephanie made another attempt.

“But of the three of us…”

“Yes?”

“Well, we…there is usually just the two of us.”

“Oh, have no worries, Stephanie. Even if we’re going to Walburga’s usual tea room, there will be enough space for just one more person joining.” Lucretia assured.

The blonde fell silent again. Hermione saw her worrying her lower lip for a while before Selwyn realised what she was doing (and that a commoner like her noticed! The horror!) The seventh-year had stopped, giving her a suspicious look. Hermione had to bite back her grin lest it was misunderstood. The pureblood’s frustration was nothing if not somehow entertaining to her.

“Lucretia?”

“Yes, Stephanie?”

“Why is Hermione joining us?”

“Why, because I wish to introduce her to everyone else, of course!” Lucretia cheerfully answered, somehow not hearing the sudden choking that the other seventh-year experienced. And here I thought that choking on your own spit shouldn’t be that easy… “It’s not that surprising, dear. Alphard had already introduced her to Walburga on Friday.”

“Walburga knows?” Her voice went up by half an octave at the end of the sentence. Hermione acted as if they weren’t actually talking about her while she was in their company.

The dark-haired witch nodded. “Certainly. It wouldn’t have been polite to bring a guest that Walburga doesn’t even know. I know that Walburga is my cousin, but I couldn’t possibly impose on her company that much, could I?”

“No, no! Of course not. You would not have performed such a faux pas,” was Stephanie’s hurried answer.

A snort had escaped from Hermione’s lips before she turned it into light coughs. She stared straight ahead yet again when she thought she could feel the blonde witch glance in her direction.

Lucretia didn’t say anything for a while, and Hermione was having enough fun of her own of trying to observe a fidgety Stephanie unnoticed that she hadn’t realised she’d been staying silent either, instead of making polite small talk. Fortunately, before she can even mentally facepalm, the blonde had decided to speak up once more.
“Has Curie contacted her…wizarding family?”

Hermione looked up, curious enough about the mention.

“Yes, I was wondering if you’ve done so.” Stephanie clarified—she was not crass enough to talk over someone present.

“Have you, Hermione?” Lucretia asked, her thick eyelashes fluttering lightly as she blinked.

The brunette shook her head. “No, of course not.”

“Why not? I mean, her family is…”

“Is…?” Lucretia prompted, but made no move to say anything more even as the silence extended more than four beats.

“They would be able to support her in Society, wouldn’t they?” Selwyn answered quickly. “So, it’s an excellent idea to contact…”

She stared at both of them expectantly. Hermione simply raised both of her eyebrows in return. Lucretia seemed barely fazed.

There was an undercurrent there that Hermione didn’t quite understand but wasn’t too worried about. If Lucretia wasn’t worried, then she wouldn’t be, as she can certainly trust the Black heiress’ social aptitude and skills. Her dormmate turned to her, waiting for her answer too, and Hermione shrugged as she realised that the seventh-years were asking her about the pureblood Grangers. It still boggled her mind that they existed, and her answer was precisely what she’d thought about it before when she read Starkey and Pendleton’s work.

“It wouldn’t be fair to them, wouldn’t it? Who am I? No one they know or have heard before. How would they tell the difference between me and the next swindler claiming to be a long-lost relative to them and went asking for assistance? Especially if that swindler was still a long-lost relative. I’d much rather make my way on my own for now and meet them on equal terms later.”

“If they’re curious about me right now, they already know where to find me.” She finished.

Stephanie opened her mouth but no sound came, before she shook herself out of the stupor. It did not mean she stopped glancing at Hermione oddly.

It continued all the way until they were than two thirds of the journey to the Great Hall. Hermione had only realised after a while that Stephanie was continuously fumbling to find a way to get someone to admit that Hermione wasn’t exactly of sangre azul, while Lucretia was determinedly oblivious. In the end, she was the one who decided to take pity on the Selwyn heiress as Lucretia didn’t seem inclined to put her out of her misery any time soon. That was when she concluded that her friend was still a Black deep down. I suppose Lucretia does have some sadistic streak of her own.

“Selwyn,” she began, waiting. It took a few seconds before an answer came.

“…Curie,” Stephanie replied, wary.

“You were wondering about my parentage, weren’t you?” The brunette asked.

“…I wouldn’t dare to impose.”
Lucretia sighed, giving Hermione a mildly disappointed look. Hermione’s lips curved up at the corners and her cheeks dimpled.

“I’m not as cruel as you are, Lucretia.”

“Oh, very well. Stephanie, since Hermione had outright mentioned it, I suppose I can dignify that with an answer. Now, how much do you know about the Grangers before they married into and merged with the Dagworths?”

The fifth-year had half-expected Lucretia to spin a yarn. What she hadn’t expected was for the Black Princess to have remembered so many details from the genealogy work that Vespasian and Pendleton had come up with. It took a while, but she managed to cover all the main highlights.

“A disinherited squib that intermarried with muggles?” Stephanie gasped, one hand pressed to her heart. There was no way to tell whether the shock was due to the squib part of the sentence or the muggles. Or both, Hermione thought dryly, we can always go with both.

“And magic came out again later on.” Lucretia replied.

“But…this is too extraordinary! Surely you don’t think…”

Lucretia had glanced at Hermione once, her expression seemed to be waiting. An odd…question? Request? The brunette nodded slowly, unsure what it was that her dormmate was looking for.

The Black heiress laid her hand over Stephanie’s arm, “Well, which one do you find more believable? That muggles can actually carry magic in their blood, or that it was just a matter of waiting until the…hmm, what was the word they used? Recessive. That it was only a matter of waiting until the recessive blood of several magical lines came together again and created a spark that flared up once more?”

Hermione only needed to glance once to know what Stephanie believed, hence, it was clear what truth she accepted.

“Ah! I see. It makes perfect sense, Lucretia! Of course, Curie is the estuary of several magical lines that had previously been weakened…”

Lucretia had turned to Hermione again at this point and mouthed a silent ‘it works’ to her—regardless of how it was mostly the result of her own persuasion, her expression was still of disbelief and bafflement. The fifth-year grinned but managed not to laugh and silently mouthed back her reply.

Thank you.

‘.

A sitting room with tall windows that let in plenty of natural light and French windows that presumably lead to a balcony. The table was set finely with lacy tablecloth, napkins in perfect folds lay for each seating. Crystal bowls sparkled under the light of morning sun, holding an assortment of summer fruits in what was supposedly wartime autumn. Fine sugar glistened like frost from where they fall over petit fours.

At this point, she was done being fazed. Hermione had stopped asking herself about just how many rooms exactly does Hogwarts have that she had never visited before.

There was only one person at the table and she was decidedly not Walburga—her nose wasn’t
permanently stuck pointed up in the air, for one. A thick tome shut with a solid *thump* and the witch reading it looked up. The Ravenclaw didn't know whether the shadows under the other witch’s eyes were due to lack of sleep or whether they were there permanently.

“Ah, you’re actually joining us, Curie! Good, perhaps I wouldn’t be burning brain cells by the minute while you’re here.”

Solid-boned and still interesting, she was a Gryffindor and a…friend (?) of Rajesh, but that was all Hermione could recall about the blunt witch in front of her.

“Uh, alright? I’m not sure if I’ll be much of a help…”

“At least you’ll get bored as fast as I do. *Ha!* Morning, Lucretia. It’s not that I’m insulting you for being a poor guest, but sometimes I wish you *don’t* coddle the fluff brains so much.” The witch said again.

Lucretia made a pointed throat clearing and silently stared at the other witch. She threw her hands in the air, shaking her wavy hair. “Oh, bother. Alright, the other, more *boring*, girls. There, does that meet your standards, Mother? Thank *hell*.”

“Where’s Walburga?” Lucretia asked.

“Your dearly dreary cousin? Off to check the cakes for a while. She’ll be back soon.” The blunt witch answered again.

The Black heiress remained undisturbed as she turned to Hermione.

“Hermione, you’ve been introduced to Lysandra Burke already?”

*Ah, so that’s who it was. The witch from the family with the largest private library in England.* Hermione nodded.

“Yes, we’ve been introduced.”

“Yes, yes, we have been, Lucretia. Please, no need to *hover*. Relax and take a seat yourself, you’re *also* a guest, *not* the hostess,” Lysandra said this with a huff. “Now, Curie, *please* sit near me before I start considering peeling the back of my hand and watch the blood flow as a nice distraction from whatever it is that people would be droning on about today.”

’-

“Ah, Lucretia! And… Curie, too. Welcome. It’s an honour to have your presence here…”

Walburga’s eyes might narrow a fraction for a moment when she came back and saw Hermione seated between Lysandra and Lucretia, but that was it. She welcomed her cousin with actual *warmth*, for one, and even if her greeting to Hermione was cool, it was completely polite.

When the disparate and frayed corners of Hermione’s memories finally managed to connect the familiar words and gestures that she’d replied to (and just mimed from the shapeless memories), Hermione had the odd realisation that yes, Walburga did just greet her like another pureblood. She realised then that Ves and Pendleton *had* been informative—Lucretia did indeed hold the keys to the kingdom, and she had decided to accompany Hermione all the way in.

’-
“Why is Curie here?” Gamp hissed at Walburga.

The Slytherin prefect did not seem friendly, and neither did her friend who was... \textit{hmm, she looks familiar}, Hermione mused. The prefect badge at the lapel of her dress reminded Hermione that she was the \textit{other} Ravenclaw witch who was a prefect apart from her friends. \textit{Seventh-year, then.}

“\textit{Obviously}, she’s here because she’s a pureblood. I didn’t know that you can be a prefect without an independent thought in your mind... oh, wait, I think that’s actually a requirement these days.”

It had surprised Hermione to see Stephanie of all people to deliver that jab.

The two recently-arriving prefects paled. At first, Hermione thought that the Ravenclaw witch was trembling, but closer observation told her that the prefect was probably shaking in anger and she was glaring at Stephanie.

“\textit{Selwyn.}” She spat out.

“\textit{Fitzpatrick},” Stephanie answered coolly. “Please, \textit{do} sit down... you’re blocking the sunlight for all of us.”

Walburga rolled her eyes but didn’t bother addressing the snapping from either side as she welcomed the newcomers and offered them their seats.

\textit{Ah, old rivals}, Hermione nodded with satisfaction once she figured out Stephanie’s motive. Her presence was simply another battlefield they can square off against each other in.

“Stephanie \textit{was almost} the Ravenclaw prefect of her year, you know? Many people expected so. Yet, \textit{voila!} They announced Cassia Fitzpatrick.” Lysandra commented slyly to Hermione. The Ravenclaw noticed that her neighbour had opened the thick tome she’d been reading earlier once more, this time on her lap instead of on the table.

“Really? What happened?”

Across the table from them, the metaphorical hissing and baring of fangs and claws continued.

“Pureblood? \textit{Please}. Don’t tell me you’re such a simpleton to believe her claim.” Cassia snarked. Stephanie’s smile was as sharp as a canary-eating Siamese cat, blue eyes just as cool.

“Ah, but I heard it from Walburga and Lucretia... unless you think you somehow know better than the Blacks?” She idly observed her nails, looking for the slightest chip. “If that’s so, oh well, what can I say—”

“No. But that’s...” Cassia found no words herself.

Walburga pinched the bridge of her nose. “Yes, \textit{yes}, I heard it. I didn’t just hear it; Lucretia came and brought some papers once and did you know that the Grangers...”

“The Selwyns cannot be as free with their investments as the Fitzpatricks. They are very traditional and mostly tied to their land.” Lucretia murmured to Hermione while most of everyone’s attention was on the Ravenclaws facing off each other.

“Uh, alright?”

Lysandra had started fake-coughing at Lucretia’s answer, one that sounded suspiciously close to a chuckle. “Lucretia is too diplomatic! What she meant was, they don’t have enough funds to make a
super endowment to Hogwarts quickly that summer, and thus the Hogwarts Board decided… otherwise.”

Ah. Well, she really wouldn’t blame Selwyn for still being bitter about it if that was the case.

“Well, she really wouldn’t blame Selwyn for still being bitter about it if that was the case.

“Welcome, Augusta,” Walburga was the first to welcome her.

“Hello, Walburga, everyone.”

“Augusta, I thought you would have arrived with Lysandra already.” Lucretia said by way of a greeting. Hermione gave a more standard ‘good morning’ along with everyone else. Personally, her neck was going to develop a crick in it if she had to look up to Augusta’s lofty height for too long —which fortunately wasn’t much.

Augusta exhaled slowly even as she sat down, her Gryffindor prefect pin can be seen on the collar of her dress, just under her robes. Hermione wondered why a part of her seemed to think that Augusta lacked a traditional, wide-brimmed witches’ hat with…a bird on it? What?

“Oh, there were some prefect business I need to take care about.” Augusta said, unaware of Hermione’s bizarre imagination.

“I have no idea why she bothers to come when half the time, she’ll just fall asleep halfway through if she’s too tired,” Lysandra commented to Hermione in a conversational voice.

“Hey! I heard that!”

Lysandra grinned at her Housemate. “You were meant to.”

Augusta’s stare was nonplussed. “And why do you even bother coming?”

“My mother would cut my book budget otherwise.” She answered without guile.

“You can just use your daily stipend.”

Lysandra stared heavenward; her left hand waving in impatience. “That is my book budget. What else do I need to buy but books, anyway?”

Augusta snorted, her tone dry. “Right. I fail to remember that you’ll forget eating altogether if you don’t have house elves to shovel food into your mouth.”

“Why else would you need to have house elves?” Lysandra’s question was actually one of genuine bafflement.

Hermione mentally winced. She couldn’t help but feel a tiny bit of old guilt to Ron who’d had to face her hyper-focused mode several times.

Hermione might not have met Tom that morning before she had breakfast with Walburga. He was, however, right outside the door of the sitting room when she exited with the other witches. A sleek black suit under his lighter, non-uniform robe, the only colour on him was the cobalt blue tie. It brought out his irises, the colours blending as subtle as opium smoke; just as capable in building a dream as well as robbing a person of their consciousness.
“Good morning, Ladies.”

The bow he sketched was to all of them, but after the first eye contact that he made with her, his attention was now on the Black ladies. Everyone returned his greeting with various deliberation.

“I’m afraid I have to steal one of your own for the moment.”

“Planning your leisurely Hogsmeade weekend, Riddle?” Walburga asked, her tone rather dry.

“Hardly. It’s mostly Society business.”

“What?” Augusta yelled.

Hermione was surprised to hear her outburst, and so was Tom from the way he’d also turned to the prefect. “Dammit. Rajesh was supposed to tell me if there were any!”

The Gryffindor was unaffected by the sound of disapproval that Walburga made.

“Perhaps he’d merely forgotten.” Tom offered. “If that were true, then I suppose the precise directions to the location would be useful.”

He pulled a scroll out from one of the pockets in his robes, tapped his wand on it, and then proffered it to her. She accepted it gladly and opened it on the spot.

Hermione saw how he twisted his wrist just so in the last moment that Augusta’s reaching hand didn’t touch his by accident. It was such a minute change that no one else had probably noticed but her.

“The actual invitation! Ah, the map is very clear here. Yes, thank you, Riddle.” Augusta was clearly satisfied.

“My pleasure. Now, Hermione, if you may grant me the pleasure of escorting you on this fine morning?”

Her head had tilted slightly to the left in thought even as she stepped forward without much deliberation. Tom might have been polite, but he was never overly so. It’s this crowd of pureblood, she concluded for the time being, it brings out the dramatist in him. She didn’t miss Lysandra’s snort and muttered ‘love certainly makes fools of us all’, right before she opened the thick tome she’d been carrying before. Hermione felt like holding back the urge to cover her face with her hands and avoid this act that Tom was setting.

She took a deep breath instead and reminded herself that there was a price to pay for all paths, and the price to pay for this one was to be neck deep in pureblood culture.

Hermione took his hand and stepped up to his side. She could feel all the eyes observing every minute detail of her movement.

“Of course, you may, Mr. Riddle.”

“Tom.”

“Very well, Tom.”

Hermione did not seem to have enough attention to spare on anything else but Tom Riddle, and he
was just as similarly focused on her once he’d paid his dues in greeting them all. Lucretia found all these little details amusing, and as she still stood a little to the back from everyone else, she had a clear view of most other Walburga’s guests. It’s truly very convenient to be tall, she thought.

The black-haired witch saw that Clytemnestra had paled at first, before now looking rather furious herself. That she hadn’t said anything might be related to how the Slytherin had opened her mouth earlier only to have no words come out of it.

Lucretia weaved around the other witches carefully as they bid each other farewell, threading a path for herself to reach the sixth-year prefect. From where she stood, she could see the other witch’s back being too straight and tense.

“Clytemnestra? Is anything wrong?”

Clytemnestra Gamp shook her head, pale strands of hair falling down her forehead. She was surprised by the greeting and Lucretia was slightly put out by that. Yes, they were not bosom friends, but was it truly that odd for her to greet Clytemnestra? They met each other often enough at various family functions during the summer holidays to be friendly.

“Lu-Lucretia? Oh, it’s probably nothing. They’re just working together…yes, that’s it.”

Both of her eyebrows rise slightly, but the Black heiress did not immediately comment as she checked for signs of infatuation.

“You are not one of Riddle’s admirers…are you?” She asked carefully. Clytemnestra’s chuckle actually sounded relieved.

“Oh, no! Nothing like that. At the very least, it’s only true in a literal sense. He has the potential to take our House far and so I have faith in his abilities. But his association…” the worry that had creased her brows before returned. Whatever melancholy had struck her earlier was once more in full force.

“I’m sure he’s very talented, but I don’t think that’s your concern, is it?” Lucretia’s question was gentle and yet still shrewd in observation. “What ails you, Clytemnestra?”

Her jaw tightened when she looked up. “Curie is you dormmate, isn’t she? I heard she came with you.”

The seventh-year saw no reason to hide her friend and answered without regrets.

“Yes. She accompanied me here.”

Lucretia waited for a moment, to let the prefect collect herself, her emotions apparently still mutely roiling underneath the surface.

“What is it?” She asked again.

The blonde Slytherin did not exactly give an answer, only looking down and away.

“Nothing. I’m sure it’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Hermione sighed when she saw the number of people who’d started to pile up in the castle’s carriage house. It was not packed yet, but already inconvenient enough. This was why she
preferred to go right after an early breakfast—most people preferred to sleep in on Saturdays that it was emptier then. Now, they have to wait in line. She made herself smile for a bit to greet the Housemates and classmates she can recognise (at least by face if not by name) before moving to follow the direction that Tom was guiding her arm towards.

“Hermione! Finally. I’ve been trying to find you everywhere.”

Hair in fashionably neat waves and a profile that Hollywood would pay to get into theatres, the urbane figure of one Auguste Murat moved through the loose crowd easily to reach her. Witches and a couple of wizards turned their heads as he passed, trying to catch another glimpse of his navy suit jacket. His claret tie added a bold contrast, and the bronze pocket square a lively complement.

(Dammit, how did she even notice all that about menswear? It was the same way how she’d started to recognise dress cuts due to Daphne. She had the feeling that she’d also hung out with Draco too often.)

The few seconds it took for her to be impressed by his sartorial flair was apparently a few seconds too long to lose track of the situation. Tom’s left hand was no longer entwined with hers but laid over her hip. He’d gripped hard for a split second before he loosened his hand again. She turned her head slightly, eyes tracking his face.

His smile was patently not real. (Why many people didn’t seem to notice that, she had no idea).

“Yes, Auguste?” Hermione replied. She didn’t step away from Tom even if she felt that he was standing slightly closer than she preferred.

“You did say that you didn’t mind going out on a lunch.” He’d come to a stop in front of them. Auguste was not a senseless wizard—certainly a credit to his future career in politics or the diplomatic corps. He’d spotted Tom’s hand and noted their closeness within two seconds and held back from approaching any closer.

Her fellow Ravenclaw sighed. “You forgot, didn’t you?”

Guilt grew like a lead weight in her stomach. Hermione bit her lip.

“Um,”

She almost took another step forward if she didn’t feel the twitch in Tom’s grip.

“The Society meeting was about to start after lunch, wasn’t it?” She turned to Tom.

“At precisely lunch. It’s just a chat, really, nothing compared to what we’ll have tomorrow.”

The Ravenclaw witch didn’t have the time to try to parse his too-neutral face yet. She turned to her housemate, “it’s friendly meal, right, Auguste?”

“Yes. I’m just annoyed enough at an idiot or two to teach them a lesson, like I’ve said.” He replied with ease. Yet his side-glances returned to Tom from time to time.

Hermione had taken two steps away without thinking when she felt the yank on her waist; it would’ve unbalanced her if she was the average Hogwarts fifth-year. It had stopped, so she was only mildly annoyed instead of pissed. As her boot-clad feet automatically fell to one of the opening fighting stances she was comfortable with, she turned around.

Surprisingly enough, Tom wasn’t looking at her or even Auguste. He glanced in bewilderment at
his left hand, as if it had started to make some decisions on its own without his input. Maybe it was saying something about wanting to jump off and join a circus.

It was surprise that she saw on his face. So unexpected it was that she could only stare back silently before his control took over a split-second later. The neutral-blank expression she knew well by now slammed down immediately. From a quick glance, she could see Auguste carefully kept his attention at both of them. Wise decision.

“What is it, Hermione?” Tom asked. “You’re going with Auguste for lunch?”

She saw the passing flicker of tension in his jaw yet it never changed his expression. Even now he only seemed mildly wondering.

“What?”

The witch raised her left hand to his cheek, shutting out everyone else around them as she focused on him as she spoke in a low tone. “You know we’ll just be talking about the Society yet again, don’t you? If the Society’s casual meet starts with lunch, it’s not going to be lunch. I’ll just take brunch—I mean, elevenses with him. It’s not as if I was calm enough to eat much at Walburga’s table, other than some fruits.”

As she said all this, her hand had moved down in a caress, past his jaw and to the side of his neck. Her eyes widened in surprise when she’d felt and counted his heartbeat. This pace is…somewhere between 80 to 90 beats per minute. Neither of them had been doing any strenuous physical activity—they’d only been walking! And yet… it was not his resting beat. She’d know.

He can misdirect, but his heartbeat doesn’t lie.

Tom only blinked, unaware of what she’d just noticed. She did feel how his hand at her waist held her far too securely to be fashionable—blatant attachment wasn’t de rigueur pureblood behaviour. She hadn’t really realised how putting his public persona on was second nature to him, had she? Memories from the last month flickered past.

Tom casting aspersions on her sandwich-making skills even as he cut a loaf into slim and yet very even slices with a bread knife. Ves’ story of their past, on how Tom had once been a mere pen-pressing muggleborn first-year to the other Slytherins. The things he’d read that still surprised her.

“—I don’t have a penny to my name—”

“Have you decided to stay, Hermione?”

It was only when she was here that she realised the muggleborn orphan wasn’t exactly the façade that Voldemort hid behind like she had sometimes suspected in her past future. It was a real facet of him, among all others. We all contain multitudes, she mused,

…and the orphan is still Tom.

“Tom? You know that this is all probably mostly for a prank, don’t you?” Her voice was gentle this time.

“Well, you can certainly do what you wish, Hermione.” He said, too polite by a half. Her hand stayed where it was, curled around his neck; his heart rate still higher than usual. One of these days, she mused, if he didn’t watch this habit of his, he’s going to smile right up the second he killed the person who’d been trying his patience and then he’d wonder why he’d been so annoyed.
Hermione did not see any other solution right now and threw caution to the wind. She pulled him down for a kiss. It wasn’t a light perfunctory peck or somehow still within mundane expectations. No, she’d opened her lips and embraced him with her whole body. If he started with being polite, she poured her concern and care into it. It was raw, more honest than she was comfortable with, but she saw no other way to pull him out of his mask. Her emotions were a jumble of both expecting and dreading the possibility of completely falling in love with him; she tried not to pay attention to them too much lest she felt nauseous from the extreme swings.

It was why he only managed to be perfunctory for one second before he also jumped headlong into the current that had already carried her away; to hold her close and lose himself in her like she was losing herself in him.

Impatience and excitement warred with cynicism and pragmatism inside her and it showed. It was there in the cycle of her passion and hesitation. Yet she couldn’t stop herself either. He needed to know and it was why she kissed him until her hands were shaking. Her heartrate ratcheted up with the intensity of his grip and his unwillingness to let her go. Wordlessly, he allowed what he felt to trickle forth and let go of the fiction that he’d been absolutely fine.

He was not fine.

It was there in how he used his knowledge of her preferences to successfully blot everything else out of her mind with kisses as darkly sweet as oblivion. His hold on her was firm even when her knees weakened. It was clear that he’d rather they spend the entire day in a room of their own with no one else to intrude or bother them. That he’d really rather not share her with the world.

Yet the world will intrude anyway. Just like the throat clearing that made them reluctantly pull away from each other.

“Well, I guess that answers the question, doesn’t it?” Auguste said. He only had one eyebrow raised, completely unsurprised by what he’d just seen it.

“Oh, you misunderstand!” Hermione said, even as she valiantly ignored the heat in her cheeks, or the occasional gawking Hogwarts students in the background. Focus, focus, focus. There is no audience, there is no audience, there is no… “There were some things we needed to talk about, and it’s done.”

“You’ve managed to…talk.” Auguste stated dryly.

“Yes.” The brunette nodded firmly, as if it was the only thing they were doing and that it wasn’t up for question. She and Tom was still standing very close to each other, his hand around her waist. The difference being that this time, she’d slung her arm casually around his back and laid her hand over the hip. “I’m sorry I can’t have lunch with you this weekend, since there is already a Society event at lunch and even…tomorrow?”

Tom nodded to confirm at her side-glance. “Yes, the larger event is tomorrow.”

She turned back to Auguste. “I’ll accompany you for elevenses, how about that?”

“That would be just as well, Mademoiselle.”

“Good. See you later, Tom.” She only hesitated a moment before pecking his cheek. She’d just done worse, this shouldn’t be much of an issue, right? Her flaming face still disagreed with her. Urgh.

“Certainly, Hermione.”
“Riddle.” Auguste nodded to him.

The Slytherin replied with more ease than he’d shown earlier.

“Murat.”

Chapter End Notes

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Cesare Bonesana di Beccaria, Marquis of Gualdrasco and Villareggio:** (Criminology, Legal theory), (15 March 1738 – 28 November 1794), Italian criminologist, jurist, philosopher and politician considered one of the greatest thinkers from the Age of Enlightenment, he’s well-remembered for his treatise, *On Crimes and Punishment* (1764), the first full-scale work to tackle the reform of criminal law. He takes the utilitarian approach to punishment, in that the punishment should serve the greatest amount of public good/increase the total amount of happiness in the world.

His work greatly influenced the Englishman Jeremy Bentham to develop it into a full-scale doctrine of Utilitarianism. (Look him up in Wikipedia if you’re still curious to read his full article).

*Yes, that may very well be the source of the title of Dostoevsky’s novel, considering that one of the themes of the novel was a criticism on Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian ideas of justice.

**Sangre Azul:** (Spanish) literally ‘blue blood’. Not to be confused with a hard rock band with the same name.
59 An Eventful Hogsmeade Weekend (and some Personal History)

Chapter Summary

The preparations for a feast. Glimpses of a Hogsmeade garden party. An old beginning – some personal history pertaining to a certain Slytherin witch.

Chapter Notes

I just want to put my head on a pillow and sleep for a straight week. My sleeping schedule has been messed up for a while. Hopefully, there are no more glaring typos/grammatical slips. Next update is either next week or tomorrow, because I’m going to finish the whodunnit part come hell or high water... after that I'll take a bit of a breather to write the closing chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

59 An Eventful Hogsmeade Weekend (and Some Personal History)

It was sometime later after her brunch with Auguste and the ‘casual chat’ that was lunch with some of the people of the Society that they really set to work.

Tom had assured Hermione that the abandoned house they’d found two weeks ago was now theirs to use as they see fit. If it was any other time, she might be interested in figuring out what exactly he meant, but standing in front of the ramshackle building with its broken drains and falling eaves, it looked like an addict too far gone to put in some effort at appearing at least normal and healthy. All she could see through narrowed eyes was a home improvement project.

Earlier, he’d casually mentioned that he was planning a Society meeting (feast?) tomorrow, and he’ll trust her to prepare the place—this rundown, rat-infested place with holes in its floors to go with the leaking roof. Hermione had rolled her eyes at that but didn’t say no. She did complain that she wished he’d actually told her about it earlier this week—they wouldn’t need to pull all the stops today if they’d been preparing for several days!

As it was, following the legal papers could be done later, she only had a day to pull a small miracle.

Whoever thought that Hogsmeade weekends were mostly for fun and relaxation hadn’t met Tom Riddle.

The large backyard was just as she remembered seeing the last time around as she carefully picked her way through it. It was filled with brambles and overrun by scrub of heathers, junipers, frostweed and hawthorn fighting and strangling each other for every inch of open soil; where each plant began and the other end was not always clear. Tom had frankly said to the Knights that they
were to follow Hermione’s orders if she needed anything. Between Abraxas, Gallus, Pendleton and Starkey, he tapped Starkey to be her right-hand man for the job before he was off back to Hogwarts, Abraxas and Gallus following right behind him through some unseen signal.

Muttering imprecations under his breath, Starkey had gone off to who-knows-where right now. She was unconcerned in finding the Knight because there were already many things she needed to do (and could do) on her own, anyway. Since Tom said that most of the Knights already knew what to do, she decided to ask first.

“What would you do, Pendleton?”

“The usual.”

“Which is?”

“Security. I’ll be erecting an anti-apparition ward except for people who’d been keyed to it, as well as warding against several other things.” He answered. “You can probably do it as well, if not better, but I don’t think we have anyone who is as good as you in transfigurations.”

Pendleton had gestured to the dilapidated house. He had a point, she thought with a sigh. It wasn’t just plain repair they needed to do, which could be taken care of with a group of people casting Reparo left and right. No, there were some changes and redecoration that needed to be done too.

His position also explained the large glass bottle at his hip whose leather straps crossed his torso—it was the vivid carmine of arterial blood and swirled with a glimmer of fairy dust. The pale Slytherin was carrying what she’d thought as an artist’s bag, but which she now corrected in her mind to be a set of warder’s paintbrushes. The more traditional would have carried carving implements too, but she supposed outright carving runes would take too much time for what would just be a temporary ward. It was far more practical instead to just paint the sigils or casually hack them with some cutting curse.

“Do you need my blood to add power to the ward?” Hermione had asked. Pendleton abruptly stilled, taut as the string of a drawn bow. She clarified further.

“Considering the colour of the ink, my guess is that you’re going to use some sort of blood ward as the base. Which isn’t a bad method to strengthen a temporary ward.”

His head dropped down; his attention apparently caught by his own shoes. She’d thought she could hear him taking a long steadying breath before he spoke up.

“Hermione?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t really know what you discuss with Tom, or how your previous wizarding circle in Lillehammer was like.” His voice was soft.

“Kopervik,” she’d corrected. “Lillehammer’s was just where I got tested.”

She would not be Hermione if she didn’t keep track of her own backstory. He’d shrugged, and she was sure he did one careful exhale with it.

“As you say. What I meant to say, please consider the aversion of us mere mortals the next time you’re about to mention…” he gazed around thoughtfully then before his pale grey eyes met hers once more. “…powering magic with…such a sanguine source. You never know who might happen
to listen.”

“It’s just some old protective magic!”

Her complaint came out more out of reflex than anything, but even thinking for a few seconds made her realise his point and she nodded grudgingly. Hermione was slightly impressed at his very indirect warning about mentioning blood magic in public. It did nothing for her impatience, though.

“Well? It doesn’t change my question, does it?” She asked. “More power wouldn’t hurt.”

Pendleton soon relented and admitted that yes, if she didn’t mind, he would appreciate a donation from her. This was said after yet another look at their surrounding before he handed her a vial and a knife. He took a smaller vial and pulled out his own knife from his pocket for himself. Both of them had sat down on the grass, generally aiming to be inconspicuous as they chatted, but there was something to Pendleton’s alert gaze and her own habitual scan of her environment that would not be missed by someone who knew what to look for.

Hermione had the absurd idea that someone from the 90s seeing them and suspecting that a drug deal was taking place. Which was not exactly far, since him asking for her blood was an exchange that would probably horrify a lot of people in her current present. Her amused huff earned a faint smile from him.

They talked for a while about the type of ward he’d decided on and discussed (sometimes argued) about the details while she discreetly let her blood flow to the small vial. He pulled out a scroll out of a tube he carried and cast *Finite Incantatem* on it. It was a surprise to see the parchment expand after that, until she realised that this was probably its actual full size.

The Ravenclaw had started scanning the ward design the moment it was unfurled. She followed ever finer details once the smaller letters turn readable.

“Medieval Runes,” she murmured after a while, finally identifying it after trying to read it as futhorc earlier and failing even as she rotated through the languages for it that she knew. “What is it about you Slytherins and Medieval Runes? Did you know that this is also Tom’s preference other than Older Futhark? And we can ignore the Older Futhark segments altogether simply because it’s so fundamental that it’s hard to construct a ward without it.”

“I think that should be obvious, Hermione.”

“Really?”

“I can write the entire ward in Latin without having to resort to too many phrasebooks and dictionaries and maybe mangling at least one or two phrases. Not all of us are polyglots by nature.” His answer was dry and self-deprecating. Hermione blushed and shook her head.

“I’m not exactly a polyglot either. Still, look, the closer connection that futhorc has with Older Futhark also allows the ward to draw greater power into it from nature.”

“Why did you think I made the design this big? It’s sturdier this way.”

At least he did incorporate her woven-layer approach, even if the weaving wasn’t as thorough and extensive as she preferred (no, she was not comparing anyone’s design with Luna’s, not unless they were a Master Warder themselves. It would be unfair). The vial was almost full. She healed her arm, cleaned it and then closed the vial before handing it to him.

Pendleton gave her his quiet thanks before giving her a smaller vial with his own blood in
exchange.

She nodded her appreciation, even as her estimation of him rose by a notch. This wouldn’t be the first time he dealt with blood magic or powered a ward with blood, as he was already familiar with the rules of exchange. If you ask for someone’s blood, it was only polite to give yours in return as a guarantee. It shows just how much you’re worth trusting, since if they found out that someone attacked them using the blood they’ve given you, that person can counterattack using the vial of your blood that they have.

The pale blond went on his way to set up the ward they’d discussed.

Starkey returned sometime later as she had begun to uproot some of the thorny blackberry bushes along with other plants—she recognised him even before seeing him by the stomp of his boots.

To her surprise, he came dragging three wizards with him. She’d come to recognise the two boulder-like Slytherins, to use Tom’s expression, and a shifty-looking wizard that she was surprisingly not familiar with considering that she’d been practically joining the Knights alongside Tom. It suggested that the wizard had been generally absent before—not exactly the mark of a diligent underling, is it? (He would be…Yaxley, she supposed).

“Right. What do we need to do now?” Vespasian asked outright.

Hermione stepped in front of them and took charge with ease.

“Clearing the field—I’ll add markers to make it obvious. Also, no cleaning charm of any type works because technically, many of these bushes are normal garden plants. They’re not invasive species or weeds. Cutting charms work well enough for the beginning, but you need a different one to pull out the roots. Ask me if anyone have no idea which spells would be good for that—I can show you.”

“Any questions?”

Abraxas’ minions generally blinked and nodded. The fourth wizard seemed to have a lot of questions he was swallowing back. Starkey had stepped forward from the line and turned around to face them.

“That’s clear enough, right? Everyone?” Many headshakes followed quickly. “Good. Get moving now, then. Chop, chop!”

There was a hint of menace in his voice. For all her ease with him, she’d only truly paid attention to him now and the cold fervour in his eyes as he tackled his task reminded her a little of Tom. She still was not the slightest bit afraid of him, or worried about what he’d do, and it did confuse her for a bit.

Only a bit, though, since there were still too many things to do.

A grumbling Starkey might not enjoy cutting and clearing the grounds, but he never second-guessed her order and he kept a rather close supervision of the other three wizards, freeing her to just leave them to it and move on to other things, like casting Reparo on the outside walls just in case (as the spell was good enough to fix the Coliseum, it was certainly good enough for an English village house).

Abraxas came barrelling out of the house sometime later, (a working floo-connection was the first thing the Malfoy heir installed in the house), colour high on his cheeks.
“VES!” Abraxas yelled.

“What?” Starkey shouted back without concern. If Melchior was here, he’d be embarrassed at both of their behaviours, especially when in front of Hermione—Hermione was only amused at how utterly unconcerned both of them were at her presence. They’d probably even forgot she was there.

“Did you see Brutus and Pierce—for Merlin’s sake, Ves! I needed extra hands!”

“Oh, stuff it, Brax. You’re handling the feast, right?”

“You’re outright stealing men—"

“There’s enough hands for you, courtesy of the house elves! Hell, call some of yer home elves if you need to.”

“Doesn’t give you the right to—"

“Would’ve been easy for you. Hogwarts elves can’t exactly work outside Hogwarts without a teach’s permission, could they?” He exhaled hard but not backing down. “No other way around this, I’m afraid. Hermy’ll need more men more than you do.”

They went on for a bit, but Vespasian had successfully overridden more than one of Abraxas’ objections. He was as sharp with his tongue as he was on his feet.

“Bugger it. Bugger you.” Abraxas cursed,

“No thanks.” Ves retorted just as fast.

The blonde snorted. They’d been staring each other down for a long silent moment. “You know I’m not doing this for you, right? I can do it for Hermione, I suppose.”

The other Slytherin’s expression was unusually serious. He didn’t even take the opportunity to gloat over managing to steal Abraxas’ minions. His answering nod was slow and sombre.

“Yeah, I know.”

Abraxas let out an aggrieved sigh as he rubbed his face with his hands, but he moved on anyway. He dumped scrolls Hermione had been looking for on a nearby table, and went around to leave a word or two to Mulciber and Parkinson. By his expansive gestures towards her and the twin boulders very-unsubtle turning in her direction and staring wordlessly, he was telling them to follow her instead of Ves.

“Cross me one more time and I’ll make sure you regret it,” Abraxas warned Vespasian with a dark look. There was something a little too overemphasised about his body language, though, rather operatic… Vespasian rolled his eyes.

“Merlin, I know! Shove off, already!”

“Consider this your last warning!”

“Yeah, yeah. Heard that before. I’d rather be gutted than listen to more whining.” He grumbled.

The blonde wizard took off to Hogwarts once more in a huff, his robes flaring impressively behind him before he shut the door with a bang. She facepalmed. Good, God. Now, she was almost certain she knew where Draco got his drama king tendencies from—Lucius had always struck her as far
chillier than his father.

Hermione had four purebloods hanging on her words that she could order around for home improvement and handiwork purposes. It was, odd, especially after the first few times Yaxley wanted to complain something was stopped by Ves giving him a warning glare. The long-faced Slytherin was less sluggish and more awed once he saw her showing them how to do the transfigurations necessary to set up several permanent pavilions in the garden within a day. It was easier than it looked since Abraxas had given her several blueprints for one when she asked, courtesy of his family library. All she had needed to do was choose the appropriate one and start following the instructions.

Rufus Carrow had popped up later and hung awkwardly at the edges, his reddish-brown hair the first thing that caught her attention. He may seem wary of her, but whatever it was that she needed that they didn’t already have in the empty house, he passed the word easily to Abraxas who was… apparently in the Hogwarts kitchen and piling requests on the house elves. Other times, he brought things that Abraxas or Tom sent her way. Reference books she asked for to clarify things she didn’t immediately get from Abraxas’ blueprints fall under things he ended up playing fetch for.

Robbe Rowle only showed up once, and she supposed it was mostly by accident—he’d outright paled and scrambled back into the house and she hadn’t ever seen him again. It was absolutely no problem at all for her since she didn’t give a damn about him either. She couldn’t promise she wouldn’t be tempted to hex him if he started being sleazy again, as she too had gone to Hogwarts to ask for help from some of her classmates and some of them happened to be witches (frankly, she didn’t trust that he’d behave around women).

Gallus came in late in the afternoon with the entire list of who had been invited, with Tom only popping for a moment to check before going off again. Gallus’ task seemed to pertain to socialising like mad over last week, hinting about the shindig and cryptically dropping suggestions that people might want to rearrange their plans from Sunday because The Society might have something in the works and then actually refraining from explaining whenever someone was too curious.

It was…weird.

Hermione had never considered that not giving enough information about a social event actually made people want to attend more, but Gallus only laughed at that.

“Don’t you get it, Hermione?” He asked, his expression genial. “That is enough information.”

“What, a party whose very existence can’t even be confirmed?” She asked, sceptical.

“That a group whose star is rising are holding some sort of event tomorrow.”

“That’s not enough!”

He shrugged, still smiling, “and yet that’s all they need.”

Abraxas was back in the evening and demonstrated that he had taken command over both the Nott and Malfoy house-elves. The house-elves, in turn, had sculpted the garden into something worthy of Balmoral or other palaces.

That was on Saturday.

On Sunday, the four pavilions stood like finely-crafted isles of the four seasons.

One was a refreshing light green and yellow with bushes whose leaves were pale and new paired
with gently-trailing ivies. The second was orange and red, a profusion of flowers filled the pots on
the bannisters and their fragrance hung as a festive screen in the air. The third was golden and
brown; two potted maples forming a gate for it entrance, the atmosphere inside was relaxing and
tranquil. The fourth was white and silver, its walls trimmed with the lace of frost, two swans
carved from ice sat on display like silent guardians, cool and unaffected by the air.

(How all the out-of-season plants were there was another story, mostly involving Hermione trying
to recall the names of her Advanced Herbology classmates and asking for Sprout’s advice. That
was how she’d ended up working with the quiet but kind Helene Girard over Saturday afternoon—a
river of freckles crossed her nose, as charming as the Milky Way. The sixth-year was one of the
few low-profile French Hufflepuff).

Now, food was laid in a magnificent spread down two trestle tables and laughter could be heard in
the air. She didn’t know where Gallus had found the musicians either.

“I didn’t know there’s a place like this in Hogsmeade. You did amazing work, Hermione.” Andrew
had expressed his admiration. He had a way of lighting up the room with his smile with the
warmth and openness of his expression. Her mood lifted easily and Hermione beamed at him.

“Why, thank you! It’s a nifty place, isn’t it? I like to think that it’s quite a find. More butterbeer?”

“No thanks for now. Mine’s still half-full.”

“We do hope you’re having a good time, Andrew.” Tom came up from behind her and to her right.
She could feel his thumb barely grazed her waist. Her spine tingled slightly and she slowly cleared
her throat—frankly, an outright touch would’ve been easier to ignore. “Last I saw, Amelia Bones
were discussing some DMLE opportunities with Emma at the summer pavilion. You might be
interested in their topic.”

Hermione did not understand why Andrew’s smile had dimmed slightly; his expression rueful as
his attention flickered between his two hosts.

“Yes, I did. Amelia and Emma, you say? Well, lead the way, Tom.”

As the two wizards walked off, chatting about nothing in particular, other people greeted them.
What she did note with some amused interest was Tom’s skilled footwork for somehow being just
slightly out of reach from a casual shoulder grab from a pureblood Hufflepuff (his name escapes
her right now), and how the Hufflepuff only managed a vague pat with the distance. Even
Timaeus’ passing arm only caught him at his wrist instead of his entire lower arm as Tom took his
hand and shook it easily with a friendly grin on his face.

Hermione might have considered it as an accident, the way she was certain the wizards greeting
Tom thought, if they even thought of it at all. But she’d seen him interact with others often enough
to catch on to the pattern. Her conclusion was different now, augmented as well with her awareness
that he’d been stiff whenever she leaned against him in the early days of their acquaintance. She’d
almost forgot that too as he’d done a one hundred-and-eighty degree turn on touching her.

Tom had managed his distance from others very, very carefully. It was not more than pace away to
seem standoffish or cold, but he was always just a hand’s breadth away from a casual contact.

A hand’s breadth away but not any closer. It was a gap he guarded as zealously as a feral cat.

The contradiction was thought-provoking. To disdain contact with other people as much as he did
and yet still strive forward to mingle, to ensure that his lack of preference wasn’t detectable simply
because he wanted to be on top of the wizarding world? That takes a stubborn kind of persistence, something she was very familiar with.

It was hard not to be impressed by Tom Riddle.

The air may nip the skin that most people would not even think of hosting an outdoor event on the 1st of November. Yet the opinion of most of the wizards and witches enjoying themselves just then was that quibbling about such mild weather was for muggles. For them, they can simply manually cast warming charms repeatedly. It helped that there was also a low-grade heat trap component to the security wards that Pendleton and Hermione had erected, so even that was not something that needed to be done often.

Two wizards strolled among the party-goers, attractive in diametric ways. One had a sunny sheen to his hair and a smile as warm as a summer’s day, while the other was pale as winter’s moon with hair of darkest night. They were too used to the admiration of others that several people glancing for too long in their direction was something that barely distracted them.

“Tom…”

“Yes, Andrew?”

“I noticed that you’re…rather particular to Hermione.”

“I am.” There was no doubt in his voice; he took no detours of topics.

The Slytherin knew from the way the other wizard suddenly turned to gaze at him that it was not what he expected. Not the admission itself, per se, but to admit so positively as to allow himself no path of retreat from his position, no way to take any other alternative.

It did not matter to him because it was true. He did not want or need a retreat from his position.

“Are you sure?”

“Would I risk her reputation by a blatant approach if I wasn’t?” He asked back.

“You…” it did surprise him that the Head Boy seemed to be grasping for words. “…she wouldn’t exactly be able to help your career.”

He knew what Andrew meant. To have pureblood in-laws that can help smooth his career was something every ambitious muggleborn wizard or witch had considered at least once.

“Who’s to say that she can’t? Besides, I do have some suspicions on my progenitors. I might not be as hapless as I seem now.”

“Not many pureblood families are happy with just any passing claimant to the blood. Success isn’t certain.” His concern was clear in his hazel eyes, his voice. Tom only glanced at him occasionally because the degree of sympathy Andrew exhibited vexed him. It wasn’t the emotion, certainly, just the pitch-perfect tone of it that the Head Boy always, always seem to manage without effort.

“Thank you for your concern, but it’s not a major issue.”

Tom felt like rubbing his temples just now because he couldn’t completely shut out the abruptness in his tone. Damn. Andrew did not seem to mind at all. When Tom came to a pause, as they’d
almost reached one of the pavilions, the other prefect paused next to him.

“Very well. I suppose you have it in hand.” The Head Boy said. “Yet I’m serious in asking your intentions to her.”

“My intentions would be known to the witch herself before anyone else, but yes, I am serious.”

“You are not merely amusing yourself with her?”

“Andrew.”

It was his turn to snap his head rapidly, the tone of his voice pointed if not sharp yet.

“I’m sorry, but this has to be asked.” Andrew did not back down from the force of Tom’s stare.

“If anyone were to ask, I’d expect it to be Daedalus.” …who is a Ravenclaw.

“He might have, if he had seen what I’ve seen.”

“What is it?”

The Hufflepuff had gaze forward again and started walking, though his path meandered to the side first, not directly towards the people Tom had offered to guide him to. Tom walked beside him, catching up to his steps in no time. His question was casual, his tone even.

“You wouldn’t happen to be courting another woman at the same time, do you?”

“No.” Tom answered without a doubt.

“Squiring her to places, dining out with a single female company—”

“No.”

“—escorting her to the Ministry Dinner?”

Tom met Andrew’s gaze without wavering. “I did go there last week with Hermione, though not from the beginning. We were mostly socialising with the Slytherins since not many people from my House knew her well yet. You can ask Lucretia or Walburga Black about it, since we ended up at the same table at the second half of the night.”

“Oh. Thanks for that. Perhaps I will.”

“Good to know that you hold my honour in such regard.” Tom’s reply was dry. Andrew turned sheepish and he scratched the back of his head.

“Well, I’m sorry if it’s uncomfortable, but I had to find out if I was seeing things or not.”

“And why exactly is that?”

Andrew actually turned to him, his expression serious. “You do know that if you break it off, the brunt of social censure would fall on Hermione than you, don’t you? The wizarding world would not be kind to her. She’s new here, but I did expect you to know better hence why I have to know how certain you are.”

“You say that as if I wanted to break it off.”
“We don’t know about the future.”

“Oh, certainly. But I know that there would be no one else like Hermione.” Tom answered, barely holding back his testiness.

“Tom—”

Perhaps it was because his patience was running thin, or perhaps and that a part of him was affronted that Andrew thought he needed to be warned of something so obvious. Warn him? Really? He who had been forced to master the intricacies of pureblood social structures from the moment he set foot in Hogwarts with no background to speak of? He knew exactly what Andrew was talking about and even more that someone who will one day easily ascend to the Wizengamot chair held by the Abbott family could not even begin to fathom.

Either way, his answer held more truth than he’d expected.

“I’m not going to change my mind. I’m never going to let her go, Andrew.”

The Head Boy watched him for a while before he nodded gravely in acknowledgement. He seemed to have missed the slight change in Tom’s tone entirely, the darker undertones he’d let loose in the end.

“Very well, then. Your intention is understood. My apologies.”

“Apology accepted.”

The feast was a success. There was no doubt on the excellence of the food and the company was even more so.

Several people had been impressed at Hermione’s skills in hosting the event and took the opportunity to express that to her often. Hermione, being Hermione, found no pleasure in claiming an achievement that was not her own; she could fairly own up the improvements and repair to the place. Hosting a large pureblood event, on the other hand, was still beyond her at the moment.

She frankly directed people to the real organiser—Abraxas Malfoy.

The blond puffed and preened at the number of witches coming to him to ask for advice and help on hosting anything bigger than a tea party, and Abraxas gladly became their fountain of wisdom, passing on morsels of wisdom his own mother had passed to him.

“No, no, no. You do not try to alter the colours of the linens one-by-one. Waste of effort and tiring too. You decide on a colour, cast an illusion charm to see how it looks like and then you bring one linen set to the dyers. Really, you don’t want the fuchsia pearl finish you’ve perfected to disappear with the first stray spell cast or accidental magic spurt from some fighting brats, do you?” He’d asked back.

The witches circling him oohed and aahed as the realisation dawned. If some of them were fluttering their eyelashes a little too much, she doubted that Abraxas even minded.

That was something Hermione had absolutely no expertise in and was only too glad to let Abraxas take over. She did not even care the slightest about the disparaging glances sent her way by some pureblood witches such as Clytemnestra Gamp, apparently the current holder of the position ‘Hermione’s Chief Flaw Finder’. The event itself was interesting, but it was a story for another
day.

For now, we concern ourselves with the highly irregular events that happened a week after that.

The beginning, however, was some time ago.

”Do you understand the problem with your essay?” Slughorn was kind as always as he slid the unrolled parchment over to her. He had timed it well; everyone else was more occupied in getting the best ingredients before everyone else filches them, or starting the first phase of brewing that no one paid her any attention. She felt like shrinking into herself at the potential mess-up but steeled herself.

“I think I do. It’s the ingredients. I followed the original recipe too much when I was trying for a very different result. So, when the flower of antimony—”

She did her best when she continued her explanation, she really did. Yet the witch knew she’d missed something when Slughorn’s shoulders had started drop slightly and his expression had somehow turned more sympathetic.

“You’ve tried very hard, dear, I know.”

“B-but it’s…” her voice had started to waver and she knew there was no use in keeping up a confident front. “But it’s still not enough, is it?”

The Potions Master shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter. We can all use some improvement. In fact, I’m sure Tom can help you out.” He scouted ahead quickly. “Tom! A word with you?”

She heard his measured steps, how he didn’t hurry even when it was his Head of House who had summoned him. His short “yes, sir?” was closer than she’d expected; he’d somehow stopped right beside her without her realising it.

“Can you help Jemima here with cases of substitutions for Flower of Antimony?”

“It would be my pleasure.” His tone was even, his smile was kind and polite instead of cloying or ingratiating, but he didn’t even stare at her longer than the initial glance.

And that was how Jemima Avery began to know Tom Riddle on a more intimate basis, sometime in the middle of their third year.

“You don’t really mind helping Jemima again, do you?”

“No, not at all, Sir.” Riddle’s expression didn’t change.

And indeed, he didn’t. He scheduled time for her without a second thought, and soon it felt all-too-natural.

Going over Potions with Tom Riddle had become a strange part of her weekend (no, it was not a study group. She was not that much of a swot to enjoy studying). He pointed out the weaknesses in her current essays, if that was what they happen to be talking about, or he would turn the conversation to the last classes. He always figured out sooner or later where the gaps in her
understanding lay, and it didn’t matter even if she tried to hide them. He probed, picked and prodded until he pulled the gaps apart until he was sure that she could see all that he could.

Jemima had expected him to crows his superiority as she’d expected a pureblood with his brains would. He didn’t. He merely pointed at her flaws and let her get to work on her reading as he returned to his own. If there were any expressions that slipped past his effort of channelling politeness, at most it was the boredom in that piercing glance under long dark lashes. It galled her because she was one of the Averys, the Sacred 28! Yes, she knew he was clever, but it wasn’t everything—

“Avery?”

“What?”

“Are you going to read that now or not? If not, I’ll just return to the Common Room. If we’re both bored here, it’s much more enjoyable for us to just go on our own way, isn’t it?” His friendly expression took the edge off his frank question, but he did not beat around the bush.

“No.” She gasped the words out, its certainty beyond reason or knowing but a decision she’d apparently made long ago in her unconscious that she hadn’t been aware of. Until now.

“No.” Jemima repeated again in the same way her mother made her decrees in the house. Confident and (mostly) calm.

Tom paused in his movements, his forehead creasing slightly.

“No?”

“No. Give me ten minutes and we can talk about it.” She tapped the open book page.

He sat down again, staring at her oddly for a moment before his attention was caught by one of his books once more. As she picked up the section of the potions book she was holding, fighting her boredom and distraction just to get through the first page, she wondered why she even did this.

The rustling of a page from across the table distracted her. It was spring, and the sun’s rays slanted low into the library windows. A splash of light poured over his head, gilding him, and she thought no one had ever looked more like a creature of light like he did just then. The floating motes of dust over his hair was almost a halo. Seraphic. Unlike Abraxas, for all his striking features, he’d never tried smiling smarmily at other people or use it to wheedle his way out of trouble with their Head of House. Most of the time, Tom Riddle didn’t seem to care about such things at all. He was so…distant, so unconnected to things that you can’t help but be curious what it was that he does care about.

The blonde witch actually finished reading through the five pages he’d referred her to. She’d even read an entire chapter in their studies that day without complaining (out loud, that is). She couldn’t exactly recall how it happened. It would not be the last time either.

There was a particular table in the group study area that they ended up using from time-to-time, unless there was someone who was foolish enough to try to take it away from her.

‘-

They had entered the fourth year with surprisingly little change in their arrangements. She still came to a particular table in the library on Sunday. She still made sure no one else knew where she went.
“Those are petit fours.”

Tom lowered his book and stared at the object on the table that had caught her attention with a jaded eye.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“But we’re not supposed to bring any food to the library!” She hastily looked around, as if the librarian would suddenly spring up unexpected from a corner bookshelf with her wide and uncanny smile as if she’d been hunting them all along. Jemima shivered. Madame Cobb gave her the willies.

“You’re going to cost us house points!”

His expression had barely changed as he raised his wand, did some movements she didn’t think she’d seen before, and tapped at the plate. The macarons of colourful pinks and greens along with the plate shimmered before disappearing.

“It’s not an issue, Avery. As long as you don’t actually drop the crumbs into the books, or if you do, immediately dust them (don’t try a cleaning charm), you’ll be fine.”

He cancelled the spell without thought and levitated one into his mouth and she forced her mouth to close before she looked too pathetic. She had to admit to not a little envy; it didn’t seem like such a big trouble to him.

“Now, what were you having trouble with in class this time?”

His semi-permanent affliction of boredom still annoyed her, as was the speed he segued into school subjects barely trying to talk about anything else, but she couldn’t deny that her grades were better. It was only later when she (somehow) found the plate of macarons right in front of her that she realised all the flavours there were her favourites.

The blonde looked up suspiciously.

“Did you take them for me?”

“The macarons?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“Perish the thought. I simply wanted some snack.”

He floated yet another macaron in his direction.

It was the first, but not the last happening in their unofficial meetings in the library (she still refused to call them study sessions). There were jellied fruits at one point and airy mousse in another. The time she’d returned to class after a bout of annoying cold led to a library meeting that involved a bouquet of flowers on the table. Lilies and Narcissus.

“They just happen to be there,” he said this without looking up from his book.

She couldn’t help the smile on her face even if she tried to repress it and had to look away because it was just flowers. Anyone could’ve gone to one of the greenhouses and picked them. And forgot them on the library table.

“I suppose someone forgot about them and left them here.”
“Yes. That must be what happened.” His tone was too bland to be true and she’d almost chuckled before feeling horrified at the undignified sound that had just escaped from her.

Later, when they parted ways, she lingered at the table as Tom walked away. She carried the bouquet back with her.

“Tom,” she called him.

The imperative edge never completely left her voice even if it was threaded with impatience and maybe a little uncertainty.

“Yes, Avery?”

He was always so careful with the distance between them.

She understood, since he had to watch himself with more care as an orphan. Didn’t mean it didn’t annoy her that they couldn’t just be...friends. Yes, that’s it. She thought, perfectly comfortable to pretend as if that’s her actual concern right now.

“What are you going to do after Hogwarts?”

His smile was unreadable as he raised his head from whatever thick book he was currently reading (it wasn’t even French. It didn’t use the alphabet but a more ancient-looking script and she had no idea what it was about).

“A little of this and a little of that.”

“You could enter the Ministry and go all the way to the top. You’re clever—you can do it.”

“Of course, I can.” He answered with more than the confidence of the dreamers of their age or the certainty of blood. No, he had something else and she knew it. It might even be Destiny. The unimpressed expression on his face, however, annoyed her.

“And…”

“And?”

“You’d need a pureblood family to support you and...and you can do that if you marry into one.” She barely held back from stomping her feet. Barely. That was as far as she can say it. She’d rather bite her tongue than be more explicit, but he would’ve understood. He was a Slytherin.

Tom met her gaze and she forced herself to meet it head on and not look away, even if she forgot to breathe for a moment before she made herself take a long breath. She had to grit her teeth and ignore her mother’s voice at the back of her head, reprimanding her for what she’d just said. You can’t scare the boys away! You can’t be too forward, Jemima! You can’t—

“I see.” He stated.

It did not help that his gaze was entirely unfathomable.

A moment or two later, he clapped his hands with a sense of finality before dropping his belongings into his bag.

“Well, I think you have a good grasp on last week’s class and the rest could be easily picked up on
your own reading. Our time here is done. See you next week, Avery.”

He left behind a confused Jemima.

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“Avery,”

“Yes, Tom?”

“It may escape your notice, but you’re not actually studying if you take the seat next to mine.” His tone was polite, but there was an undercurrent of something else that she couldn’t identify.

“We don’t really have to study all the time, do we?” She leaned against his shoulder. He didn’t change his side glance.

“If you don’t need to catch up on your potions studies, I’m afraid I have other things to do.” He shifted to the right.

She let out a long sigh. (She definitely didn’t huff. It wasn’t beautiful). “Oh, alright, alright. Very well, let’s see what I have to catch up.”

Jemima moved back to the seat right across his and dutifully picked up her book. If she had been half sulking the entire time, Tom had too much patience to be affected by something as small as that. Even if she didn’t want to, she still noticed the way he managed to calm her down without a fuss. Her mind couldn’t stop picking at it, like an old itch that acted up every time the weather changed.

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Tom Riddle might not personally enjoy quidditch, but like many Slytherins, he would always publicly support his House team.

She always made sure that the seat next to him was hers. Even if he did insist on a more formal distance between them (and she could understand…somewhat. They were in a public place, and standards have to be kept). It was an annoyance, but she could live with it. At least Tom never gave the time of day to any other girl, and she preened inside.

This state of things wouldn’t last forever either. It could only get better once they grow up.

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“Morning, Avery.”

“You can call me Jemima, you know?”

“Avery is your name.”

Jemima slowly stared at the ceiling of the Potions lab. Slughorn had asked for Tom’s assistance and he agreed without much fuss. She volunteered herself on the spot.

“It’s also my brother’s name. I’m disturbed by the idea that you call me and him with the same name.”

Tom stopped his sorting to turn to her, mild interest in his face as he mused for a moment.
“It’s not.”

“It’s not?”

“It’s not the same name. You’re Avery,” she shivered. A-ve-ry. She could hear the way his tongue rolled on the first syllable, the accidental caress he turned it to.

“He’s simply Avery.” Short syllables. Ave-ry. All business, two clips and it was done. She cleared her throat in the end and slowly nodded because she was out of things to say that wasn’t ‘say my name again.’

Jemima remembered when she first heard of Curie. Rumours of an orphan from some war-torn side of Europe—probably another of the school’s charity case, then, she’d dismissed. Couldn’t be pureblood, because if she was, then there would’ve been news among her mother’s social set of who was adopting her, right? The blonde nodded to herself with satisfaction. Probably a muggleborn.

Tom, she heard in passing between his and Slughorn’s conversation, had to play nursemaid to the new student. The third time she caught wind of it again filled the blonde with annoyance.

“You don’t have to say yes to everything he asks, even if he’s our Head of House.” She told him.

“I’m aware of that, Avery.”

“We can go back and ask Slughorn to assign someone else to it. You’re already the prefect! And now you have to spend even more of your own time on yet another task that just about anyone else in Slytherin could do?”

“Perhaps he needed a prefect.”

“There’s still Oswin and Emma. They’d be happy to take over from you,” she said derisively.

Oddly enough, he actually seemed amused. He’d slipped away from her grasp on his arm as he sat back down on the armchair he’d taken in their common room. She took another seat near to it.

“Avery, you do remember what Slughorn told us all about making our way through the Ministry, don’t you?”

She made a reluctant nod. “Yes.”

“Then you’d know that once there, it would never be about what you prefer or wanted. You can’t just deny a task simply because you don’t like it. Slughorn is teaching me this even from now.”

“But it’s not fair to you!”

Jemima thought he even managed to smile then, though she had no idea how.

“Life isn’t fair, Avery.”

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She could not make heads or tails of the rumours.

They say that Tom gave Hermione Curie a crown of flowers, promising betrothal and marriage.
Impossible, she thought. He would never risk his reputation with a nobody like that! He has a long way to go! It simply sounded like something out of an old fairy-tale, and it was why she’d dismissed it quickly as an embellishment. There were mutterings he took her on a picnic. That they spent the afternoon walking arm-in-arm with each other in Hogwarts, like the day before—

The condescending and pitying glance from Patricia, at least pulled her out of her worries and right into anger. What did she know about caring? It hardly mattered to dear Ms. Parkinson who she was going to marry as long as she can keep the lifestyle she’s accustomed to, didn’t it? What did she know about…about caring about someone? She wouldn’t let the vapid blonde see even an inch of weakness.

The witch didn’t see anyone unfamiliar at the Ravenclaw table and felt the invisible bands tightening around her chest to loosen. Perhaps it was just the Hogwarts rumour mill making much ado about nothing, as usual.

As her gaze swept her own House table, her breathing felt more difficult once more.

Jemima couldn’t see Tom anywhere—not with his friends, not with the other years.

But the Slytherin did see her the next day along with the unknown transfer student, Curie.

The transfer student was a homely witch with a crown of flowers on her head and yet she moved as if the castle was hers. She was strange, but there was a solidness to her steps that told of the strength of her will. Curie barely spared a glance to the people whispering or talking about her as she passed, as if they were dust that would fly apart to be shapeless again, anyway, so why even try? It annoyed Jemima because it was too close to how the world fit to her. Yes, other people are worthless to her, but she had the right to it! Her family was born here and they were bred to be over the masses, to receive their due reverence. Magic had run through their blood longer. Things were as they should be.

Curie moved with the same certainty when she arrived—late—in the Great Hall, arrogantly unconcerned. Jemima was certain it was completely intentional. Tom talked to Curie as if it was his own preference, as if he’d always wanted to instead of it being another task piled on him by Slughorn. He lingered without a care by the Ravenclaws’ table.

Curie had talked to Tom as if it was nothing out of the ordinary at all that he gave that attention to her, as if it was hers by right. It made her angry like nothing else. The blonde wanted very, very much to…

…drop a boulder from great heights on her. It was only a flight of fancy but it made her feel better.

The most difficult thing to accept for her was how aloof Tom was slowly receding into once Curie entered Hogwarts proper.

(She took nine classes! Could you believe it, Jemima? Nine advanced classes! Oh, shut it, Melchior. I don’t want to hear about it.)

It was as if she hadn’t known him. She’d come across him carrying three thick tomes with ease once in the library. She greeted him and he replied with his old friendliness like no time had passed. When she asked him what they were for, his answer came too easily to him.
“There are some arithmantic arrays I wanted to cross-check with Hermione.”

The name was harsher than a slap across her face. Tom Riddle had walked away with a purpose, unhurried, not quite noticing the gasp she’d uttered, or how she’d leaned back on the nearest shelf and didn’t move from there for a while.

Tom might have let Curie along with him in Hogsmeade because she still interested him and amused him so far, but it didn’t mean that it was easier for Jemima to accept. He did pause in front of her when he saw her in the Slytherin common room, tired out from the worried floo-call her parents had made. Everyone’s parents had been endlessly calling. She would bet that all fireplaces in the Slytherin Dungeon were blazing green right now. She looked up at him without hiding her fatigue (she could afford to do so because she knew she still looked beautiful and she’d changed into a new dress already—fuchsia and cream with fine embroidery at the edges).

“You simply had to go back,” he said, without preamble. “I had to do it.”

“I had to go back where?”

“From Hogsmeade. The attackers had the muggle weapons that Grindelwald used in the Ministry Attack and beyond. It was too dangerous.”

“I could have…”

His steady, sceptical look dampened her insistence.

“You parents would have been very disappointed in me if I let you get out there and get hurt at all.”

“But Curie—”

“Has no family. She has no one who would miss her.” He answered firmly, and suddenly she understood what he was trying to say. There was no question to her why he went out into the still-dangerous street with Curie.

The transfer student was expendable where she wasn’t. When she couldn’t manage to say anything else, Tom had stood up and continued on his way.

“Stay safe, Avery.”

“You could call me Jemima, Tom.” She said, on one of their prefect rounds.

“And your parents would have disowned you on the spot,” he said it so cavalierly that she knew he was joking.

“But…” she trailed away. The sentiment that wanted to dig themselves out of her head was about how he called Curie Hermione, but the last thing she wanted was to admit that she even cared about something so trivial and she smothered that urge again.

“They wouldn’t do that,” she said instead.

“The Averys are not only an old family, but part of the 28.”
“It doesn’t matter.” The words spilled out before she could bottle them, push them back down far from daylight. It shouldn’t, she still wanted to say, but didn’t because she knew it still did. She hated the way he carefully put yet more distance between them, how she had inevitably reminded him of it again.

“Even if you can disregard who you are, Avery, I never forget who I am.”

“Are you alright?”

Jemima pulled herself up with horror when she realised that Tom had found her falling asleep on a library table. What did her hair look now? Were there creases of her sleeve on her face? She gingerly patted her hair and cleared her throat, hands laid delicately on the table.

“Yes, I’m sure I’m fine.”

Tom Riddle didn’t immediately sit in front of her. He was still standing near her, and the next thing she knew, his wand turned in loops and whirls and he said the words for a spell she didn’t know. Green text floated in front of her, and she didn’t understand what all of them meant.

“Your temperature is still normal. You’re not sick.”

She wanted to say everything at once but the end result of that were the words being jammed together in her throat. Nothing came out. He’d tilted her chin up slightly to observe her pupils, only using a fingertip and his hand fell away immediately when it was done. She regretted the loss and was unhappy that she did, her skin still recalling the echo of his touch.

“Yes, I don’t think you’ve caught any sickness.” He concluded, before pausing. He seemed to have seen something in her eyes all the same.

“You hadn’t expected me to be here.”

The blonde took a deep breath but said nothing because she knew she couldn’t give a convincing denial then. Tom still hadn’t looked away and this time she wished he did because he was taking all her breath with her when he did that, pinned her under his endless gaze.

“I would have been here. I made a promise and I don’t break my promises.”

This time, he sat on the seat next to hers, and hope took flight in her chest. She managed to lean against him for a while (he was always so still compared to most other boys), then Tom edged slightly away. She shifted to follow him and leaned into him yet again. **Hmm, was Tom’s back always this stiff?**

“Avery, I wasn’t joking when I said you can’t seem to study if I sit on the same side. If you’re really keen to prove that now, I’ll gladly move.”

“Don’t,” she sighed. “I’ll move back.”

“Emma confirmed that Curie had joined your Society,” Jemima said as she sat on the arm of his armchair, her gleaming blonde hair cascading down her back like a golden waterfall whose ends brushed his shoulder. Tom lowered the book he was reading and sat up, turning to her.
“And your question is…?”
She took a deep breath.
“Why?”
“Why?”
“Why did you let her join?”
“Avery, let me ask you this. What are your plans after Hogwarts? Do you intend to enter the Ministry and work? Or have you expected to hold the social side of the family affairs, host dinner parties for your husband’s career?” His voice was still calm, hypnotic.
“I think it’s not a mystery to you,”
He nodded in agreement.
“Of course. Now, do you wish to sit down with Emma for an hour and talk about Ministry policies? How they worked and where they failed? Listen to her detail the minutiae of the life and times of bureaucrats? Is that it?” From the way his mouth curved up slightly at the edges, she knew she’d failed to hold back her expression of dismay.
“Do you want to go through several tomes of Charms and Enchantment over the weekend to study the creation process of magical maps? Do you enjoy reading up new warding schemes in your spare time, so much that you can barely socialise with your dormmates?”
The witch exhaled slowly, carefully. “Alright, alright. I understand. I enjoy none of those things. But you’ve never asked me if…”
He raised an eyebrow at her, not hiding his disbelief.
“Are you saying that you want me to force you to read through an entire shelf of books every weekend? Really? And here I thought you’d be happy that I was considerate of your preferences.”
Jemima bit her berry-red lip in frustration. Tom was actually being very reasonable. She just…
She just hated the thought that he was spending more time with Curie. Her gaze dropped to her finely manicured hands. One had started wandering towards his shoulder without her realising it—he was solid, dependable. He’d stiffened at first before letting his guard down again. Some moments later he casually lifted it up and laid it back on her lap.
“Let me ask a slightly different question, then. If I met a bright and ambitious person, should I leave them alone, and the one day face the risk of having them compete with me, or should I try to pull them over to my side? To work for me?”
She was a Slytherin. Really, she wasn’t stupid. If she could see Tom’s rising star, then it was clear that Curie could do so too and would gladly follow him. It didn’t mean that she would be happy about it.

Tom slipped back into their previous, routine schedule as if nothing had changed.

It was as if there hadn’t been the interloper who had a hundred books in her head instead of an actual life, fighting skill in exchange for the life of her family. The stranger who’d looked down at
her so *easily* and turned around as if she had found her wanting, as if Jemima was just another

nobody.

It pricked at her in the times when it was quiet, in the stillness of the night or the hush of the

morning and she couldn’t shut out her own voice. Hermione Curie had passed her several times

now in the usual hustle of Hogwarts and yet her gaze skipped easily over Jemima.

She’d been waiting for a revenge and she was ignored outright. It was galling. It made anger

bubble so hot inside her stomach that she could not think straight and Violetta concerned that once

she even reached out and clasped Jemima’s hand in hers.

But there was still Tom, who did not seem to be as *busy* as he used to be. He stayed longer even

when she wasn’t discussing Potions with him, asked her about her Charms class and whether she

had any trouble there. Normal was mending itself from the mess torn apart by the foreign arrival

whose eyes seemed restless even now, ever roaming. Jemima didn’t think she’d settle for Tom,

anyway, not with the other pureblood boys on her tail.

‘-

“Who on earth is Fudge? How dare he even insinuate—*how dare he?*” Jemima hissed.

“Life isn’t fair.***” Tom said again, strangely unconcerned.

“If my father hears about ***this—***”

Tom shake his head. “There is no need, Avery. Abraxas and Melchior are aware of it, and so do

everyone else.”

“But—”

His gaze cut her words off as loud as any utterance can. There was an intense focus she didn’t think

she’d seen before, particularly in the slow, deliberate way his attention moved, from her chin, to

her neck, almost as solid as an actual touch. It didn’t help when she saw that he’d raised a hand,

even if he had enough control to notice what he’d done and pull it down once more.

She swallowed, her throat feeling oddly dry.

“You need a distraction,” he said instead. “What do you think about having dinner at Hogsmeade

tonight instead of the Great Hall?”

“It’s not Hogsmeade weekend.” she said, breathlessly, before she felt the urge to step on her own

toes for saying something so idiotic. She simply couldn’t think when he was staring at her like that

(if she had thought that he was compelling before, it could not hold a candle to his magnetism

now). She shook her head.

“I mean, *how... we can’t possibly ask Slughorn to let us out, right?***”

He shrugged. “We can’t. But we *can* use the fireplace in his office.”

Her voice was a gasp. “Sneak *in?***”

“A third year that Gallus’ sister knows is in detention. He can open the door for us and we’ll return

through one of the shortcuts between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. So, what do you think, Avery?”

There was practically nothing on earth that could make her say no.
She didn’t know what this was, right then, but she didn’t care much to question it either. He didn’t disagree when she said she wanted to change clothes first and when she met him in the common room, it was clear that he had the same thought; Tom had changed as well. Soon they were at Hogsmeade and she grabbed his hand in excitement the moment they were out of the Three Broomsticks.

It had been…unexpected. Unexpected but pleasant, since she didn’t think that Tom actually saw her most of the time. Now, there were times when his eyes strayed to her again and again. He declined her suggestion to dance, but he didn’t outright said no.

“Maybe next time,” he said easily.

He’d pulled his hand out of her grasp, but she’d caught it again and again, before he finally gave up by the third time. She rested her head on his shoulder with a victorious feeling.

The walk back to Hogwarts took some time, but she did not regret it for all the times she could ‘accidentally stumble’ against him. She didn’t do it too often, but considering the length of the journey, it still gave her many opportunities (and some was her actually tripping over tree roots and the like). As they reached the end, his hold had started to change. Where it was barely there before was stronger now. Once, she didn’t even have to clasp back since he was doing all the gripping.

Her final stumble came when they had reached Hogwarts. Tom had stepped out into the corridors and she’d missed to clear the single step from the secret passage. It wasn’t even intentional and she almost fell face first on the floor. He caught her deftly. Her face was in his chest and his scent was divine—something fresh and cool, from the deepest heart of the forest where the light never reached.

What she hadn’t expected was the hand caressing up from her shoulder to her neck. His hold tightened and it hurt for one second before he suddenly pushed her away. His back was to her.

“Tom?”

“Go back to the dorms Avery.”

“We could go together—”

“No. Leave, now.”

Jemima had never heard the particular coldness in his tone, or how commanding he could be. She shivered—with what, she had no idea. Her wariness only fed her desire, a confusing feedback loop she couldn’t find her way out of. He had taken three steps back now, out of the light and farther from her. He’d never seemed so distant and yet so alluring before. A phantom in the night.

“You have a lovely neck, J—Avery. Very exquisite.” His tone was sibilant. Dark.

She was too surprised to say anything. He took the opportunity to disappear in her confusion.

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Chapter End Notes

In which I am glad that I'm not in the same city as my sister, as I can almost feel her
side-eye across chat when I finished writing this and sent it to her. "Do you realise that Tom is being a cad?" My reply was a reflexive, why, I have no idea what you mean, dear, no idea at all. She insisted that she'd seen plenty of jerkasses using the charming but hard-to-get approach while 'scattering a lot of romantic bait' that get young women among her acquaintance hoping for more, but never certain enough in terms or words to actually implicate the jerkasses if the young women try to complain or ask for further clarification. They usually end up looking as jealous and/or possessive harpies. I'm sure she'll put them in painful joint locks if she was ever physically present in any one of those confrontations.

And then I have to solemnly swear that even though I know how the method works, I never did anything like that. Never, you hear me? I have more class than that.
More memories belonging to Jemima Avery. Emma tries her best. Hermione and Camellia talks shop. Crowns of flowers. Whoever said it was better to have loved and lost had clearly not met Tom Riddle. Reciprocity. A thorny crown. Saturday, a week after Hermione’s last Hogsmeade visit. In which Hermione came across a group of prefects in her search for Tom.

The end of a beginning. (Not always in that particular order).

One of the longer chapters (12k-ish not including the End Notes). If anyone's made any bets, some people certainly are owed some free drinks. Next chapter might come up in three weeks or more, because I'm spent and I have a wee bit of writer's block right now. Delivered now according to the incoming votes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite her best efforts to find him on Thursday, he remained elusive. Even when she tried to find him on prefect patrols, Agatha only shook her head at Jemima, with more understanding than the Slytherin witch ever wanted to see in anyone’s face and it was why her own expression only become colder and more distant.

“Where is he?”

“Like I’ve said, he’d asked for the arrangement of his patrol for the day early this morning, including the partners. Andrew had to go out of his way to check with other prefects and it took some time, but it was done. He doesn’t need to come to any of the other meetings today.”

“Fine.”

“Jemima—”

“It was only a misunderstanding, Agatha. Truly, there’s no need to fret.”

‘-

As she looked up from the armchair of their common room, watching Jemima Avery enter, Emma had no idea why the responsibility fell on her.

Well, that wasn’t quite true. She knew. It was what good people and good friends do, wasn’t it? To help each other? She was helping Tom get his message across, even though she knew that he was
well beyond annoyed and had chalked it up as hopeless. As for Jemima, she could have directed her thoughts towards more productive endeavours if only she stopped chasing after Tom. The fact that she couldn’t really care less about the personal life of either one of them notwithstanding.

Still, she knew that Tom might be slow to anger, but once roused it was never pretty. It would be better if she can head off this accident before it happened. As her mother always say, managing House politics would be a good experience in handling people once she entered the Ministry.

“Jemima? A word with you, if you will?” The sixth-year asked.

“What is it?”

“Please, take a seat and make yourself comfortable.” Emma’s tone was only slightly different than her bored one, but she’d stopped overthinking about it too much.

“What is this about?”

Emma glimpsed the scroll she’d slipped in the middle of the book she was pretending to read. “Do you remember sometime last year when Tom said that you both need to concentrate on your studies.”

It was a good thing she’d asked Tom for details of his…encounters with Jemima.

The blonde’s lips curled into a smile. “You know he doesn’t really need to concentrate as such, Emma. It’s all very easy for him.”

“It’s not that easy for you.”

“It’s not as if I need to apply for the Ministry, do I?” She shrugged, uncaring. Her tone might even be lightly mocking, but Emma couldn’t care less. The brunette glanced at the note in her book again.

“What about the time he asked for space?”

Jemima leaned forward this time, confident and sultry, “You might not know it because I’ve never heard of anyone interested in you, but sometimes people just want you to chase them.”

Emma was beginning to think that Jemima had no idea how Tom actually reacted in her vicinity.

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“I don’t need to do that now. He’s relenting already.” She said with self-satisfaction. Cornflower blue eyes narrowed. “Unless…are you trying to push me off him because you’re interested?”

She couldn’t help but sniff at that. “Hardly.”

“Now that I think of it, he would be a great partner to someone trying to climb up the Ministry, isn’t he?” Jemima hadn’t stopped with her cold stare.

“Please, Jemima. He’d be one of the worst choices I can make for my husband.” She replied, with more frankness than she’d planned, simply because she didn’t see a faster way of getting Jemima out of her paranoid delusions.

It did the trick. Jemima sputtered. “What? Tom? Impossible! If you’re saying that he’s not your equal, your family is just some middling—”
“Jemima. We’re too alike.” Emma cut in.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve heard what some people say behind my back,” Cold. Unfeeling. “And I don’t think they’re wrong. I’d certainly like my partner to have more warmth than I do—I pity the children otherwise.”

Jemima relaxed again, “well, you can be rather frigid,” she answered carelessly. Emma thought that it was a good thing she didn’t care about what Jemima said.

“And Tom’s exactly the same.”

The blonde witch huffed this time. “He’s not. If he’s like that to you, that’s just because he doesn’t like you. There’s certainly pent up passion that I’m sure I can coax, given time.”

She shook her head. Oswin and Mordred could already see how Tom would prefer not to patrol with Jemima if he could help it. Even Ursula Greengrass had mused about it, and she usually preferred to stay far away from the conflict between the more prominent families. On the other hand, none of Tom’s other admirers seem to notice his forbearance with them either. It was not a uniquely Jemima problem, even if hers seemed to be the most significant in scope.

There really was no helping it. At least she’d tried. She can wash her hands off this entire affair with a good excuse now.

Emma simply closed her book and stood up.

“If you live to regret your choices, don’t blame me about it.”

Jemima found him in the library the next day during the evening, at their table. The blonde knew that she found him only because he wanted to be found. He closed the book he was reading the moment she approached. Blut: Eide und Eingeweide, Riten und Rituale—Johann Goerg Faust; she could barely read the title with its ornate Blackletter font; she certainly couldn’t comprehend it. He had stood up when her attention returned to him.

“Tom—”

“You’re a beautiful witch, Jemima Avery,” his voice was oddly formal, even if the way he frankly stated it made her blush in a way that many other boys barely affected her. “Which is why I have to remind you again to not touch me so casually. Otherwise, perhaps it is unwise for us to be too close.”

Her reflex was to deny. “I didn’t—”

“You know exactly what you did. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other things to do.” He’d picked up his book and walked away.

“Tom,”

He stopped, but didn’t turn around.

“Alright. I’ll…I’ll try to remember. Now, can we just read? Please?”

It got better after that.
Tom turned around and simply proceeded to ask her about her Potions class, apropos of nothing. Other than that, it would be her Charms class that he inquired about. There was none of yesterday’s distance or tension and he actually chose to sit next to her. She reminded herself to keep her hands to herself because she didn’t want everything to go back to what they were before. 

His usual hour had passed and he hadn’t started to move away. It was promising.

“Would you mind if I did some work here?”

“Oh, no, not at all.”

Tom did move to sit across her, but she couldn’t actually complain when she saw just how many scrolls he started unrolling or books he opened and stacked to his left. She was too happy to spend more time with him that she didn’t care how or why. If she couldn’t understand why anyone would want their free time going through these particular thick or boring books, well, she’d never really understood his taste in books.

If many of them seemed like legal books, it did not surprise her either since her father had many such things in his library too. It was probably a wizard thing. It was the same way when she recognised the letterhead of some of the scrolls—that was the Ministry’s letterhead. Those were probably copies of official documents or correspondences. Again, it wasn’t anything she hadn’t seen before in her father’s office. She decided to sporadically work on her homework, throwing questions at him whenever she was stumped.

It was all worth it in the end when he asked whether she’d like to have dinner.

“Right now?”

“Avery, in case you didn’t notice, this is already seven,” his answer was patient and she felt her cheeks warming. She’d lost track of time. It wasn’t something she’d expected since it was the first time it happened while she was doing homework.

“So…does this mean that we’re going to the Great Hall?”

He did not immediately answer, simply closing up and tying the scrolls he’d carried with him. “Actually, I was thinking of something less crowded, if you don’t mind. How does the Astronomy Tower sound to you? We can bring a picnic basket up there.”

“I didn’t know about that.” She murmured, in slight surprise. “Of course, I’m interested.”

It was faint, but she was certain he’d just smiled. “Good. We’ll head there, then.”

’-

It was Saturday that was the most memorable to Jemima.

It began with Vespasian was showing his appalling lack of manners yet again and she had to leave her own House table. (Her mind shied away over the unconcerned glances the rest of the wizards—her own Housemates—had shown). Really, it was no surprise that his family did not rise far, even if they’d been in Britain since before William the Conqueror! Really, if Tom had been there, she would’ve told him everything, and Starkey would have been reprimanded for being so disrespectful to his betters!

(See was resolutely not thinking about how Curie seemed to be ensconced firmly among Tom’s circle of friends. They’re working colleagues, that’s it. It’s no surprise that they have to sit together
Jemima had finally walked out of her dorm again once she had made sure she was presentable once more. She had stayed in bed for at least an hour and screamed into her pillow, silencing charms cast on her curtains, but that was that. She would not let herself be defeated by a mere hooligan. She would look down on him and ignore him the next time around. Yes, that’s it. Show him who you are.

To her surprise, Tom was in the Slytherin common room. He’d looked up the moment she entered.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, even as she took the silk handkerchief he pressed into her hands.

“Of course you are.” He said it smoothly, but the appeasement still annoyed her. It melted away once he touched her elbow and guided her to the couch and sat next to her. The blonde paused for a moment, slightly surprised. She got over it quickly enough and simply draped herself over half his back, chin on his shoulder. She smiled when he didn’t even resist this time. She knew his acceptance was just a matter of her persistence.

“You have to do something about Vespasian. He really doesn’t know his place.”

“Alright.”

“Alright? That’s it?”

“He’s reckless that he’ll make a mistake sooner or later that I’ll have to punish him for, it’s not important. What I do want to know is if you’d like to dine in Hogsmeade this afternoon?” He asked, his palm utterly relaxed when her hand held his. He did not even seem to notice the fourth-year witch staring at them from a couch in the corner instead of continuing her reading.

“Did you know that your friends backed Curie over…Rowle this morning?” She asked him.

“And you cared so much about them backing her over…Rowle, is it?”

She ignored his knowing tone even as the hand that gripped his twitched. “They really should be reminded about Slytherin House rules.”

“Avery, what are you trying to say? That you’re vexed that you can’t spend lunch with them, because you’d rather do that than spend it with me?”

“Of course not!” Jemima gasped, horrified. “How could you even think so?”

Her sputters changed to an indignant sound once she noticed he was actually grinning.

“Tom! You did that on purpose.”

“Yet you didn’t answer my question.”

She wanted to slap his arm for that, but he’d moved faster than she’d expected. But she didn’t care. He’d never done that before with her and she was just glad for the progress.

“Don’t be dense.”

He leaned forward slightly, his tone mesmerising. “So, what are you concerned about? Spending time with them isn’t something you prioritise over spending time with me, is it?”

Jemima nodded slowly because for all her still-lingering annoyance, she couldn’t think of a reason...
They met Clytemnestra in the common room when they were both dressed to go out. The sixth-year had greeted Jemima warmly, but her expression was pinched when her attention turned to Tom.

“Weren’t you adamant on accompanying Curie earlier?”

He squeezed Jemima’s hand but didn’t drop it. She squeezed back.

“I did.”

“And?”

“Well, I’ve discharged my responsibility, of course. What else?” Tom’s answer was unconcerned.

Clytemnestra nodded as she finally moved from the doorway. “I hope things are exactly as you say.”

“What happened?” Jemima asked.

Clytemnestra smirked. “Oh, nothing unexpected. Curie got her comeuppance. I knew there was something suspicious about her. Why else would—”

“—someone from the DMLE wish to talk to her.” Tom finished.

The sixth-year turned to him with a frown. He shook his head.

“More information is not always a good thing, Gamp. Avery needs to be above all this so no one can drag her in.”

The mood of the other Slytherin witch visibly cleared.

“Ah, alright. Good point. You’re going to Hogsmeade now, then?” She asked. Her tone was almost cheerful. Almost.

“Yes,” Tom answered without reservations.

Patricia had just walked out of the dorms and was staring at Jemima in disbelief, but she didn’t change her expression. Jemima knew she was smiling a little too wide and didn’t care. Let the other witches envy her—they should.

Jemima knew that Emma was just being too careful and old-fashioned about her relationship with Tom. The sixth-year was the sort of person to find out about the friends and acquaintances of anyone that was interested in her.

The whole day passed like a dream. They had gone out from the fireplace in Slughorn’s lab, slipping in through a method Tom would only smile and not explain about. She didn’t really care about the details—as long as he had it in hand, what does it matter?

The day was beautiful, the air crisp and even if the sky not completely clear, the clouds were wispy thin streaks. There was no crowd in Hogsmeade, since it was not an actual Hogsmeade weekend,
even if Jemima thought she could identify a few couples as actual Hogwarts students. They could meander down roads at a leisurely pace because there was no crowd to avoid or work around, taking their time sightseeing. If the way she did not let go of his hand amused him, she didn’t care; she simply did not want to let the go of this chance.

They visited small shops whenever it caught her fancy. He humoured her without the slightest bit of impatience, kept her company and talked about everything and nothing before they wandered away again. She rarely let go of his hand. He did leave on occasion when he thought he saw someone he knew, or when perhaps other Slytherin wizards. He’d always returned and she was the last person who would begrudge him for dealing with business once in a while.

They had lunch at a small French restaurant that she didn’t know existed. He listened to her and asked about her family, dark eyes never leaving her.

“All that’s lacking is an actual dance,” she commented.

His dark eyes were unreadable, but they did not leave her. Neither did he slip away when she held his hand firmly and drifted closer.

“Perhaps next week,” was his answer.

The two of them had only returned later in the afternoon, and if she heard from the House grapevine that Curie ended up in _St. Mungo’s_ somehow, she really couldn’t care the slightest. What on earth had she been involved with, anyway? Jemima sniffed. She knew the transfer student was up to no good.

“You did that on purpose!”

“I was walking on purpose. On this side. If you still happen to crash into me when you can see me coming some distance away, well, I don’t think I know of any potion that can help with your sense of balance and direction.” The Ravenclaw witch said with a flat voice. Her hair was as dull as her eyes and Jemima repressed a disgusted shudder that she was this close to her. How a few pureblood wizards were even interested in Curie in the first place was something she couldn’t fathom.

“You didn’t avoid me, on purpose! That’s just so rough and déclassée of you.” She insisted.

“You didn’t avoid me either, so I suppose we’re even there.”

“I thought I could be generous to you, to give you the opportunity to start anew,” she began, and it was true. “To make amends, and then you can start your work life with a clean slate.”

She’d just decided to give Curie the opportunity to explain her previous ignorance and to pay her respects now to the Avery heiress. Jemima had decided that she _could_ be generous to someone who would most probably end up as one of Tom’s professional staff (but she drew the line at ever inviting Curie home). It was all well and good to be clever, but you won’t go anywhere if you couldn’t even be polite and show people some respect that was their due—Jemima had always thought that Curie was generally dismissive of the pureblood institution itself.

“Thanks, but no thanks.” The other witch twitted mockingly.

“You—” she cut herself off with a shake of her head, holding her temper even as her anger rose hot and eager in her stomach. “Never mind. I thought I can be liberal to you, on account of Tom. Well, I _tried_. He can’t blame me if you fail to get any job after Hogwarts.”
No, she would make sure that no polite company would receive Curie, she was determined. Give her enough time and she’ll make sure that the upstart was not going to be attached among their Housemates either. Like an alert gardener, Jemima was going to pull the weed out before it took root and choked Tom’s glory with her own ambition. If any of the French wizards were interested in the transfer student, then all the better! They would scarcely see her again if she’d moved across the Channel.

Jemima was not the slightest bit surprised when Tom offered to take her dancing to London next Sunday.

Even if there was a certain tension in the air that had not lessened since Grindelwald’s attack on British soil, the wizarding world was nothing if not determined to show that he could not affect them. Restaurants were still open, laughter could be heard alongside music, even if they were sometimes a little sharp. If there was one thing the wizarding world did well, it was denial. They could certainly show Rome a thing or two on how to party when the world came down.

She’d doubts at first about going in and out of the wizarding world and into the muggle one, but Tom’s point was a good one.

Like many things, it began with a question.

“I don’t mind at all, Avery, but would you like higher odds of your parents’ acquaintances to see you?”

The blonde scoffed, pearl-pink nail tapping her lips. “Please, this is a Hogsmeade weekend, Tom. It’s not strange to see a Hogwarts student outside Hogwarts.”

“That only extends to Hogsmeade.” Tom pointed out. She sniffed.

“The plebeians can settle with Hogsmeade. Any one of us can go anywhere.”

She held his hand, placing it on her hip even as she laid hers on his shoulder. They stepped into the dance with the smooth flair of those who had the luxury to practise as much as they needed.

“But am I?” He asked.

She did not understand what he was asking, not until she caught a glimpse of Mrs. Selwyn passing with a few other women she could not make out clearly. Colour drained from her face—Tom took her elbow in no time and somehow pulled them both out of there. Out through the back door and right back into Diagon, all the way to the dilating brick wall that lead to the Leaky Cauldron.

Jemima did not complain about muggle places with their drab colours or less flamboyant clothes that day, letting Tom take the lead when it came to interacting with muggles. Of course, the fact that they caught looks of admiration in more than one place, like birds of paradies among rock pigeons certainly soothed her ego. He followed her easily when she pulled him onto the dance floor with her, warm hands holding her with the care of one handling a crystal vase.

“See how they watch you?” Tom had leaned forward, his voice as smooth as wine. “You’re the most beautiful woman here, and I’m the lucky wizard who walked in with her.”

She laughed to hide her blush and wonder. He was right. Here, she knew the men honestly
appreciated her beauty with no thought to her ancestry or family.

“Are you fishing for a compliment?” She asked back slyly.

“What if I am?”

Jemima smiled. It was hard to stop feeling pleased with herself when she felt like Selene whisking away Endymion—right now, no other witch could even see his elegant profile but her.

“Well, you are. You’re the most handsome man here.”

“That would mean we’re perfection itself, then.”

Yes, it was perfect. Now, if only the annoying Curie could just disappear somehow…or if Tom would just ignore her instead of giving her the time of day. The twit was acquiring airs! She didn’t even seem to realise who Jemima really was. Truly, she should warn Tom that to give Curie too many opportunities is to cause the Hogwarts transfer to forget who she is and where she came from.

There was a burning question inside her that needed answering, and the blonde Slytherin took the opportunity when the song they were dancing to slowed down.

“Tom?”

“Yes J-Avery?”

“You know that I love you, don’t you?” She didn’t let his almost-slip distract her.

His smile was more of a smirk. “I know.”

She swatted his shoulder. “I’m serious! I do, you know?”

“Like I said, I’m quite aware of it, and I’ll thank you for the honour.”

He took her hand when she was gearing up for a second swat and kissed the back before returning it to his shoulder. The witch was distracted for a few seconds before she shook her head.

“But do you?”

“Do I what?”

She tightened her jaw and met his gaze head on. If she tried beating around the bush, he would only dodge just as adeptly. He was as Slytherin as they come.

“Love me?”

“Of course I do. Do you need to ask?” He replied.

“Beyond anyone else?”

Jemima wished her voice hadn’t wavered at the end, that she could be as calm and composed as she’d always been in Hogwarts when she was talking to anyone else. Anyone else but him. His gaze was warmer then.

“That goes without saying.”
A twirl and several more turns later, she pulled herself closer to him.

“Kiss me, then.”

“Excuse me?”

“You love me, right? Prove it.”

It was the Wednesday after the second grand Society meeting that had her and the Knights turning the Shack upside down (not that anyone even call it that now). It was just after Hermione’s perfectly normal lunch with her friends, when she decided to leave the table first—as not everyone ate as fast as she did. Not far from the doorway, she caught a glimpse of Tom in the corridor at the other side. It was nothing she would be concerned about. Just one of his ‘oh-so-accidental’ encounter with her.

Just as she stepped out of the room, she felt something fall lightly at the top of her head.

Turning, Tom’s mysterious smirk was the first thing she saw. She patted her head and felt something satiny in her hand. Hermione pulled the item on her hair—

—and found crown of roses. It was pink and orange like the first blush of youth and as sweet in scent.

“You made another living flower crown?” She asked in disbelief. “When did you even find the time?”

“I’d be lying if I said it was.” Tom answered. Seeing her raised eyebrow prompted him to explain further as she’d started walking. “Naïve transfiguration from paper, Hermione.”

“Oh!” Well. It wasn’t the first thing to cross her mind. She eyed him sceptically. “What’s the occasion, then?”

“Occasion?”

“For this?” She raised the garland slightly. Hermione was determinedly not paying attention to the students who were slowing down to watch.

“I simply wanted to,” was his answer.

Now that was a load of horse shit but Hermione had a little more tact now than she did back in her Hogwarts days so—

“That’s not the only reason, is it?” Hermione asked back.

“Well, she had a little more tact. She’s not a diplomat here. Nobody’s promising any miracles.

Tom came to a stop and she drifted to a pause too.

“Sometimes, things are as they seem, Hermione.”

“And this is not one of those times,” she added just as easily. It was hard to hold back the shrewd smile from her lips, so she didn’t even try.

“Why not?”
He took a step forward. Hermione simply tilted her head slightly and furrowed her brows, wondering what he was up to. *Why was he raising his hand to—fix my collar? Is my tie skewed?*

Perhaps she was getting a little too inured to his presence that she’d only wondered if he was about to kiss her when they were but a hand’s breadth away. Yet another voice distracted both of them and Tom drew back.

“I had hoped I wouldn’t encounter the two of you for a while.”

Black hair flowing down her back like silk and eyes as sharp and dark as polished obsidian, Camellia Lee was definitely not amused.

“Ah, Miss Lee. I commend you on your quick lunch. Very efficient of you.” Tom greeted.

“And I can’t exactly commend you on your latest action to—” the sixth-year flapped her hand rapidly while grasping for words, “—to play reuniting shepherd and weaver girl where any passing student *can see.* This is not even the seventh of seventh month, for goodness’ sakes.”

The beautiful Hufflepuff was giving them a particularly annoyed stare.

“I’m sorry?” Tom asked (sounding not even remotely sorry). It might be why Camellia’s cheeks were now rose-hued and why she was taking another long breath. There was a muttered word or two in Chinese before Camellia bit her lip.

Hermione’s forehead crease was mostly because her reflex was to memorise any words that she didn’t understand to look it up later, never mind that it wasn’t even a language she mastered—

“Your—your *courtship rituals.* I thought of checking before you decide to—to exhibit something I’d rather not have to explain to the younger years.” Camellia’s expression told all.

“There is no exhibiting! We were just chatting!” Hermione said defensively, before she realised that they weren’t completely clear from view from the Hall and she could already see some idiots rubbernecking—*oh Morgana’s lingerie, Tom!* Tom had already stood too close to her before…she glared at him because it was definitely *his fault.* It was intentional. She just *knew it.*

“And we’ll continue *chatting* somewhere else.” The brunette firmly nodded, paying no regard to Tom who was definitely holding back laughter.

Hermione thought she saw Camellia releasing a small sigh. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

The Ravenclaw started to march away, deciding that she didn’t really care if Tom would decide to keep up with her or not.

“Nice crown, Hermione.”

Camellia’s comment was a little abrupt, random. Perhaps it was nerves—Hermione’s own nerves were certainly acting up.

Hermione turned back merely to reply to that. “Thanks.”

“Is no one going to mention the fact that I made it?” Tom casually volleyed the question. “It is certainly not an easy object to craft.”

The two witches continued on their separate ways and determinedly ignored him. Camellia’s
cheeks were ruddier in colour and Hermione didn’t want to know what hers look like.

On Thursday in the Advanced Ancient Runes class, Hermione finally realised what had been stewing at the back of her head yesterday. She approached the Hufflepuff witch she’d met often recently with a friendly smile on her face.

“Camellia!”

“Yes?”

Hermione took no heed of the slight wariness. The witch, after all, still walked out from the huddle of Hufflepuffs she’d been in the middle of to talk to her.

“I’ve been trying to figure this out since yesterday but I don’t think I’ve figured out heads or tails out of it. What was the shepherd and weaver comment about? I don’t think I know—”

“What? Oh! It’s nothing,” there was exasperation but it wasn’t directed towards Hermione as she rubbed the bridge of her nose and looked away for a moment. “It was just an expression, which I now realise isn’t exactly English. Perhaps I should have mentioned Romeo and Juliet instead.”

Hermione couldn’t help wincing at that. “Please, don’t. I’d take the shepherd and weaver, whoever they are, over them.”

Camellia paused and looked around Hermione curiously. It was a little overt that Hermione couldn’t help checking over her shoulder too.

“Looking for something?” The brunette asked.

“I’m surprised that your ‘other half’ didn’t come along with you.”

Hermione could practically hear the quotation marks in the words—as if the other witch’s determinedly bland expression wasn’t enough of a clue. She rolled her eyes. “Thankfully, he actually has other things to do. This means he’s not up to something annoying yet again, since idle hands are the devil’s workshop and all that.”

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop?” Camellia wondered.

“Yes, you haven’t heard of that?”

That lead to a short detour on Hermione’s attempt at explaining that particular saying. It proceeded to several other idioms as Camellia mentioned a couple of others she’d found bizarre and hadn’t managed to make heads or tails of. That segued to the Old English phrases often used when you’re writing in futhorc and some of the obscure phrases Hermione had found convenient to memorise to create wards with.

Why? Because not many people are that familiar with them which meant it would take more effort to break down. This is why using more than one language for your wards is also a good idea, and no, using futhark for the basics doesn’t count.

Camellia had leaned forward at this point, her eyes glittering with interest.

“That’s an interesting approach.”

“It’s not mine, it’s Luna’s” Hermione had replied without thinking. That was, until she froze up and
felt the echoing loss and sadness descending again as she busied herself with unrolling her last ward design on the nearest empty table.

The Hufflepuff observed her quietly, and when she hadn’t said anything after a moment or two, she simply went back to her table and then carried her work over to the table next to Hermione’s that she’d joined together.

“If you didn’t play with the phrases and languages, how did you strengthen your wards? Professor Gildenstern said yours is the strongest ward by miles,” Hermione asked, curious.

“Geography, of course, along with geometry. That is the basics of geomancy.”

The Hufflepuff witch unfurled her design and Hermione gasped at the scale of the plan (an estate) and how the components are interlocked together like a finely constructed clockwork. Any single tree, if old enough, was included into the ward, its vitality leveraged to contribute strength. On and on it went, and even the elevation carefully noted, considering that the map of the area warded included contour lines and other topographic details. As Hermione hadn’t known that many serious geomancers among the warders she knew, it piqued her interest.

“This is really fascinating. But I do have to wonder, this style of ward construction doesn’t seem like an easy thing to construct for small spaces or locations—not a lot of anchors involved like trees or rivers and hills.”

Unexpectedly, the sixth-year chuckled. “You don’t pull your hits, do you, Hermione?”

“Um, what? What did I say?” It surprised her.

“Simply that it’s a direct hit—one of the few weaknesses I have in wardcrafting.”

“Oh, that was rather impolite of me, wasn’t it? Sorry, it was just the first thing that came to my mind when I was checking out your style. Your work is very good, honest! It just something that struck me as I was reading…”

Neither of them took notice of the Hufflepuffs that had migrated their seats around both of them now, or the other enthusiasts who gravitated towards them as their discussion piqued the interest of others (if those people can find some spare space that hadn’t been taken by Hufflepuffs). Among those from the other houses was unsurprisingly Pendleton. What did surprise her was Verrault, who had drifted in too. She kept forgetting that he was friends with Camellia. Professor Gildenstern weaved around everyone as usual.

It was an intellectually invigorating class, right until the end as she stood up to leave for lunch. The Hufflepuffs cheerily waved her goodbye, to her surprise, while Camellia simply managed a polite nod. Somewhere near the door Tom was waiting, and when she’d walked up to him, she felt something fall on top of her head yet again.

Hermione only raised one unimpressed eyebrow at him.

“Is that a flower crown again?”

“What do you think?”

“This better not be a crown of red roses or I’m taking it off my head right now and I’ll burn it outside.” She warned. Like hell was she going to accept being the ‘queen of his love’. That level of bullshit was among the things that gave her goosebumps, right up there with anything related to Romeo and Juliet (it didn’t help that Camellia had just mentioned it).
He laughed and shook his head. “No, it’s not a crown of red roses. Magnolias and marigold, actually, with some hyacinth of a similar shade.”

Ah, magnolia. No wonder the scent was so pleasant.

“Tom, if you keep doing the same thing over and over, it would lose its impact, you know?”

She had half a mind to take it off and toss it at him this time so he could see what his high-handedness was going to cost him (the attention people gave her because of her entanglement with him aggravated her). Yet something in his eyes stopped her. Perhaps it was because she was all-too-aware now that his glibness, like his perfect student self, were adjustments to a world that did not accept a muggleborn Slytherin. They were adaptations to a world that demanded a perfect pureblood prince in its stead even before he knew who he was.

It was probably overly strangely sentimental of her, but she didn’t have the heart to do anything close to rejecting him harshly. Kill him, maybe, under the worst-case-scenarios of him somehow staying unchanged in his descent into megalomania, but she would still not be callous to him. She’d managed to see fragments of humanity inside him and she can’t unsee them now.

“Why do you keep doing this?” Hermione asked instead.

Perhaps there was something in how she said it, or how she had found her calm again at that moment. He acted as if she did something interesting as he considered his words with care.

“Well, Hermione, I’m touched that you appreciate my efforts so very much.” His tone was dry, but she stopped herself from reacting instantly, to take a careful breath to calm down and simply wait —she didn’t even roll her eyes or glare. No words she said when he pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear and simply stared at him with expectation.

“Perhaps, I am simply desperate to receive something in return. Since I’ve yet to receive any, I thought it meant that my efforts are not enough and I just have to keep trying.”

She almost snorted. There was no way that it was his actual purpose. No way.

“You want…” She shook her head in disbelief. A crown of flowers? Ridiculous. Yet wasn’t reciprocity one of the principles of gifting? And she knew he grew up with the Slytherin favour-trading system. This was actually rather straightforward compared to that.

She eyed him, but like usual, it was hard to read his emotions beyond what he allowed people to read.

“I see you’re still unconvinced. I’m sure I can come up with something more interesting for you tomorrow.” He replied with unphased optimism.

With that, Tom unexpectedly left Advanced Ancient Runes class without her, leaving one gaping Hermione behind him.

’-

“This is ridiculous and it has to stop.” Hermione stated firmly during Friday ADADA class.

“I’m sorry?” The Hufflepuff she had been fighting before puffed up with indignation before Abraxas could say anything.

“It’s not you, Fidelis,”
“I say…”

She sighed. The tall sixth-year still with a layer of baby fat over his face wasn’t a bad fighter and she didn’t want to insult him, especially since he was also a decent classmate in two of her other classes (and someone she saw in multiple classes of hers was a rare thing in itself).

“Do you see this?” the witch pointed at the flower garland resting on her head, gladiolus in a riot of colours with the yellow trumpets of another flower interleaved.

“Um. Where do you get daffodil with the coming winter? And how did you get that white star mark in the middle.”

“I don’t know! And that’s not important,” she waved quickly.

“But really, it takes effort to grow that these days—”

“It’s just Tom. And he really needs to stop.”

“Tom Riddle gave you the flower crown?” Fidelis Derwent asked in surprise before he suddenly searched his pockets for quill and parchment scrap. “With all those spring flowers? Which greenhouse did he grew all of them in? I want to check and take notes.”

“Ah, Tom didn’t grow any of them. But when he does need fresh flowers out of season, then the person of interest would be Annabelle Palmer.” Abraxas joined the conversation effortlessly with the social fluidity of a popular student. He frowned in the direction of Hermione’s head. “I don’t think that’s daffodils, though…”

“Oh, I know her. She’s in Advanced Herbology too,” the Hufflepuff nodded as he put his quill away. “I didn’t think she was that good, though. Slytherins don’t usually like Herbology.”

“Well, she is muggleborn,” Abraxas commented.

“I’m muggleborn,” Hermione’s retort was waspish.

The blond only nodded at that. “Yes, exactly. You’re all weird.”

Well, she couldn’t exactly argue with that. Hermione slipped her wand back to its holster as Fidelis was once again staring at her flower crown with interest.

“So, are these actually real flowers or not? The colours are unbelievable, but they’re very realistic otherwise. I can’t tell if it’s transfigured or not.” The Hufflepuff squinted as he drifted closer. She waved her hands in front of his face.

“Fidelis, focus! This is nothing new. He’s been giving me flower crowns for several days.” Hermione corrected. That caused him to frown in thought.

“Flower crowns? Well, that’s lovely, but for what?”

“You’re really not in touch with the school news, are you?” Abraxas looked down his nose.

“But seriously, Abraxas,” Hermione cut in before the Malfoy heir riled up their Hufflepuff classmate. “The attention even this crown gets in the middle of Advanced Defence class is annoying.”

“Well, you can always take it off?” Fidelis suggested.
She scoffed and shook her head. “What, and let social pressure define what I can and cannot wear? I think not!”

He opened his mouth for a moment in a wordless surprise. Abraxas only snorted but did not look surprised at all.

“You can always blind anyone who stared. Maybe use some slime spells right at their face. You know, plain old sand would also work—you can get Robbe to tell you his favourite spells for that under threat of extreme pain.” Abraxas suggested in return.

“Abraxas!”

The Slytherin shrugged, impervious to stares from his two other classmates. “What? This is Advanced Defence class. Any attacks are fair game on free-for-all fights like now.”

“No, I’ve got it. If Tom is really expecting some reciprocation for all these gifts, I’ll give him the most ridiculous flower crown I can come up with, mark my words…”

As Hermione continued muttering about all the things she was going to pile into the flower crown, Fidelis Derwent, generally rather well known for having a good head on his shoulders, slowly but steadily edged away from the two of them.

Abraxas had sputtered and complained back. “A flower crown! Surely, Hermione, you don’t think —”

“He’s been making a spectacle all this time! I’ll show him spectacle.”

‘-

Hermione didn’t know who first spread the news, but she was only half awake when she took breakfast on Saturday morning when the first excited passer-by dropped themselves right across her. She’d only slept at two. The brunette barely registered the wizard in front of her as she squinted against even the faint glow of the morning sky seen from the Great Hall’s grand windows.

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“You’re planning to give Tom Riddle something today?”

“What if I do?” She asked, her voice sharp with the general hatred of cheer of someone stuck between lucidity and sleep.

“Um, nothing. I was just curious—thanks!”

As the other student walked away, she pulled herself back towards her breakfast without a care.

’-

Hermione did end up making a flower crown…for a given value of ‘flower’.

On Friday night, she casually pulled a seat over to the Ravenclaw living room fireplace and threw some floo powder from her dorm’s common pot and tried calling several establishments.

The beauty of the wizarding world compared to the non-magical one of this era was that practically everything can be had by owl order. For the stuff you need to get immediately, there was always
the floo. Even if all Hogwarts’ fireplaces apart from those at the faculty offices/quarters could only manage floo-calls instead of floo-travel, it was enough. An owl sent to fly immediately wouldn’t take long to reach Hogwarts on the same day.

“Garthener’s Apothecary?”

The green flames crackled as a young witch shook off her distraction and turned to Hermione, confirming her question and asking her what she needed.

“Excellent! I’m looking for freshly cut saffron crocus, do you stock them? If not, I’ll take any store you can reference…”

Saffron* meant beware of excess.

*Here, it meant the flower but only the vivid red threads of the stigma and maybe the stamen, but certainly not the petals for some reason.

It was a message the Ravenclaw could absolutely get behind when it came to Tom Riddle, which was why she received a box of the flowers within an hour through owl-mail. She carried it to her room and poured the contents into a bucket to turn them into the base for a garland. It wasn’t a wooded plant so there was no way for her to create a living flower crown. A more mundane sap mixture she’d also ordered (generally known as florist’s glue in the wizarding world) worked just fine.

Spiky conical heads of the teasel for (aptly enough) misanthropy followed, with the mini-pudding bowls of red and burgundy flowers of the mountain laurel for ambition. Add a few carmine hundred-petal roses for pride and she was all set. She was rather proud of herself.

Oh, wait, she was certain she had one more thing…bird’s-foot trefoil. It took a while to get the clustered yellow flowers to bud and bloom from the simple plant cuttings she had, but it worked. Revenge.

Hmm, the trefoil looked familiar, though. Where have I seen them recently? Never mind. It didn’t really matter.

…on the other hand, it occurred to her only after she was done that her entire work was basically one elaborate personal critique. The teasels and rose branches meant it was already half a crown of spikiness and annoyance. An insult, no matter how sweet smelling, was still going to be an insult.

With a sigh, she resigned herself to making a second crown, smaller than the first, with the intent of plopping it directly over the first. That would blunt its critical content, right? The Ravenclaw witch had ordered more flowers and plants than she needed, simply because she hadn’t been sure which ones she would end up using in the end. She picked up some leafy greens from her assortment of floo-order vegetation, but couldn’t quite concentrate on it immediately.

The way Lakshmi was staring at her handiwork was not helping (why she wasn’t asleep at midnight, like Lucretia and Eugenie, was something Hermione had stopped wondering about).

“Hermione, what is that?”

“A flower crown.”

Her dormmate raised one thick unimpressed eyebrow. “Do you have any plans to crucify somebody?”
Hermione did a double take and laughed when she realised it could look like a thorny crown, albeit with some flowers, from a certain point of view.

“Um, no. It’s a gift.”

Lakshmi was still staring sceptically at Hermione’s most recent creation as she slipped down from her own bed and sashayed in her silk nightgown to her friend.

“With friends like you, who needs enemies?”

“It’s not that bad!” The brunette defended. She pulled the garland closer when Lakshmi tried to touch it. “I’m not cursing anyone with this! You know, the whole ‘a pox on all your houses’, last words, and the like.”

“Darling, if the best compliment you can give about your gift is ‘at least I’m not wishing plague on you’, you have a problem.” Lakshmi drawled, still trying to poke the crown that Hermione had passed to her left hand and kept far away from her friend. Lakshmi stretched over Hermione’s shoulder to reach it; she simply leaned forward and extended her left arm as far as she could over her desk, far from her dormmate’s grasp.

Still, that comment was…annoyingly relevant to the issue.

“Look, never mind, I was planning to make two, anyway.” She finally said.

Her dormmate only shook her head before walking back to her bed, her effort to appease her curiosity with a hands-on experience failing. Yet Hermione was pretty sure she heard Lakshmi muttering something about how Riddle had bizarre tastes in lovers before she returned to her bed and novel.

So, Hermione went back to her salad green, err, patience dock.

The rather unassuming plant called patience dock representing (obviously) patience seemed like a good overarching theme to wrap everything else with. A little patience wouldn’t hurt Tom’s ambition and can temper the possible excesses. (She went with the leaves of patience dock instead of its flowers because…do you know how hard it is to find fresh flowers of something considered as an ordinary weed plant when you’re entering winter? She didn’t have enough time to go through the whole re-blooming it again. Besides, the meaning was the same for the whole plant).

Then, she added white sprigs of common laurel flowers for glory and velvet purple tropical orchids from the angraecum genus for royalty to cater to his apparent obsession of making his mark as the Heir of Slytherin. There’s also the fan-like young leaves of the palm tree for victory. The yellow bells of the crown imperial lily species that always grew together in a circle as if for a crown, unsurprisingly representing power.

Glory. Royalty. Victory. Power. All these are yours if you would have but a little patience.

There. That’s certainly a soft enough landing after the thorny flowers, right? Right.

“-You’re serious when you said you’re making him a gift.” Lakshmi glanced sidewards at Hermione, who hadn’t hidden the boxes she placed next to her plate at breakfast.

“Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?” A random thought popped into her head—why was Lakshmi even awake this early? She hated doing that on schooldays, much less on a Saturday. It
was weird.

Lakshmi nodded. “Right. Wait, let me find some people first and don’t start without me.”

“What?”

Her dormmate didn’t wait for Hermione’s answer, jasmine-scented hair swishing behind her as she stood up from the table. There was something to Lakshmi’s words that made Hermione second-guess her usual habit of just assertively marching to the Slytherin table whenever she needed to find Tom. There was that pricking at the back of the neck that she never ignored, the phantom ants running under her skin and told her that she was being watched.

There were Ravenclaws some distance away from her on the table who seemed a little too intent on their breakfast when her glance wandered in their direction. Same with some of the Hufflepuffs she saw—Lakshmi had gone over and greeted the Head Girl, and Agatha waved at Hermione once their gaze met. The seventh-year was unbelievably perky that Hermione held back the urge to wince as she smiled and waved back. Even when she wasn’t lacking sleep, she wasn’t that cheerful in the morning.

When she was trying to look towards the Slytherin table, she found Tom had been looking in her direction.

“Oh, isn’t that sweet?”

She whipped her head around and saw Julia sitting casually next to her, picking a muffin for her breakfast.

“Julia?”

Since when had she been there? She must’ve been rather sleep-deprived to not notice her arrival.

“He’d been content to just watch you that he’d ignored Malfoy and Rosier at least once.” The other brunette grinned in amusement before she turned to Hermione, interest clear on her face. “Oh! Are you going to go to the Slytherin table now?”

The phantom tingling was still at the back of her neck.

“Oh, no. I don’t think so.”

“With that, Hermione fled to the library, boxes in tow.

The problem with planning to gift someone is that, you have to be at the same place with them to hand the gift.

This was a stupidly obvious realisation to have in the library, half an hour later after she’d managed some random reading in and generally doing nothing. Yet on the other hand, she knew why she didn’t come to the realisation earlier. It was because it had seemed that she’d been tripping over Tom every time she was simply trying to get around Hogwarts in the last month and more that some part of her had implicitly assumed that anywhere she was, he’d show up in no time anyway. Which was a foolish assumption to make when she didn’t know how Tom’s social schedule looked like recently—with all these inter-house spats, she could imagine the prefects are calling to have all hands on deck.
She sighed, rummaged her bag for his tie and cast a locator spell before she started walking.

‘-

A strange feeling of unfamiliarity rose in her mind, the very opposite of déjà vu when she walked down an open corridor lined with plush floral carpet and several doors before reaching the study area. She didn’t think she’d even been here before, during her first time around. Only later did she realise why. Hermione had passed the walkway before in the 1990s, but it had been a very different place. The doors were all dusty and locked, and the carpet rolled up and stored, only the old stones of Hogwarts visible. The multitude glass lanterns decorated with various little dragons that occasionally preened, climbed around or simply slept hadn’t been there either. There were only functional torches.

The corridor had been utilitarian, the rooms closed up. She’d asked Madam Pince once if they were store rooms or restoration rooms for books similar to those she’d seen in monasteries before. Madam Pince’s smile was bittersweet.

“That would be the ones higher up or hidden behind the main walls. No, Hermione dear, those are simply meeting rooms.”

“Really? Why aren’t they open, then?”

“You’ve seen the open study area, right?”

“Yes?”

“Is it ever full?”

“Well, yes, when we’re approaching end of term tests.”

The older witch was staring in the direction of the closed-up doors, clearly not visible from the front desk, but she doubted that her mind was even in the present.

“And yet the open study area and the smaller carrells suffices. There is no need to provide access to the private study rooms.”

“Madam Pince?”

The librarian shook her head, and the younger witch wondered if Madam Pince had always looked that old. “Once, Hermione, at the end of the term, the open study area could not adequately seat two houses, much less four.”

“Once opening the private study rooms are simply a matter of needing space instead of unnecessary luxury.”

She did not quite understand it then, but she understood it better now as she made her way through the bookshelves teeming with students short and tall, young and old. The current Hogwarts had numbers that her school didn’t have—at least twice that. Young Hermione had been too excited with the wizarding world, impressed with its wonders and novelty to have seen its cracks.

Now, she merely paused for a while to shake the memories away. She was here now and change was hers to create. There was no need for her to dwell on old future memories.

‘-
She was feeling rather silly when she found out that Tom was also at the library, simply in the public study area. As it was Saturday morning, it was still rather empty. He was talking to a couple of prefects, the first that she could recognise was certainly Andrew, the Head Boy, while the other was a witch, a Gryffindor prefect she didn’t recognise. Since the next sixth-year prefects were the French duo, and the fifth years were the tall, oddly-familiar-looking ADADA duellist what’s-her-name (her name escaped Hermione right now) and the duellist Raj, she suspected that the unknown witch was a seventh-year, Crouch’s partner.

“…but that is the issue. We’ve solved it among ourselves, but it doesn’t end there. First, animosity takes time to die down, and second, we’ll need to actively watch over and redirect the younger years.” Tom was speaking to the other two prefects.

“I see what you mean,” the witch murmured.

Andrew only sighed as he rubbed his forehead.

“Daedalus, what do you think?”

Hermione did a double-take because she couldn’t see him anywhere. That was until she tried checking the next table. Sure enough, Daedalus was slumped over his arms.

“Daedalus.”

“I heard you the first time around Andrew. Merlin.” He picked his head up but rested it against a hand, his eyes still half-lidded “What I think? The same with what Frederica said earlier. We really need to do a circuit in our respective Houses, talk to the younger years, cajole and chat with them. More work on our plate, yes, but I really don’t see a faster way.”

As Daedalus gave his opinion, Tom had already stood up from his chair and walked to Hermione who had paused at the other end of the long oval table. When his eyes alight on the boxes in the crook of her arm, he actually lit up.

“Are those for me?”

“What do you think?” She asked back flatly. Hermione sighed and put them down. She picked the larger one and opened it. “Well, I have two, so don’t get disappointed with the first. I have to make it since some things are important to say.”

The most dominant detail of the flower plant were the crimson saffron threads—be careful of excess.

After that were the prickly teasel heads and rose thorns. Red thousand-petaled roses and mountain laurel wove in and out, with the occasional yellow of the trefoil peeking out from behind the grander flowers. Be careful of excessive misanthropy, pride, ambition and revenge. She knew he understood it because the second time his expression met hers, it was rather sardonic.

“Consider me duly warned.”

“You don’t have to wear it if you don’t want to.” She said quickly. “I only needed to make a point.”

“Oh, but I do. Please,” he said, and he lowered his head in front of her with all the dignity of a king at his coronation. She bit her lip and acceded to his request, placing it carefully on his head. She was aware that the other prefects had paused their conversation and was now watching them with interest.
“Now, for the second one,” she stated, opening the other box. It was slightly smaller than the first. This was a more subdued garland that was predominantly green due to the patience dock (for patience). The young palm leaves spreading up gave it a dimension of height that the first lacked. Then white sprigs of the common laurel, purple of angraecum orchids and yellow imperial lily. She didn’t miss the way his lips had curled at the corners when he’d seen the plants and blossoms she’d included.

*Have patience and you’ll find victory, glory, royalty and power.*

Tom stacked the second box on top of the first with interest, observing the size difference. “Are they unequal sizes so they can be worn together, stacked?”

Hermione sighed. She supposed she should already be used to how not much get past him.

“Yes.”

“Well, give me my second crown, then,” he said, as insufferable as any royalty.

That was when Hermione heard Emma’s warning.

“Hermione, watch out!”

The Ravenclaw leapt back instinctively; she’d dropped the second flower crown in that moment. Her peripheral vision caught an arriving group to her left, but it was one figure that ran ahead of the others that her attention was focused on. Her second reflex was to raise a shield, which deflected the first and second spells aimed at her. Daedalus ducked with a protesting ‘hey!’ as he dodged a stray spell. Her attacker didn’t seem to heed him.

“Back away.”

“Avery,” Hermione was unimpressed even if Jemima Avery was pointing her wand out at her.

Her even mood allowed her to channel her inner Daphne a little.

“How do you do? I don’t think I’ve seen you around much.” She asked back, flippant.

“I’ve tolerated you long enough now, and it’s clear that you’ll keep grasping beyond your due if I don’t stop you. This stops here.”

Hermione couldn’t help the surprised chuckle, even if she turned it quickly into a snort. *What on earth is she talking about?*

Emma came up shortly, with Agatha and Gamp.

“Jemima,” Emma warned. She herself held down the arm of the sixth-year witch next to her and ensured that they still kept their distance.

“Stay out of this, Emma. This needs to be settled between me and Curie.” Avery stated.

The Ravenclaw only raised an eyebrow at that pronouncement, shield held fast in front of her. From another direction came Eugenie and Augusta *(ah, I remember her name! Yes, Augusta). The Gryffindor witch looked very interested and not the slightest bit about to interfere; she’d taken a seat on one of the tables nearby and sat down instead.

“What is it, really?” Hermione asked.
“You have to lay down the rules firmly for her, Tom. Tell her.”

Tom had been quite content to stand to the side until his Housemate mentioned him. He did move forward, but Hermione could recognise reluctance in how he didn’t hurry.

“I have no idea what you mean, Avery.”

“You don’t love her,” the blonde stated, with all the weight of judgement.

Eugenie might widen her eyes, and Andrew confused but unable to look away, but neither Tom nor Hermione even blinked at that statement.

“Well, *duh.*” Hermione answered out of reflex. Tom’s cough was *definitely* a surprised chuckle he immediately hid.

“He loves me,” Avery said.

Hermione let out a burst of laughter—at least before she covered her mouth with her hands. “Sorry. I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

That clearly wasn’t the reaction Avery had expected, since she was momentarily stunned.

“Tom, tell her!” She insisted. “Tell her who you actually love.”

Tom met Hermione’s gaze, his expression one of amusement. The Ravenclaw almost couldn’t stop her another burst of laughter from surfacing, especially since it was hard not to think of Tom as *cute* when he was wearing her flower crowns on his head. Even if he wore it with the dignity fit for any king. She bit her lip hard instead.

“I love no one, actually.” Tom said.

“What—”

“Do you know what love is, Avery?” He didn’t let his Housemate speak. “Mrs. Cole showed me some very enlightening examples of love. Take little Johnny, somewhere around eight right now. His mother was a parlour maid who fell in love with the young master of the house. He promised that he’ll marry her and take her away. Now, guess what happens when she’s *enceinte*? His parents threatened to disinherit him and he backed down out of fears of being penniless. They shuffle her off somewhere. She’s broken-hearted and nine months later, voila, little Johnny is left at Wool’s Orphanage, not far from either of his parents’ homes.”

Hermione almost couldn’t believe that Tom was going to be rather blunt about his background and she was sure no one else was either. Daedalus was sitting up and gaping wordlessly while Andrew looked awkward, fidgety with cheeks a brighter shade than usual as he stared somewhere in the direction of the library’s tall windows.

Also, since when was Lakshmi here, bright-eyed, and why was she *taking notes?*

“Off the top of my head, I can remember at least four ‘little Johnnys’ in my vicinity. Then, there’s the little Millies, whose parents fell in love with each other, eloped, fell into poverty and now their mother is reduced to walking the streets. Sometimes the father is dead or gone, and at other times, he is the mother’s procurer.” He dismissed it without another thought. “No matter. The end is still the same. They give up little Millie for a better life at Wool’s. There are other cases, but I’m sure you all get the idea by now.”
Emma was silently making some rather forceful signs with her arm. Probably to get Tom to move the hell on from the current topic, her expression impressively unchanged even if there were high spots of colour on her cheeks. Augusta looked impressed. Eugenie was bright red next to the Gryffindor and determinedly not looking at anyone. Gamp was…pale? Wait, why is the Slytherin sixth-year even pale?

“So, no, really. I don’t consider it a praise to tell someone I love them. Based on what I’ve seen, it’s more like a curse.” Tom said, before looking up towards Hermione.

“What I do consider a worthy promise, is to fight to stay by someone’s side and never let go. To help them fight, through blood, battle and banishment, and still not leave.”

Hermione was unable to stop feeling flattered even when she knew he said it for show. Well, she reasoned to herself, he is a natural charmer.

“But that is love,” the comment flew from Eugenie, who was embarrassed that her thoughts had slipped her mouth. Tom didn’t seem to mind her interruption and shook his head.

“No, that’s loyalty and honour.”

“But you said you love me!” Avery exclaimed, turning around and stepping in front of Tom.

“I expressively did not, and I’d dare to swear that on my magic.”

His statement rang clearly in the room, and Hermione was not surprised at the gasps she heard—she was sure hers was one of them. It was not an oath one makes lightly and it was easy for her to believe him.

“But—”

“Besides, love does not stop people from leaving or from using others—if that is all that you ask of me, I pity you.”

The blonde’s breathing faltered, growing harsh from the hit. Hermione winced; not all wounds are physical.

“Are you taking back your words now?” Her voice had grown more wretched, her tone raw and bleeding.

Tom shook his head, his slight bafflement visible by all.

“You still don’t understand, do you? I’ve never said I loved anyone.”

“You did! You said so to me!”

Tom stepped away from her carefully, easing sideways and Hermione knew instinctively that he was heading her way. “Whoever said that to you was not me.”

The blonde gasped, staggered as one who had been shot through the heart. The Slytherin witch turned, following Tom’s movements, keeping the two of them face-to-face. Jemima reached out to him and he slipped away from her touch with such a light move that Avery might’ve mistook it for an accident.

Hermione didn’t. She knew how Tom moved by now. He had subtly dodged the blonde.

“It was you. We spent the day and danced the night away.” She insisted.
“And when was it, Avery?”

“Last weekend. Are you pretending now?” Her voice was raised.

Tom glanced at the other prefects with a confused countenance. Andrew was the first one to speak up, a frown on his face.

“That’s impossible, Jemima.”

She whipped her head around and the scorn clearly audible in her voice. “Oh, you can’t possibly be making excuses for him, Andrew!”

The Hufflepuff was too sympathetic. He did not raise his voice at all in the face of her tantrum; it was kind and soothing.

“He couldn’t have spent the weekend with you, Jemima. He was with us.”

Hermione herself had only began to realise the oddity then. The hairs of the back of her arm were rising as she realised the incongruity herself.

“What?”

“Last weekend was the Society meeting in Hogsmeade. Tom and Hermione were the host.” Emma stepped forward from where she had been standing. Gamp had found a seat somewhere, looking too pale and staring at Jemima with concern.

The seventh-year prefect pushed her glasses up casually, as if the entire event was just another report she needed to read.

“I saw Tom there, Jemima. I talked to him. Everybody did and could truly tell you about it.”

Jemima was shaking her head as she gingerly stepped back, as stable as a ship whose hull was bending under the storm waves. The blonde might seem confused, but the panic under her skin, the flicker of air pressure that was magic passing in the air was an obvious tell to Hermione—the blonde knew. Some part of her already knew that something was wrong, had already suspected.

Hermione covered her mouth with her hands as she realised the scale of the other witch’s misfortune. Oh my god, she thought, before her gaze shifted to Tom. Did he know? Did he?

“What…what are you saying?” Jemima was doing her best to stay hopeful but she was failing,

Emma said no more, just insistent in her staring. On the other hand, a horrified but concerned Eugenie had stood up, even if she did so while wringing her robes.

“Avery, I think you’d want to sit down.”

“No.”

“Please. Emma, please…” Eugenie asked.

Emma had swiftly moved beside Jemima at Eugenie’s pleading expression to her. The seventh-year made a quick jab of her head and Gamp followed her to pull a chair out as Emma guided their Housemate there carefully, through her protestation.

“I’m fine.”
“Avery,” Eugenie said this firmly, pulling the other blonde’s attention back to her. “Y-You have to accept this, alright? Tom…Tom was hosting the party at Hogsmeade last week. He c-couldn’t be anywhere else.”

“No! You’re lying.”

Hermione admired Eugenie’s courage and kindness to volunteer herself for an unpleasant task of bringing truth to one who didn’t want to hear it. She would’ve helped if she didn’t think it would make everything worse. The best she could do was keep her distance. Eugenie tried again.

“It’s true—”

“No! You’re just jealous, aren’t you? You’re saying this—”

“She has no reason to lie, Avery,” Augusta cut in before Jemima could start attacking Eugenie. “She doesn’t even like Riddle that way! Neither do I, and I can tell you for sure that it was Riddle who was at Hogsmeade last week.”

Jemima was shaking her head in disbelief.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake. Why don’t you try giving us some other date, and I’m sure we can match that to where Riddle is.”

“I don’t need to. He was there.” The blonde murmured, in a daze.

“Even if there hadn’t been us last Saturday, I’m sure Hermione could tell if it wasn’t him.” Augusta added carelessly.

Wrong words. Those only caused the unravelling witch to focus on her again, eyes rolling with hate.

“Curie! You planned this, didn’t you? You stole him from me—”

Hermione could not summon any hate for her now the same way she could not summon hate an aggressive pheasant with a broken wing, fitful on the forest floor and frenzied with pain.

“Oh, for goodness’ sakes,” Augusta cursed, stepping forward.

“Augusta, don’t—”

Eugenie’s warning was too late.

“It wasn’t him!” Augusta insisted. “I don’t know who you went out with or who you actually dated and I don’t care. But I can bloody well tell you right now that it wasn’t Tom Riddle.”

Jemima had covered her ears with her hands, her words were fragments of denial strung together like a rosary for the damned.

‘No, no, no. No, no, no, NO. No…’

“You’ve been had, I say. Move on.”

Gamp was glaring daggers at Augusta who, after some polite words of explanation from Emma, walked away in a huff after throwing her hands up. Eugenie apologised to the Slytherin witches before she left. Daedalus’ gaze wandered from person to person, for some reason.
“I think… I think we’ll have to cancel the discussion we were about to have this morning.” Eugenie announced to everyone else in the room and to the newly-arrived prefects like Verrault who was confused by the entire tableau—the frozen people, the busy witches, with one Slytherin witch in the middle wailing in total breakdown, and the other non-prefect person apart from Hermione that no one seemed to notice.

(Lakshmi was in her element here, watching avidly).

Andrew nodded in agreement with Eugenie, giving his sympathies to a newly-arrived Oswin. Oswin had arrived, taken one look at the scene and shook his head as he cringed a little. He was barely fazed.

“You don’t look surprised.” Andrew commented.

“She was bound to be disillusioned sooner or later—Jemima’s simply too blind to the reality that Tom’s not interested in her. I didn’t see this happening, though.” Oswin answered.

Agatha had only stepped in, took one look at the scene and looked infinitely sad instead.

“Oh Jemima…”

Jemima Avery ended up in the infirmary on Saturday. Hermione didn’t see her on Sunday or even the week after that—not even in Advanced Potions, and she knew Avery took that. She might not have liked the Slytherin witch, but she didn’t want her dead or anything. It was why she tried to find Emma at one point to ask.

She took a seat next to the Slytherin at the library table.

“You care too much, Hermione.” Emma said, leaning back on her chair. The brunette disagreed.

“I care just enough. What happened? Is she back at class yet? I didn’t see her in Advanced Potions.”

Emma clasped her hands together, thinking for a moment, before she lifted her chin once more.

“That’s because she’s not in class yet.”

“She isn’t?”

“No. I don’t know when she would be.”

“You’re kidding me.” Hermione said, staring. Emma’s expression didn’t change, just her usual solemn neutrality. “You’re not kidding. How… what happened?”

“Nervous breakdown, I think, but that’s only based on my impressions. Madam Edelstein would know better.”

“And we wouldn’t hear anything from her. Patient confidentiality,” Hermione finished without thinking, still too surprised at the news to say much. She only ended up staring inquisitively back at Emma. The Slytherin let weighed her words carefully before she spoke.

“Yesterday, I asked to be able to receive copies of certain pages from Tom’s diaries. It was not the contents that I need and I couldn’t care less if he removed those. I simply needed the appointments. Jemima’s memories of meeting him and what she wrote down in her diary…the later ones don’t
tend to match up with his schedule at all.”

“I know it’s not him,” Hermione said, “but still…”

“The Polyjuice Lover. This type of ploy has happened often enough in magical history that people have learned and used safeguards about it.” Emma said. “One would think that an heiress like her would have been taught rigorously about it.”

That modus operandi would be Hermione’s guess too once she noticed the timing impossibility, but she didn’t dare speak it out loud.

“But if that was the only problem, she should be fine, right?”

“Perhaps. What I do know is that her mind refuses to accept the fact that it has all been a lie and now she insists that we’re the ones fooled by fake Tom last week.”

“I… maybe I could…”

Emma looked up once more, dark eyes as steady as an owl.

“You can do nothing. I’ve tried talking to her several times and…” she paused, unexpectedly losing words. It took a few moments before she continued. “We can show her reality right in front of her face, but we cannot force her to take a step forward. To leave the fantasy her mind built will be her choice and hers alone.”

The realisation that coalesced together in Hermione’s mind saddened her. Her breath came out slowly in a long exhale as she watched the motes of dust dancing in the rays of light, beautiful and yet as ephemeral as a dream.

“And right now, a world where she is Tom’s lady love is certainly one that she’d rather stay in than the real world.”

Chapter End Notes

…and we’re just left with the aftermath as well as clarifying and tying up the remaining loose ends.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Enceinte:** (French) Pregnant, with child. Readers of historical novels involving the English gentry of the 18th and 19th century would have encountered this term once or twice. Why being pregnant is such a state to require euphemism is something I haven’t figured out yet.

The second meaning of the word is enclosure. *Ciente* comes from the Latin *cinctus* which meant girdle—to be pregnant is to be ungirded (releasing the girdle as the belly expands), and a fence or wall can be described as girdling a territory of land. Then we have the rare combination of both in which the land is engirdled with an actual girdle (the magical Girdle of Melian in Tolkien’s Silmarillion, but I digress…)
Additional Notes:

“And I can’t exactly commend you on your latest action to—” the sixth-year flapped her hand rapidly while grasping for words, “—to play reuniting shepherd and weaver girl where any passing student can see. This is not even the seventh of seventh month, for goodness’ sakes.”;

Camellia is referring to the Chinese folktale of the cowherd and weaver girl, a love story between the cowherd (the star Altair) and the weaver girl (the star Vega) who are banished on opposing sides of the heavenly river (Milky Way). The reason for the banishment in the version that I know of is because they’re slacking on the job since they started a relationship, which annoys the King of Heaven (like any folktales from more than two millennia ago, there are variations within it). They are only allowed to meet once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar.

In Japan, their festival is the Tanabata, which nowadays are generally celebrated according the Gregorian Calendar, on the 7th of July. Some regions still follow the old lunar calendar, so some places celebrate later, sometimes all the way into August. Korea and the countries of Southeast Asia also have their version of the folktale.

Camellia Lee (OC): Sixth-year Hufflepuff, Camellia is a strong contender for the sixth-year Hufflepuff prefect’s position before it fell to Ethel Macmillan. She’s graceful about her loss and had moved on from it. An elegant and ethereally beautiful witch, she shares Advanced Ancient Runes with Hermione. Camellia is practically the number one on this subject in all Hogwarts, as she had learned warding at her mother’s knee (her mother was a warding grandmaster). Always having the time to help her housemates, she occupies a special position in the heart of the Hufflepuffs.
61 The Remaining Pieces

Chapter Summary

_The first Sunday of November. Tom and the Prefects. Chats with Andrew, Philippe and Timaeus. Augusta drops in on Hermione and Tom. Vespasian Starkey is wasting his time in a most agreeable manner in the Slytherin common room until someone interrupts his peaceful afternoon. A guest for Tom Riddle. Some answers will not be what you wish to hear._

Chapter Notes

Did a brisk jog and was thinking of 'I'll just lay my head here for a while before I update' and suddenly I woke up after sleeping for a few hours. Whoops.

On a more story-relevant note, I managed to write this chapter out and I'm still not satisfied with it. But I'm a firm believer that deadlines help the writer to stop fretting and just start writing. Even if I feel like just tossing this to the dustbin (not tight or dense enough in plot), at the very least I've answered some questions and can now focus on finishing chapter 62 and wrapping up the arc. After that will come my break for sketching out, outlining and writing the first several chapters of the Third Arc before I start posting them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

61 The Remaining Pieces

The most insidious kind of lie is the one with a component of truth in it. Most people would find it difficult to detect with ease, its resemblance with reality allowing it to settle in the subconscious of many people, even those who consider themselves immune to them. But for all its stealth, it is still not the best one.

The best kind of lie is one you don’t need to tell—for it never runs the risk of being disproved.

That is the primary reason that Tom was rather well-versed in using deflection than outright falsehoods. The *truth* is the best deflection, just not the entire truth, especially if the entire truth is so unexpected or implausible that it would not cross the mind of most people. It was why he’d considered the risks and rewards of displaying yet another example of his muggle orphanage background in Hogwarts. If it had been a Slytherin crowd, the act would be equivalent to baring his throat to a predator—extremely unwise to do. With them, he would’ve used a completely different approach. Yet since he had been around other prefects, almost all of whom tended to be more open-minded than most Hogwarts denizens, the potential gains were worth the cost. They would only sympathise with him more, but that was merely a beneficial side-effect.

The primary goal had been to provide a cold contrast to Jemima Avery’s memories, to bring her dreams and ideals crashing down in the harshest terms possible.
To make his disregard of her clear and absolute.

To posit in the most undeniable terms that he found the idea of love laughable was a good one. A part of him experienced a most visceral satisfaction when Avery realised that her memories were as ephemeral as daydreams and all the hopes she had pinned on him shattered right there on the spot. She had been too busy staring at him in disbelief that she hadn’t noticed the tears that had started to streak down her cheeks. The blonde was practically drenched in misery. If he hadn’t had to consider his image, he would’ve laughed with joy then, to draw out her misery with his absolute indifference.

It really was worth the cost of a little exposure, especially with the prefects being the accepting fellows that they are that the little tidbit of his background wouldn’t be a source of problem for him in the future.

What he hadn’t expected was how the actual sympathy poured.

Andrew had, very discreetly, asked him if he could just talk for a while away from others because there were some things that he wanted to ask Tom’s opinion about. His concerned expression implied that it was literally going to be anything else but that, but he saw no reason not to follow.

The Head Boy was only satisfied when they went to an empty table past the bend, so as to pull them out of sight of the others (the study area was L-shaped).

“Tom, first, I have to apologise to you because I never realise that you felt that way.” Andrew began, his expression unexpectedly glum.

Tom paused as he quickly backtracked through his recollection, trying to find out just what the hell had he said that might induce Andrew to say that. Certainly nothing that he said to Andrew today was even extraordinary, only prefect business. Yet even his prodigious memory came up with nothing as he tried to scan even yesterday’s interactions.

“I’m sorry?”

“No, I’m sorry. If I had known, I would have done something before…explained things, maybe.”

He was running out of all reasonable explanations, and the stupid voice in his head that sounded exactly like Abraxas started spouting outrageous theories. *He thinks you’re in love with him!*

*Shut up.* Tom resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. Great. He’d been listening to Abraxas prattle on and on for so often that he could hear the blond speaking nonsense in his head even now.

“Explained about what, exactly, Andrew?” The Slytherin did his best to sound neutral, but he knew his smile was probably a little strained.

“Love.”

Tom punched and dropkicked his mental version of Abraxas off a cliff before he could say anything even more stupid. Andrew still looked too bloody understanding for his peace of mind.

“I know, you think it’s a foolish idea. Even now when you’re trying to hold back your opinion, I could see parts of it still in your face. You don’t believe in love. You said that to Jemima—and practically everyone else there. And that’s just…sad.”

Tom wasn’t going to examine why he felt a such relief from hearing that he only managed a casual,
“oh, that. Yes, I don’t.”

If he’d been a little more prepared, he would have tried to sound less dismissive. But it was alright—something this trivial really didn’t matter much in the grand scheme of things.

“That’s disheartening…and it doesn’t have to be that way,” Andrew Insisted, as he seemed to have recovered his determination all of a sudden.

“…alright?”

“Love, **real, genuine** love is a wonderful emotion, a **force** that can drive you to scale mountains and face dragons for the people you **love**.”

Tom blinked, nonplussed but said nothing yet. *I think that’s called having an ambition.*

“Even if you’ve never seen it so far, if all the people who used its name in vain are selfish, or too worn down by the life that they gave up on its noble principles, **love is real**. Love is real and powerful and you shouldn’t give up yet on ever seeing it, alright? You’re bound to be a great wizard one day and it would be too sad if you missed love because you’ve closed your eyes to it.”

That sounded like an inspiring speech. Tom couldn’t help but be impressed by it, which meant that he was taking notes on how to emulate his body language and intonation if necessary. Now, if only he can parse what the Hufflepuff’s entire passionate screed was supposed to be about. *It can’t just be about love, right? Too simple.*

Andrew made a significant gesture to the back, and Tom guessed it had something to do with…the other prefects? No, that can’t be, Andrew wasn’t talking about ‘love of fellow men’ here. Hermione? For all his skill in reading people, he was coming up blank right now. Yes, really. Andrew patted his arm supportively. Tom stared back in a way that he supposed was collegial and conversational—even if he still has no bloody idea what the entire point of this whole conversation was about.

(No one, however, was ever going to be able to read *that* on his face).

“I’ll…take your advice under consideration.”

“Thank you. Really, that’s all I ask. Don’t give up on love yet! You’ll find it when you least expect it.” With a final, cordial pat on his shoulder, the Head Boy walked back towards the main prefect gathering.

Did the Head Boy, truly took him to the side *just* to give him a **speech** whose whole purpose was to tell him to **believe in love**?

Tom shook his head. He was still missing something here. “No, I don’t think that’s it.”

The planned prefect gathering was awkwardly dispersed after Emma and Eugenie floated and escorted a now-unconscious Avery to the infirmary. A pale Clytemnestra Gamp had been entrusted by Emma to try to communicate what happened to Avery’s parents—nobody who was there envied her the task.

Tom had only started to walk out of the library with Hermione who was looking oddly concerned about Avery. He couldn’t quite understand, but had dismissed it as another of those conditions of
excess sympathy that normal people suffer from time-to-time, whose excess pressure was alleviated from time-to-time by…waterworks. He counted himself lucky not to be among them.

“Tom! Ah, good thing I caught up to you.” Bernadotte accosted him when they had just stepped out, his long braid whipping out behind him. “I had something I truly need to speak to you about right now.”

One entreat ing glance from the Gryffindor and Hermione suddenly took off.

“Of course. I’ll just chat with Ceres while I wait, shall I?” She said.

Hermione left to chat with Ceres Victorinus some distance away to give them privacy before he can even tell her that he didn’t actually want to be separated.

(The French wizard might cut his talk short if she was around).

Tom only gave an inward sigh before attending his fellow prefect. A few freckles over Bernadotte’s nose lent him a boy-next-door air, even as he’d heard witches talk about the sixth-year. The Gryffindor’s blue eyes that were a little too enthusiastic for his comfort, reminding him too much of a freewheeling knight errant, and Tom schooled his expression to a polite neutrality as he spoke.

“Yes, Bernadotte?”

“It’s Philippe, I tell you.” He replied by reflex. “Alright Tom, first let me tell that you’re a good prefect. Hell, you’re a great prefect. I’ll admit that—even if I’m still going to agree to disagree with some of my Housemates about whether you can beat me in a fight, seeing as we’re never in the same Defence class.”

Tom made a polite cough but said nothing.

“Did you just—cough sarcastically? How do you even do that?” The Gryffindor asked, askance.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” he dryly replied.

Pip shook his head. “Wait, never mind that, I’m getting distracted again. Melusine, Ceres is going to kill me if she thinks I’m wasting your time. Where was I…”

Bernadotte snapped his fingers in thought. This was going to take ages if Tom didn’t say anything.

“You were singing my praise?” Tom offered, with a little more bite in his sentence than usual. The Gryffindor simply rolled his eyes, his posture in a slight slouch.

“Very droll, Tom, but you’re close. You’re a great prefect and you haven’t even done this for long. I don’t know how you manage that…”

_Herding the Knights is not very different than herding other students_, Tom thought but did not say, _and I’ve been doing that for more than a year._

“—so! Anyway, you’re an intelligent and talented fellow. You’ll go far in life, achieve whatever you set your mind to and all that rot. I’m sure I’m not the first to have said this to you—yeah, I can see that it’s true from your barely changing face. Really, no need to deny it. We both know that it’s true.”

“Yet a career no matter how great is not all there is to life. No man is an island. It’s the people in
our lives that gave it, and our achievements, meaning. Just how empty do you think it would be if you’ve achieved many things but have no one to share it with?”

He raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Well, Tom supposed he might find it boring, but empty is rather pushing it. Power makes up for a lot of things. Power allows you to eat well in a well-furnished and amply defended castle while an entire city rioted not far from you. Power provides you with an army to crush said riot. Bernadotte stayed unaware of his thoughts.

“So, I’m sorry that your life sucks so far. I thought it was annoying enough to have to punch some uppity idiot from time-to-time in Beauxbatons whenever they mention my having muggle relations as if it was some sort of chronic disease. I can’t imagine that the first time you arrive in Hogwarts was easy, especially when you were in Slytherins. There’d be idiots pouting stupid thing about you, left and right, at all times of day. Can’t say I wouldn’t have punched all their faces in.”

“If I did that, I would be alienated from practically my entire House.” Tom pointed out. Though I’m sure you wouldn’t think much of doing that, would you?

“Exactly! Which is why I’m in Gryffindor instead.” Philippe replied without an ounce of hard feelings. “You’re good at that, like you are at a lot of things. That’s why I can’t stand idly by when I see there’s the possibility that you might slip in something just as important as your duelling skills and magical knowledge.”

For all of his mild irritation at Bernadotte’s meandering chat, he couldn’t help but be curious.

“Which is…?”

The Gryffindor was oddly hesitant now.

“You know that Hermione’s not the type to get involved with someone if it wasn’t serious enough, right? I don’t need to be friends with her for long to see that.”

“Yes…?” He hedged. What was this? A ‘concerned’ friend of Hermione’s? He would have been less on edge if it wasn’t a wizard who had approached him.

“You need to learn to let go of the past to be able to truly move on into the future. Hermione doesn’t deserve your doubts.”

He felt like an actor walking on stage to a wrong play, grasping at the lines. When did I even say I doubt her?

“Bernadotte, I can assure you that I have not the slightest doubt about Hermione’s dedication.”

“Yes, yes. You work very well together,” Bernadotte nodded quickly. “But that’s not all you could be, and—dammit, I can’t believe I can see something you’ve missed. And Ceres calls me dense.”

The Gryffindor scratched his head with a surprising amount of frustration before he met Tom’s gaze again.

“It might be easier to be a cynic—you can’t be disappointed if you never expected much to begin with. I’ve been there. But sometimes, you need to take a leap of faith to win big!”

Oh look, familiar ground once more, he was a little more at ease once they’re discussing something resembling tactics.

Tom nodded. “Sometimes you have to take a calculated risk, carpe diem.”
“Yes! You get it!” Bernadotte clapped his shoulder. “Sometimes you have to have faith and be willing to fight for something that’s worth it. And Hermione is worth it.”

“Of course.” Tom agreed. It was easy since Bernadotte was just spouting obvious truths in a non-sequitur manner. He hoped the point would come around soon because this guessing game was getting old.

“So yes, love isn’t a weakness, it’s a strength. I know neither of you simply consider the other as ‘just friends’—anyone with eyes could see that. If you need any help in telling Hermione that you love her, you can talk to me.”

What the—

Then, to his surprise, Bernadotte stepped away and waved in the direction where the two witches had gone off to.

“He’s all yours, Hermione! Hope you two have a good date today! I’m rooting for you both!”

It was clear even from this distance that Hermione was rubbing her face with her hand, and that said face was pretty red, even as Victorinus glared at Bernadotte from beside Hermione and told him to ‘mind his own business’. Hermione was slowly walking towards his direction but was carefully not looking at any place in particular—Ceres, on the other hand, moved with the speed of a loping greyhound and nabbed Bernadotte in no time.

Bernadotte grinned goofily as he waved at both of them, unresisting to his prefect partner’s effort to drag him away. Tom gave him a level, unimpressed stare. He could hear Victorinus telling her Housemate to stop pestering his juniors as she pulled him away.

The Slytherin wished she had said that before Bernadotte spouted all this…weirdness at him.

“So! What’s your plan for today?”

Hermione might sound more cheerful, but she was still looking anywhere but at him.

“What gave him the impression that I’m close to bursting with the urge to tell you that I love you?” It was an idiotic question, and it didn’t sound less stupid when he said out loud. Yet the inanity of it had been dogging other thoughts from the moment Bernadotte said it that he simply needed to pour it out immediately lest it rotted his mind.

The Ravenclaw forgot that she was trying not to look at him; her look was a mix of ‘seriously?’ and ‘are you high?’ Hermione’s hand reached towards his hair…and ended up patting her flower crowns that were still there. He hadn’t realised that he was still wearing them.

“Next question?” She asked back, all sarcasm and challenge.

In the commotion, he really had forgot the bloody obvious.

Tom couldn’t help laughing at that, and for all her initial reluctance Hermione was soon laughing along with him.

The next time Tom encountered Timaeus Crouch they have only gone down on flight of stairs. The Gryffindor sixth-year had placed a firm grip on his shoulder before he could surreptitiously slide away, looking him straight in the eyes. Hermione was just a curious bystander at this point.
“Tom.”

“Timaeus?”

“You had ample courage in Hogsmeade and you’ve easily trusted your life to Hermione.” His voice was grave when he said this. Tom could easily see how he would handle responsibility once he entered the Ministry next year.

“Well, thank you,” he said, accepting the compliment.

“And she has shown her worth and did not betray that trust.”

“Um, thank you?” Hermione was a little uncertain, which Tom didn’t blame her since he had no idea what Timaeus wanted to say either.

“If you can trust her in matters of life and death, I’m sure you can trust her when it comes to matter of the heart.”

He bid them goodbye with the same grave nod he did at the beginning. When Timaeus was clearly out of the corridor, Tom let out a tired sigh while Hermione let out giggles that turned into laughter.

“As much as I don’t actually mind wearing a flower crown for the whole day…”

“You’d rather…” Hermione gasped, “…avoid all the relationship advice?”

His put-upon expression at her didn’t stop her laughter though it lessened it. Even between that she managed to open her bag and pulled out two boxes to hand to him.

“Here, then. No hard feelings.”

Then Julia passed them on her departure from the library and told Tom outright that she had no doubt that his relationship with Hermione is the type that would last, and that he didn’t need to worry about it. Hermione was giggling again before Julia even reached the end of the corridor as she knew that her friend wouldn’t take it personally.

Tom had only boxed one flower circlet when he saw Amelia Bones entering the corridor from the stairway. That was when he caught her wrist and pulled her down a small alcove. A twist of the Ming dynasty vase displayed seemed to open an unseen door to the side.

“Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“Anywhere I’m not going to see anymore prefects. Back to the library is a good idea.”

“Oh, yes. Most people wouldn’t expect that we went straight back.”

Hermione was in a rather concentrated discussion with Tom in a library carrell about why changing one creature into another seems to be an easier act than just changing part of a creature.

“I haven’t even managed to find anything that would allow you to attach the arm from one wizard on another. I did use all the healing keywords you recommended. The only one I’ve found so far is the Transylvanian experiment of trying to piece together a man from different corpses.” Disappointment coloured his opinion.
The Ravenclaw winced.

“Oh, I heard that one. Somebody’s been reading too much Frankenstein. Didn’t work, of course.”

Tom nodded. “I did read the conclusion first before even trying to read the entire monograph. Why waste time if it doesn’t even work? Do you hear of the precise reason it failed from your healer studies?”

She leaned back on the seat, trying to recall. It was one of those cases used as a cautionary tale, a staple of her field healer classes when she took them.

“Pretty straightforward, actually. They gained the bodies via the means that many medical faculties in the 18th and 19th century did even if they didn’t say so.”

“Body snatchers—gravediggers.” Tom stated.

Hermione nodded. “Yes. Early decomposition may not ruin a cadaver for dissection that much in a temperate climate, but they haven’t yet known by then that it’s ruinous for neurons. Cell death occurs within minutes the brain is starved of oxygen. The brain is basically useless. Non-functional.”

“So, if you want to use someone’s head like that, cut it off immediately and dump it into a bucket of ice. A bit like working with cut flowers, actually.” He concluded. Her hand twitched as she held back the urge to massage her temples. Something seemed to have occurred to him then that he seemed more optimistic. “Ah, it might even be easier to ensure freshness of brain tissue if we make sure the heart is still pumping before the head is cut off. The oxygen supply is therefore never stopped until the cut.”

They might be in a carrell that no one just passing by can hear them, but sometimes the brunette witch thought that Tom had lost all intellectual inhibition around her that he forgot normal people had this thing called morality. Cutting off random people’s head is not done.

“I think the usual name for a human with a still-pumping heart is living,” Hermione muttered, but didn’t bother lowering her voice, “and cutting the heads of living people is murder.”

“Well, it doesn’t need us to do it personally. Too bad the French aren’t having any revolutions this time. Madam Guillotine would certainly save us some effort.” He replied with an amused gleam in his eyes. She couldn’t figure out if he was serious or joking, and considering his sense of humour, she didn’t try.

“How unfortunate,” was her dry retort.

She didn’t catch his reply, if he had any, as the knocks on the door distracted them before it swerved open within a second. A Gryffindor prefect stood there—Augusta, Hermione triumphantly recalled.

“I finally found you.”

“Me?”

That took Hermione off-guard. Augusta shook her head.

“No, not you, him. I never thought you’re that hard to find, Riddle, but it did take some effort.”

“Is there any reason for the search?”
“Well,” Augusta’s gaze flickered to Hermione before settling on him again. “I thought I was going to say something.”

“If you were going to tell me to trust Hermione with my heart, trust me, I’ve heard enough variations of that by now.” He replied. Hermione snorted and bit her lip to hold back any inadvertent chuckle.

Augusta stared at him askance. “Why would I want to do that? I know you’re getting on alright. Not exactly my business, is it?”

Hermione couldn’t help her chuckle even as Tom’s droll reply of ‘yes, finally someone gets it, thank you’ earned a baffled nod from Augusta.

“You wouldn’t believe how many people have been concerned about it earlier,” Hermione said. “So, what brings you here?”

“Philippe and Ceres are going to take the long way to Hogsmeade today because one of his cousins contacted him. They plan to be at the Hogshead Inn today. He said that he did plan on telling you, but he never got around to it before Ceres dragged him off earlier. I just thought that you might want to plan another Society meeting tonight about it.”

Tom tapped his fingers to his chin. “It depends on what they hear. It might be something or it might be nothing. I suppose I’ll just wait for the update from them today, then.”

Augusta shrugged. “Suit yourself. I just thought you needed to hear that.”

“I do. Thank you.”

The other prefect was still standing at the doorway as she hadn’t bothered to enter the carrell even as she spoke. She almost set off once more when she Augusta turned back.

“Oh, and Riddle?”

“Yes?”

“I did meet Julia before I got here, and she assured me that you’re not going to do anything as stupid as pushing Hermione away because you don’t trust that love wouldn’t betray you—” Augusta’s grin was entirely too wide and if Tom had less self-control, Hermione was sure he would have groaned. Right now, she only caught a twitch of his left eyebrow. Hermione was biting her lips so hard it might even bruise.

“—All I’m asking for is an invitation once you finally get married.”

“Augusta!” Hermione was too shocked to hold herself back. Heat crept upwards from her neck.

“Perhaps we will if you don’t make such a pest of yourself,” Tom retorted back, which from Augusta’s surprised yet interested face was something she hadn’t expected. “Thank you for your information and good day.”

Without any prompting, Tom shut the door in her face.

Hermione was rubbing her eyes when Tom spoke up next with a forced cheerfulness.

“So, what do you say about sightseeing around London today?”
It was just the perfect Saturday afternoon to flop around aimlessly, Ves had thought. He’d gotten the right of it, too, after all the uncommon toil and hard work he had to do last weekend. It was an experience to see just how perfectionist Hermione could be—she could even give Tom a run for his money, something he didn’t think was possible. Unfortunately, all his plans of comfortably dawdling was not to be. He sighed internally the moment the wizard stopped in front of the occupied armchair.

At least I can make sure this is entertaining.

“Afternoon, Ves,”

Vespasian Starkey had been lounging in the Slytherin common room without any cares. His newsboy cap was slightly lopsided to the right. He looked in all the world like another pureblood with too much pride and fluff between their ears. This illusion cracked slightly with the sharp gaze that took in his visitor from head to toe in a flash before he seemed once more to be occupied with the quaffle he was tossing from one hand to another at a lazy pace.

“Afternoon, Irwin. Were you lookin’ for Bernard? Or someone else?”

A flicker of jaw muscles tightening. Irwin was as fine-boned as his sister with complexion just as pale, and Ves supposed that many people might find that attractive. He was more bored with the seventh-year than anything because the wizard scarcely had any obvious personality. Heck, Brax was an overdramatic fool, but at least he’s not so bland as to be forgettable.

“No, not really.” Irwin answered.

“No studyin’ business? Oh. Right then.” Ves nodded and leaned back on his seat. He’d started passing the quaffle again.

“Starkey…”

“What?”

Irwin didn’t immediately answer him, his gaze still unreadable. Ves gazed up lazily.

“I’ve no ken o’ yer mind, Irwin. You can spit it out—or mayhaps don’t. Suit yourself.”

“You—”

Ves only blinked as the seventh-year stepped forward and loomed over him.

“Well?” Ves asked back.

After a while the other wizard took a deeper breath and stepped back.

“You know why I’m here.”

“Not truly, no. I don’t make an ‘abit of nosing around some jack’s cly. ‘m not short on gelt or hungry fer name, Irwin.” Amusement tinged his words.

Irwin pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I need to see Riddle.”

Ves’ expression brightened and he stopped himself from making a wicked smile. Don’t scare him away just yet...
“Ah, why don’t you say so! Ain’t it easier when we’re not mauldering around?”

“Well?”

“Tom’s in his dorm, I suppose. You can wait until he’s done.”

An impatient Irwin had started walking past Ves when the fifth-year leapt out of his seat and around, now suddenly standing in front of Irwin.

“’Fraid I can’t let you do that.”

“It’s an emergency.”


This time the gritting of teeth was more obvious before Irwin stopped. Ves couldn’t help it—the beginnings of a grin rose on his lips.

“Stand aside.”

“Won’t.” Ves replied. His wand was already in his hand. “If we’re goin’ to go at it hammers and tongs, let’s just get it now, shall we? ‘M getting a mite bored, anyway.”

Paradoxically, this actually caused Irwin to stop.

“I’m not here to fight you.”

His reply was glib. “That’s what they all say right until we did.”

“Vespasian.”

A snap, and Ves’ wand was now pointed at Irwin’s neck. He tilted his head to the left slightly, his grin beginning to bloom now. “Ah, ah, ah. You’re none I care for, Irwin. That name ain’t yours to say.”

He could see Irwin’s Adam apple bob slowly before the other wizard backed down. Such a pity, he mused.

“Please. I need to see Riddle.”

“Well, take a seat, then! You’ve come to the right place, really. Relax. He’ll be down in time.” Ves answered cheerfully and clapped his hands together, wand still in hand.

“Ves—”

“Do sit, Irwin,” he replied with a wide smile. The slight snap in his tone showed that it was not a suggestion. “You came to my lord for an audience and you will get one. Never let it be said that he’s not considerate.”

His usual accent was gone now, in its place something more cultured with a politesse Starkey was very much not known for. The warmth that had previously been in his gaze and manner seemed to have evaporated along with it. What was left was a creature that seemed to be perfectly at home in a cold and callous court.

“But I’m sure you have no intention on imposing yourself on him, isn’t that right? For none of his Knights will brook any offence to his person.”
Starkey had summoned one of the unused corner tables towards him. He asked the house elf watching over Slytherin House nicely for a pot of tea and received a complimentary plate of small cakes along with it and he gave his thanks accordingly. He started to prepare two cups, the unease of his guest seemingly went unnoticed by him.

“There’s no need,” Irwin began.

“I insist,” Ves answered while pouring tea into two cups. “All this food prep reminds me…unless you’ve got a flash mollisher playin’ the cook in the kitchen to queer up grub, adulteratin’ food ain’t the smartest thing to do. You got to make sure it’s spread evenly all o’er, fer one, ‘cause you don’t know how anyone would eat. It’s even more impossible when you got to be canny wiv yer hit and don’t go knocking other people down willy-nilly like extra pins.”

He shook his head and raised his gaze back to his fellow House mate as he placed the teapot down.

“’Tis too hard, innit?”

Irwin watched him carefully, with a slight crease between his eyes, yet he said nothing. Ves leaned back as if it had been a rhetorical question.

“Much easier to just go after the sod’s preferred swill.” The fifth-year stated, before casually tapping the teacup nearest to him. “Pour your personal poison, add the slop or what-have-you. Stir until evenly mixed. Use the right blend and most people can’t even sniff it out. Voila, and Jack’s your uncle.”

Ves seemed pleased at what he’d figured out. “So simple, right? Here, how’d you like yours? Lemon? Sugar?”

“I don’t—”

“Pffft. An Englishman who doesn’t drink tea? Don’t be absurd, Irwin.” His eyes glimmered with humour.

“Oh, please, don’t tell me you’re worried ‘bout m’ little lark. ‘M just joking, pay me no mind. Here,” Vespasian pushed both teacups forward until stood side-by-side, “you can choose whichever and I’ll take the remaining one. Howsat?”

For something as simple as just taking a cup of tea, Irwin Avery certainly took his time. Ves didn’t seem to begrudge him the slightest.

“Milk or lemon? Sugar?”

“Look, Ves, I had no intention to—”

Ves rolled his eyes, left hand poised between the bowl of lemon slices and the small milk pitcher. “Milk or lemon, Irwin? Come on, I’m not askin’ for some long essay answer. This ain’t Advanced Arithmancy.”

“…lemon. One sugar.”

“Very good. See? It ain’t hard.”
At one point, Gallus had walked up from the direction of Tom’s dorms and Irwin had stood up immediately. Ves shook his head at the apparent rush.

“Ah, Irwin. Fancy seeing you here,” Gallus greeted him easily. “Who’re you looking for? None of the sixth or seventh years have dorms in this direction.”

He stated this as if all of them didn’t already know that, as if they had not all memorised the dorms that each door lead to during their first year. Irwin’s shoulders tensed momentarily before relaxing.

“I’m here to see Tom.”

“Oh, you are?” Gallus glanced at Ves in apparent surprise. “Why didn’t you inform us immediately, Ves?”

Ves shrugged. “’M pretty sure Tom has other important things to do, yeah?”

“Never too much to receive a…rare guest,” Gallus smiled at Irwin. Irwin’s return smile was wan and sickly in appearance. “You’re in luck, he’s already back. Come on down, then.”

Irwin followed the shorter fifth-year in front of him. Just before he passed the doorway, Vespasian called.

“Irwin?”

He turned around.

“Did y’know that for potions with a human component like Polyjuice, it’s not impossible to figure out who the human component is? Just takes a really good potioneer with a lot of quid at hand and a hell of patience.” He grinned, flashing rows of white teeth. “Potions is so fascinating, isn’t it?”

Irwin said nothing before continuing on his journey, but if it was possible, he had gone even paler at Ves’ apparent non-sequitur.

‘-

“Ah, Irwin! What brings you to my humble abode?” Tom greeted his guest.

“…I—”

“Please, take a seat.”

“I don’t need a seat,” he retorted sharply. “I need to talk to you quickly.”

It was Gallus who was suddenly at his left. “Please, sir.”

With a firm push on his shoulders, Avery sat on a chair that had somehow been moved right behind him. Tom moved until he was a few paces in front of the seventh-year. He was in a fitted grey suit jacket without his robes over them. One might think that this would make him seem more like a muggle, but the easy way he toyed with his wand and sometimes balancing it on a single finger belied that.

“What’s all the hurry?” Tom asked.

“I don’t care what you’re going to do, I just need Jemima to be alright.” The words came out rushing one after another, like the rapids of a churning river.
Tom’s forehead creased in thought. “I’m sure that plea is better addressed towards Madam Edelstein. She is the Head Nurse.”

“But she’s not you.”

“Evidently,” Tom’s reply was dry.

“She wouldn’t know exactly what’s wrong, and I’m sure that you do. Please…” Avery’s voice trailed away as he looked away in that moment, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he struggled with himself.

Tom tilted his head to the left a little, curiosity his only expression. “Please what, really?”

“Help her, fix her. Do something.”

“I’m more curious why you thought I could do anything at all, really.” Tom mused out loud.

“Because…because you broke her! You broke her, alright? I heard what happened from Oswin and I…” he seemed to either have run out of words or couldn’t continue without his voice faltering. Perhaps he’s thinking about his dear sister, lost in slumber in the infirmary with no end in sight. Tom would’ve smiled with relish if he wasn’t more invested in playing the baffled bystander.

“I broke her? Really?”

“She loves you.”

“No one’s stopping her from loving anyone she wishes,” Tom replied, the wry twist of his lips was one that perhaps only Hermione could understand. “And it would not explain her current… malaise.”

“That’s…”

Surprisingly enough, Irwin fell into silence even as Tom watched him.

“Well?” Tom prompted.

“You—you know why…”

Tom’s single glance to his friend had Gallus walking forward into Avery’s view again. The slim Slytherin’s tone was bored.

“Irwin, please, say what you mean. I’m sure you have other, important things to do. Tom certainly has them, and if you’re just here to get us to play a guessing game with you, well, you can do that with someone else in their time—”

“No,”

“No? I’m sorry, but I’m not letting anyone abuse Tom’s hospitality—”

“It was my fault…”

The words were soft and Tom wouldn’t have caught it if Gallus hadn’t stopped himself abruptly, or if he hadn’t been waiting for Avery’s reaction. Gallus paused and glanced at Tom.

“Now, why would you say that?” Tom asked.
Avery finally raised his head, after being too occupied in following the loops of the oriental carpet of the dorm.

“I did slip you some Amortentia. It was harmless. Just a little bit of fun—”

“*Harmless?* Gallus raised his voice. “You *dare* to claim that?”

“It’s nothing our forefathers haven’t seen in Hogwarts of their time, and of the Hogwarts before that!”

The both of them were standing now, and almost at each other’s face. For one who was not physically imposing, the Rosier heir was intimidating enough once he allowed rage to overtake him.

“Peace, Gallus.” Tom stepped forward. “And do lower your voice, Irwin. We can already hear each other clearly, no need to shout.”

Gallus grudgingly stepped back.

“Gallus can be a worrier. I don’t really think much of a little Amortentia—it barely worked on me, mind you. I didn’t feel like giving your sister my singular attention, though there were still some changes. I think we can find some arrangement that will allow me to forget it sooner.” Tom could see tension leaving Avery’s shoulders, the brightening of his expression as he begun to once more flirt with the idea of hope. Avery might not even realise it yet, but the beginnings of a smile had started to grow on his face.

“*Thank you.* Does this mean that you can—”

“*But,*” Tom cut in.

Avery’s voice faltered, “excuse me?”

“But it didn’t even occur to you to ask why I stepped aside as your sister began to dig her own grave?”

The blond’s stiffened, his face an awkward mask of confusion and faltering hope.

“You did not think to even ask, did you? You thought that was the only sin involved?”

Their gazes connected; he did not let Avery wonder for long.

“People would talk to me, Irwin, commenting on a conversation I did not have, in places I knew I did not go to recently. You didn’t think that I would be unaware of someone else walking around with my face, do you?”

He could almost see the gears turning in Avery’s head, how the seventh-year’s cautiousness was beginning to be swamped by trepidation. Tom had moved to another chair in the room and sat down, facing Avery over some distance now. Gallus stood to the side, a little beyond the blond’s field of view and no less vigilant. The cadence of Tom’s voice was that of a storyteller now, dark, smooth and hypnotic.

“Not long after Hermione began her classes in Hogwarts, she had an accident. That was how she put it, though I disagree. There was no accident in her fall down a set of spiral stairs. She did not suddenly decide to jump. For one so sure of her footing in Defence class, no mere abandoned bottle was going to make her slip and *threw her down.*”
“She could have broken an arm. She could have broken her neck. It speaks of her skill that she didn’t, but that does not absolve the culprit of the crime.”

Tom’s gaze was cold this time, and Avery didn’t hold it for long.

“She said she can handle this matter on her own, but I’ve asked her every week or so about her plans for the culprit if she would not let me handle it. The more time passes, the less she seems to care about it…”

There was a simple vase on his bedside table, and it was filled with a bouquet of only one type of flower. The tall stalks of the simple yellow of bird’s-foot trefoil. It was one of the flowers he had slipped into Hermione’s yellow flower crown. Its possible meanings are rather narrow.

*Revenge. Vengeance is mine.*

Tom plucked a stalk out and toyed with it as he stood up again.

“Hermione would’ve given the most cursory of punishments for such a crime, because she is simply that good-natured, but I have given my word that the culprit’s punishments would be hers to decide. I was in an inconvenient bind right then.”

He stopped in front of Avery.

“I was still trying to find my way around it until Ves identified what I was poisoned with and its target. Very convenient. There was no need for me to continue trying to find loopholes or figuring out a trade with her. I once more hold the right of revenge for myself.”

“I suppose I have you to thank for that.”

He smiled. He didn’t bother to make it look pleasant, or look anything like the smiles of the average humans he knew.

“You wouldn’t mind telling Hermione that I’m doing this for myself, wouldn’t you? She’ll grumble and complain to herself, but she wouldn’t deny me the right, as she is learning already that there are rules of Slytherin House that we live by. She is starting to learn that what binds us together is stronger than the rules of Hogwarts.”

He leaned forward and lowered his voice as if in a friendly conspiracy. “You already know I don’t really care for the Amortentia—I wouldn’t take revenge just for that. Between the two of us, though, this is for her.”

With a last pleased smile, Tom stepped away.

“It’s not too bad, Irwin. Your sister yet lives and will recover one day, which is very merciful of me if you consider that she’d actually tried to kill someone who was mine.” He finished cheerfully.

The blond was still, stoic, but Tom was a practised observer to be able to see the tension in his frame, how he was trying to hold it all in because even the slightest exhibition of emotion was going to burst the dam. He was sure that Avery finally, *finally* realised that the Heir of Slytherin really couldn’t give a damn about his useless sister.

That he’d do *nothing*. That he was all too happy to do nothing.

“Gallus, please escort him out.”
“Yes, my lord.”

Chapter End Notes

Right, that's one aspect of the whodunnit handled...
**Chapter Summary**

An average mid-week. The case of Jemima’s malaise. Hermione visits Nurse Edelstein in the infirmary and picks up her responsibility as an apprentice. An assortment of visits to the infirmary, beginning with Eugenie and ending with the Knights. The result of Hermione’s investigation. A meeting at sundown far from curious eyes. A reconstruction.

**Chapter Notes**

I finally managed to end the Second Arc. Been giving me a headache for a while. I was sorely tempted to just stop at the last scene of Chapter 61, but then I get the nagging feeling that there are some unresolved...issues still hanging about. I can let them drag on to the Third Arc (which I certainly haven't done at all), or I can finish it now. For all of my dislike of emotional confrontations, I choose the second one. I wrote while muttering and grousing the whole way, apologies if it's not my best.

This is a good point to say that I made a Character Appendix for *Strange Attractors* in the Wattpad version of my account (Orange et Blue Morality). Why in Wattpad? Because I can upload my sister's moodboards there, that's why, so some character bios already have pictures and stuff. This is just in case anyone needed a quick reference of who's who. (I'm also editing chapter 30 to also have this PSA in the Author's Notes for new readers).

Thanks for all the reviews and favs! Sorry if I can't get back at you yet, real life's stepping up its pace right now. This is also the point where I'm taking a break for a few months to work on the Third Arc. Hopefully, now that there aren't many people who would get in Hermione's way (or Tom's way), I can just move on to the main plot all the way until the end of the academic year. (Yeah, hope springs eternal).

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**62 Discovering the Truth, Reforging a Pact**

On Wednesday, Hermione had the whole of her lunch break to read on the copies of Jemima and Tom’s schedule that Emma held, as well as the ones she highlighted which showed how Jemima’s experience contradicted Tom’s actual activity of that time. Her thoughts still turned in that direction once in a while even as she attended her classes (A. Arithmancy and A. Charms), all the way to the end of Charms.

“Hermione?” Lakshmi raised an eyebrow.
“Yes?”

As Eugenie was also looking at her, Hermione had the feeling that they’d been calling her name more than once.

“Ah, sorry. I didn’t catch whatever it was you were saying. I’m still itching to solve the mystery of Jemima’s experience.”

Lakshmi snorted. “What’s there to solve? Riddle got tired of her hanging on his sleeve that he didn’t say no when one of his friends offered to polyjuice into him.”

“How do you even know that?” Eugenie asked in disbelief, her forehead creased. “That’s a horrible thing to do to Jemima!”

The dark-haired witch opened her mouth and then closed it again immediately, her pointed gaze at Hermione clearly said ‘you deal with this’.

Hermione beat any calls for ‘courage’ and ‘valour’ in her head with a metaphorical broomstick as she made her retreat.

“Um, oh, look, class has ended! I almost didn’t realise that.”

“We were pointing that out to you earlier,” Lakshmi continued while picking up her bag. Hermione followed suit.

“Yes. Great. Thank you. Look, I still wanted to solve this little mystery and I want to pick Tom’s brain about it,” her warning look towards Lakshmi made her dormmate held her tongue on whatever she was about to say just then. “So, I’ll go off first and see you at the dorms!”

Hermione barely waited for her friends to finish their goodbyes before she’d turned in the direction of where she’d last tracked Tom and practically leapt to her feet as she set off. She didn’t bother calling him because she knew she can catch up to him in no time, and calling was just going to get even more attention directed their way from their assorted classmates. Which was the last thing she needed.

Tom looked back just as she was two steps away from him and shifted to the right. Melchior stepped away from him to the left once he realised what Tom did.

Between them was the space for exactly one person and Hermione stepped forward to take her place effortlessly.

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Hermione could only dismiss Jemima Avery’s lack of presence in Advanced Potions for a few days. After that, the snobbish Slytherin’s absence started to nibble at the edges of her thoughts, her thoughts circling around her head as the brunette wondered what could’ve delayed her recovery so much. For all that Hermione considered the Slytherin a pain in the rear, she didn’t really wish her to suffer. Not to mention that she couldn’t help her curiosity. It was why she still kept trying to figure out what on earth could be the problem.

It was for this reason that the Ravenclaw didn’t turn towards the library in the evening, which was what she would do if she didn’t happen to be in her dorms or the Ravenclaw common room doing her school work. Her feet easily beat a path to the infirmary.

“She’s not waking up, is she?” Hermoine barged into the Head Nurse office.
“Hermione!”

“Sorry!”

Nurse Edelstein had almost dropped the bottles she was stocking, catching them in the nick of time. Hermione stepped forward to help her with it out of guilt, the glare barely affecting her once she’s determined. Maggie sighed and shifted aside so Hermione can help.

Warm lantern glow lit the room. The stars beyond the great windows were richly spread in their splendour, as no moon was in sight. Ah, no wonder there’s a lot of Astronomy observation classes this week, she mused, as opposed to book work or analysis. It was new moon.

“Why are you here at this hour?” Nurse Edelstein asked.

It was a good question, seeing that in a quarter of an hour or so, the Great Hall would start serving dinner in less than half an hour.

“I’m your apprentice, aren’t I?” Her tone was a little too innocent.

Maggie muttered something that might be ‘why now?’ but didn’t repeat it any louder. What she said instead was, “you’re asking about Avery, aren’t you?”

“I’m worried—and I’m also saying this professionally, as far as my knowledge informs me. If she’s still unconscious, shouldn’t we get her somewhere she can get a more specialised treatment?”

The nurse sighed and turned.

“You have a point, and we are getting her specialised treatment.”

Her eyebrows rose. “We are?”

Maggie nodded, her usually fresh face had lines of worry on her forehead. “A specialist mind-healer visits from time to time, trying to coax her to leave her fantasies without forcing her.”

“How would a healer do that? Jemima’s not even awake.”

“By careful use of legilimency.” Maggie replied. “It’s not as effective or easy compared to doing it with a fully conscious patient, and trying to untangle the language symbolisms of the subconscious is a skillset of its own, and you’re not even guaranteed to find the patient’s self in the initial visits. I hear it’s still possible to make some progress even if the speed tends to be on the frustrating side.”

“Something you’re really not interested in, I gather?”

“Yes.” Maggie didn’t hide her shudder. “How do you even know whether you’re progressing or staying in place? It’s difficult to gauge. Give me a weeping sore or a puking patient anytime.”

Hermione laughed. “Alright, I get your sentiment.”

“I like progress that I can see.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

They continued stocking the shelves in a comfortable silence for a while, with Hermione going off to locate the trolley where all the new potions sent from the Potions labs were stacked to get more. The movement was repetitive and quite soothing, and as such gave her ample opportunity to think.
“I am you apprentice, right?”

The nurse stared at her askance. “I thought we’ve established that already?”

“Just making sure. So, we only have one long-term patient here, then?”

“We?”

“Well, I am your apprentice.”

Maggie snorted. “I suppose. What are you thinking about?”

“Would human interaction helped pull her towards consciousness?”

The nurse paused in thought, her copper hair practically glowing under the warm lights. “I think it would help. Unless she’s very familiar with your voice and hearing them would actually agitate her…”

Hermione shook her head. “No, I don’t think she’s that familiar with just my voice when she’s not seeing me directly. We don’t exactly make a point to chat with each other.”

“You can try to read to her while I monitor her heartbeat, then.”

“Good.”

Hermione was only mildly surprised to see Eugenie visiting Jemima around noon the next day. In the blonde’s hand was a cheerful bouquet of pink, peach and yellow flowers.

“Eugenie! I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Neither did I,” she replied, a little wry. “I certainly didn’t know you were friends with Jemima.”

“Well, we’re not exactly friends,” she admitted. “but I am Madam Edelstein’s apprentice.”

“Oh, really?”

Her fellow housemate was surprised, and the talk detoured in that direction for a while as Hermione explained the arrangement between Nurse Edelstein and Madam Álava. It wasn’t something she wanted to dwell in as she was more curious as to why Eugenie was there, and she asked about it outright.

“I thought she’d like to hear what happened in the prefect meetings that she couldn’t attend,” Eugenie said. “Madam Edelstein said it would be good for her to hear a familiar voice every so often.”

Eugenie had found a spare vase from one of the other side tables, filled it with water with a quick Aguamenti and placed her flowers in. Hermione was quiet simply because she was trying to find something to say that wasn’t as bland as ‘how very nice of you’, or as careless as ‘I don’t think Jemima would do the same for you if you’re the one unconscious in the infirmary’.

“There, the place is more cheerful now, don’t you think?” Eugenie smiled.

Hermione smiled back, even if she felt hers was probably a little more awkward than Eugenie’s.
“I thought one of the Slytherin prefects would do that?”

There, surely that was a neutral question?

“Emma came on Sunday. She then said that she had asked about it to Madam Edelstein, and she answered that recovery would take a while, so she’s content to visit once a week. Gamp is…” The blonde sighed, biting her lower lip in thought. “I came here with her after the prefect meeting on Monday and she barely stayed five minutes before immediately going off. I feel like she doesn’t want me to see her break down. I told her the next day that I don’t mind visiting Jemima at a different time from her, and she told me to mind my own business.”

Hermione frowned, even as she tried to keep her calm. “She said what?”

Eugenie waved it away, unconcerned. “She is simply of bad humour, Hermione. I tried again yesterday and told her I’ll visit Jemima on Tuesday, Thursday and maybe Saturday, and she only nodded and said that she’ll remember that.”

“You’re a good friend, you know that?”

She ducked her head, “oh, it’s nothing.”

“It’s not. You don’t see a lot of Slytherins here, do you?” Hermione asked dryly.

“There are many cards here already.” Eugenie flailed a hand towards the side table. “And there’s another, older bouquet of flowers that’s not mine. She has friends.”

“Then I’d rather have you as my friend than ten of them.”

This time, Eugenie truly blushed.

Nurse Edelstein finally gave her some details on Jemima’s condition once Hermione finished signing her official apprenticeship documents as well as the familiar patient confidentiality one. When Maggie drolly said that she can’t use anything she found out to tease Jemima, the brunette only rolled her eyes and said that the Slytherin was a patient of hers now, and that meant she’d do all she can to make her better. Distressing her clearly wasn’t a part of that.

Truly, Hermione’s pity had overwhelmed a larger portion of her annoyance. She couldn’t even consider Jemima worthy of hate from the beginning—the pureblood witch was simply too ignorant, too cooped up in her own world that it wouldn’t take much to make her trip over her own feet.

Hermione couldn’t take her seriously as a threat.

Now that she thought about it again, Tom’s cutting words had been so precise. The brunette had even borrowed Lucretia’s pensieve just to see the effects of his retorts on Jemima. Each of his reply was a blow as painful as a body punch. Avery might even choose the several body punches if she was given the foresight of what would happen. Hermione certainly would.

That series of perfect hits was a little on the improbable side, even for a raconteur like Tom. You know what’s more probable? The Ravenclaw mused to herself, if he’d planned it all beforehand.

Finding Jemima’s weak spots would be child’s play for him, particularly since they’re in the same House and the Slytherin prefect’s crush meant she was completely unguarded towards him. Once
the information was at hand, it was simply a matter of constructing the right weapon, the right words aimed to hit each spot.

But how did he know that Jemima was going to be in the library that Saturday morning?

Yet that level of orchestration—as if Tom was the director to the cosmic play—wasn’t possible barring an actual Imperius. That spell was too risky to use in Hogwarts if you were trying to lay low. Not to mention that Jemima didn’t act anywhere like an Imperius’d witch. She was too emotional and erratic.

Hermione was left with the unsettled feeling that she was still missing something as she finished helping Nurse Edelstein and left the infirmary.

The Ravenclaw witch did not exactly spend some time in the infirmary every day. It was closer to once every two or three days, though there were sometimes consecutive days if there was a good reason for it. It was thus sometime next week when the infirmary had what she considered as an interesting guest. Curly dark brown hair and from this distance she can already tell that his Slytherin tie was silk.

(All the times she spent with the Slytherin Germans and some of the French helped improve her sartorial observations).

“Evening, Melchior.” Hermione greeted as she opened the infirmary door. His usually easy smile faltered a little once he realised who had opened the door, though his eyes did not lose their warmth.

“Evening—what are you doing here?”

He somehow managed not to drop the flowers he held even as his hands swung down awkwardly.

“I’m Nurse Edelstein’s apprentice,” she said plainly. She was even wearing one of the nurse aprons over her uniform. “Which is why I’m inviting you in even if you sound like you didn’t want to see me here.”

“I don’t—that’s not what I meant at all! I’m always pleased to see you.” His earnestness meant that he wasn’t even lying as he said it.

Nice save, she thought.

Melchior followed her in. He was far more dashing in his Hogwarts uniform than he had any right to (was that a pocket square?)

“Always pleased? You won’t be when I’m banging on your door at midnight” Hermione’s voice was dry.

“But I know you’re considerate enough not to.”

She huffed but said nothing. A second glance gave her more details; his uniform was far more finely tailored compared to the average student’s. Hmm, almost to the level of evening wear this time. She had the odd feeling his current suit-androbe wasn’t one that he wore every day. Not that she could give a reasonable explanation why anyone might have wanted to own more than one type of school uniform, of all things
She certainly didn’t, but what did she know of pureblood habits?

“It doesn’t really matter, considering that you’re here with flowers for someone else.” She answered reasonably.

“I was just passing by,” he murmured. She eyed the yellow roses, some sort of lavender and other blossoms he had in disbelief. This shyness didn’t seem like him much either, even if he was never as shameless as Abraxas.

As if.

Hermione stared at him, waiting for him to raise his gaze once more and meet hers. “No, you’re not. Now, stop dawdling and come in.”

She left the door open and walked back to the medical case that Maggie had handed her earlier, to gauge her skill level. Hermione recognised skittishness well enough by now; it was interesting to see which body languages humans shared with other creatures, a fascinating insight she hadn’t expected to gain from taking Advanced Care of Magical Creatures. She knew that her personality was probably not soothing enough nor her words mellifluous to be able to persuade most people.

The best she could do would be to leave them alone undisturbed.

Her guess was correct—Melchior stepped in some time later when she’d started reading again for a while. She carefully kept her eyes on her scroll even as she tracked his movements across the hall from the corners of her eyes. She waited until the sound of his footsteps stopped before surreptitiously glancing up.

He’d stopped at Jemima’s bed.

Melchior was looking around for an empty vase when Hermione had glided up next to him and offered one.

“Here.”

“I’m just—”

She shook her head. “You don’t owe me any explanations, Melchior. I think it’s nice that you’d do this for a housemate. She doesn’t get a lot of visitors.”

Hermione had gone and stayed in the Nurse’s office the last time Irwin Avery came around, because the first time he saw her, he paled, even when she didn’t do anything much but catch up on her homework once she finished her inventory check (the place was blissfully quiet, something she could use). But other than him, Eugenie and a couple of others she didn’t see anyone else.

The Ravenclaw was content to withdraw again. His presence here had added more puzzle pieces she was working in her head of Jemima Avery’s Fall and she was content to simply mull over it again. She was rather surprised to hear that most Hogwarts students only knew her as ‘suffering of shock of unspecified source’, but she supposed that she shouldn’t have been surprised. The prefects that she knew were professional, if not loyal to one of their own. Apparently, none of them had leaked any details of Jemima’s breakdown. She also knew Lakshmi’s love of secrets didn’t mean she was going to pass them to anyone else—it was enough for her to smirk like a cat with a saucer full of cream at speculators and say nothing, coasting on the desperate curiosity of others while drawing out their suffering every time.

What did surprise her was how Melchior approached her just before he left.
“Are you alright?” He asked. She cocked her head, confused.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I mean, Jemima clearly has given you some trouble…”

Hermione couldn’t help the grin, or the easy shake of her head even if such confidence might come across as cocky. Her competence had been bought with blood, tempered in her unending defence of her friends, even if she could not remember all of them.

“What? No, not at all. She’s overpampered and overconfident. I just hope she wakes up soon before she misses too many classes. Not to mention that being unconscious for too long wouldn’t have been good for her physical health.”

“You…hope,” he said, eyes wide.

“Of course, I do.” She nodded, a crease appearing on her brow for a moment. “She’s a patient like any other.”

“She…she pushed you off those stairs! Right? Pendleton and Starkey eliminated practically everyone else from being the suspect, don’t even try to deny it.”

The vehemence in his tone surprised her. Since he had put it that way, she followed his request and didn’t.

“Look, I can kick her backside the next time she tries to raise a finger against me,” Hermione replied. “I was simply too careless then. She wouldn’t have been able to do so if I was more careful.”

He shook his head. “You…you don’t actually consider her a threat, do you?”

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. “Seriously? You have fought me, right?”

She knew she got him there once he shut his mouth wordlessly.

Hermione found out that Melchior had actually encountered Eugenie on one of the times she wasn’t temporarily manning the infirmary. Both her dormmate and Nurse Edelstein had told him that it would be good for Jemima to hear familiar voices, and he didn’t consider it too much of a hardship to be in the infirmary once in a while when he was free to help with that.

“It’s not that much of a bother,” Melchior said.

Even when she had pulled a chair to sit next to his, which was next to Jemima’s bed, she was biting her lip to stop any of her brash opinions from carelessly pouring out. She took her time to collect and form her thoughts properly before she spoke. This was not too hard to do since Melchior did not mind telling her more things about his routine or asking about her day—questions she can easily answer without second thought. He was, she found out, truly rather friendly.

“It’s still rather amazed,” Hermione finally said. “That you’re still sympathetic to her when you’ve made your opinion clear on how bad it was that she attacked me.”

“We all make mistakes—it doesn’t mean it can’t be fixed. She can be too stubborn and blind to things she doesn’t really want to see.” He finally replied.
“In denial, you mean,” was her dry retort.

A faint smile rose on his face and she knew he did not disagree with her. Still, he did not address her comment directly. “Yet she was able to see who Tom could be even when she’s unaware that he’s actually the Heir. I’ve heard her firmly defending him several times last year to her circle of acquaintance who didn’t know him and thus doubted him. Tom wasn’t even around to overhear that and she never mentioned it to him. It really wasn’t a part of her efforts to persuade him.”

That was unexpected. Melchior’s expression was a little wry when he noticed her surprise.

“She could’ve been more, you know? If only she wasn’t too enamoured of the ‘ideal pureblood lady’ life that she had stuck to in her mind that she could not see other alternatives. If only she didn’t set her cap at Tom and would settle for no one else.”

A part of Hermione was mildly embarrassed that she had never really thought much of Jemima. Though to be fair, why on earth did she want to think more of someone who’d pushed her over some stairs, anyway? She was only human.

However, the Ravenclaw could just let the Slytherin witch live and remake her life in peace after Tom’s brutal deconstruction of her dreams.

“And you say I’m too kind.” Hermione commented.

He rolled his eyes. “You are too forgiving. I just know her more than most and it annoys me to see her being foolish when she could be more than that. I’m just…impatient about her current stupidity.”

Hermione had found her words by now as she stood up.

“Well, then it’s a good thing you’d have plenty of opportunity to familiarise her with your voice. I think it’s about time that she learns to tell the difference between your manner of speaking and Tom’s, don’t you think?”

She didn’t turn around as Melchior sputtered, even if she couldn’t help the amused smirk on her face (it wasn’t as if he would see it). Hermione only raised a hand to wave away his protests, still not looking back and content to go back to her healing homework. For all of Melchior’s supposedly-confused protests of how he has no idea of what she was talking about, she knew exactly why she did it. It was about the second grand Society meeting that she’d only belatedly noticed to have taken place on Samhain—she had a feeling that Tom knew exactly what the date was and did it on purpose. What she’d noted rather immediately was how she’d seen all the Knights helping out the day before.

All except Melchior.

Considering that Jemima went out to London to dance with ‘Tom’ was on that day, she could put two and two together. It was the most obvious of Jemima’s assignations with not-Tom, true, but it had made her trace back her memories and see just when he was absent and how it lined up with Jemima’s schedule that she’d gotten from Emma.

It reminded her of a curious experience she had during the Ministry dinner that was the botched Order of Merlin award ceremony. She’d been sure she saw Tom across the room before Abraxas called her name and then Tom appeared soon enough beside them. She’d thought herself to be mistaken then, but now she saw that a different conclusion was possible.

Come to think of it, she should’ve wondered about it earlier. Why would Tom easily give up the
chance to talk (and schmooze) with people from well-known wizarding families? He might have
tired of the adults’ crass assumptions of him, but she doubted it would have stopped him. She’d
never seen anyone else so driven to overcome the accident of his birth.

To abandon such opportunity did not sound like him. Unless…

Unless he knew there was already someone else to do it for him.

Slowly but certainly the pieces of knowledge fell into her hands. She could almost see the entire
field of Tom’s campaign now and the knowledge gave her an almost visceral sense of power
before she caught herself. Was this how Tom felt all the time? Or even Dumbledore? No wonder
the headmaster began to lose touch with the ordinary wizards and witches! To be able to work on
the greater picture of the world exerted a mesmerising pull, especially for one who always
hungered to change the world like she did.

The only thing that dampened her thoughts was the realisation that he hadn’t told her of it at all.

And yet she’d only asked him for truth when they’d embarked on this unusual arrangement.

The thought created a hollowness in her chest, one that was starting to be filled with echoes of a
myriad of doubts. Hermione could not shut their noises out even as she tried to calm herself.

The last major knot bending Hermione’s theory out of shape so far was how Tom knew Jemima
was going to be in the library, going off to attack her. Her gut instinct suspected that Tom had a
hand in it, but logic and her own mind demanded that she come up with an actual method instead of
just ‘feelings’. The how of it was something she hadn’t managed to figure out yet.

The unsolved problem floated in the background of her school work, sometimes surfacing in the
routine of the infirmary as her idle mind sought for something more substantial to chew on while
she moved efficiently, almost automatically.

When Melchior visited the infirmary again, she was not surprised, though Gallus’ company did.
Melchior presented her with a smaller bouquet just then, ‘for the dedicated lady healer’ and her
ironic curtsy was matched with a bow that was more genuine. Gallus also had a bouquet for her,
and when she said that she wasn’t getting the impression that he was here to visit the patient, he
didn’t deny it.

“I’m not. I’m here because I hear you’re here.” The Rosier heir said. “I’m sure you’re bored
enough that any company is welcome.”

“But…why?”

Gallus’ sly smile was his answer, as was his bow to her.

“We are friends, aren’t we?” They were, but she felt that there were other things he hadn’t
mentioned still.

If Melchior stayed for a while, Gallus was more content to talk to her after a cursory visit to
Jemima, and when they’ve exhausted their conversation topics, he easily took his leave and
departed from the infirmary even while Melchior was still there.

Two days after that, she encountered Abraxas and Pendleton who greeted her with cheer and
reserve, respectively. They were an interesting case for her to compare and contrast. Both blond
wizards from old wizarding families with manners that were diametrical to each other that one never thought of them as related—like Achilles and Odysseus, perhaps? The latter blond came with a small bowl filled with...grapes?

“I was about to bring a fruit basket, but I remembered that Avery’s mostly unconscious.” Pendleton said, by way of explanation.

Hermione nodded slowly.

“It’s no problem. I suppose I can feed them to her,” the spider-silk tube that was the wizarding world’s preference compared to IV drips came to mind. “But I don’t think she’d realise the difference in what she’s eating.”

“It’s the thought that counts.” Pendleton said, unfazed.

“Can’t we just have this conversation inside?” Abraxas griped. Hermione stepped aside easily. The Malfoy heir ignored the look that Pendleton was giving him as he gave her a charming smile and presented a bouquet to her with a flourish. “And how are you, Hermione? Is the current addition to your schedule not putting an undue burden you?”

“It may surprise some of you, but the Hogwarts infirmary cannot be compared to the A&E ward of St—Mungo’s” Her answer was dry even as she accepted Abraxas’ bouquet.

She’d almost said St. Barts there. Why did I almost say St. Barts? Hermione ignored yet another memory oddity of hers with the speed of one who had a lot of practise.

“Is it boring?” Abraxas asked, curiosity clear in the way his blond head turned this way and that as he took in the infirmary. Pendleton came in at a more sedate pace and taking a direct path towards Jemima’s bed.

“Well, it can be. Luckily, I have my all my homework with me, so I can just get through them during the slow times. I still don’t understand why all of you are bringing me flowers.” Hermione was beginning to be a tad familiar with the spare vase cupboard here.

“Isn’t it obvious? Because you deserve one. Beautiful flowers for the beautiful.” Abraxas replied.

The brunette huffed as she took out a new vase. “Flattery won’t get you anywhere.”

They bantered for a while as Hermione casted Aguamenti and placed yet another bouquet into a vase, with Pendleton chiming in occasionally. Between the two of them, they had another bouquet, this time for Jemima, and she had prepared a second vase for it. When they had reached Jemima’s bed, Hermione added the flowers among the bevy of best wishes and get-well-soon greetings from Jemima’s friends (other Slytherins, mostly).

Pendleton’s expression was more thoughtful than anything else as he watched the witch laying in repose. Abraxas seemed uncomfortable for some reason. His gaze flitted to the pale countenance once in a while, but fled just as rapidly to other places—the window, the larger side table Hermione had made by joining two smaller ones considering all the get-well cards, the edge of the blanket closest to him.

“So, is everyone going to make their way here?” Hermione broke the quiet first.

“Excuse me?” Pendleton asked.

“I’ve seen Melchior and Gallus, and now you two...is everyone else going to visit?”
“I don’t know. Certainly not Ves,”

His answer intrigued her. “Why not?”

The pale grey eyes looked out towards the pale wintry sky for a moment before he met her gaze. “To say that Tom is disinclined to Jemima Avery is an understatement.”

“That’s like saying a volcano is a little hot,” Abraxas muttered beside him. Pendleton continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted.

“Ves is…let us just say that what Tom prefers, he would favour above many. What Tom disapproves, he will easily hate.”

A disciple, Hermione thought, the realisation settling strangely into her mind.

“Would’ve called him a bootlicker if it wasn’t for the hero-worship.” Abraxas said again. “Tom actually said that it’s not a bad idea to visit sick House mates, as Slytherins take care of each other and all. Guess what Ves said? Any Slytherin but her and her brother. Can we simply settle for ‘tactless arse’ as his nickname and be done with it?”


“Right, sorry for the language, but I’m sure you get the sentiment.”

“Yet you don’t seem like you want to be here either.” Hermione hit the opening the moment she saw it.

“I happen to like talking to you.” Abraxas’ grin wasn’t as bright as his first, but it was no less genuine, and he easily ignored Pendleton’s pointed throat-clearing. She glanced heavenward once.

“I wasn’t talking about visiting me. I was talking about visiting Jemima.”

Abraxas couldn’t help glancing at the invalid for a fleeting tenth of a second. He rubbed his nose with a sigh. “You don’t really beat around the bush, do you?”

“I’m just curious.”

He shrugged. “I just don’t like hospitals or anything close to it.”

It was true, she could see his discomfort better now that he’d put it that way. Whether it was the only reason was something she could put aside for now.

“Well, are you both going to try talking to Jemima?”

“Why would we?” Abraxas asked flattering and brash at the same time. “Much better to talk to you.”

“I would like to do so if it doesn’t feel too much like monologuing.” Pendleton said with a neutral shrug of ‘what can you do?’

Hermione sighed. She did end up finding seats for all three of them and settled them all not far from Jemima. She supposed the sound of familiar voices from Slytherin House might help. There was no harm in trying, right? Getting some tea here wasn’t difficult as there was a dedicated infirmary house elf (‘Call me Heely, Miss!’) and an assortment of cut fruit pieces (because she preferred to not serve cakes all the time).
Abraxas was somewhat curious on what being a Nurse’s apprentice meant on top of her class schedule. The Ravenclaw didn’t think it was that much of bother because she’d already mastered the basics. The presence of established standards to follow meant that Nurse Edelstein needed to go through some routine tests and exercises just to see how much she’d mastered, and even that was spread over days and weeks as they both had their own daily life to attend to.

It wasn’t anything too trying for Hermione right now and she suspected that the first few months would be this easy as Maggie dotted her i’s and crossed her t’s when it comes to establishing the baseline of Hermione’s healing knowledge. Even caring for the patients here were not difficult. Unlike the non-magical world, here, cleaning patients only took a wave of her wand. The only patients staying in the infirmary was Jemima and two first years who had an accident in Potions class this morning—she was positive they’d be able to be discharged at the end of the day, at the latest.

Hermione tried to distract the boys from being too stunned about her careless replies regarding her healing apprenticeship by asking questions back.

“So, what are you planning to do after Hogwarts?”

“After Hogwarts?”

“Yes? You know, career? Work? Go around the world, maybe?” She asked.

“Well, I’ll be the Lord of Malfoy Manor anyway, why do I need to work?” Abraxas asked in puzzlement. It was met with a roll of eyes from Hermione and surprisingly to her, a huff from Pendleton.

“Look, we have our own Wizengamot seat to hold too! Going around the world sounds like a grand idea, though.” Abraxas conceded.

“My family have our own estate and Wizengamot seat, and my father had still been an Auror Captain.” Pendleton countered, holding his teacup and saucer with level ease.

“Yes, and your family had to entrust your vote to another family at least half the time because his ‘job’ takes so much of his time.” Abraxas said.

“And yet we have read carefully and voted for all the Wizengamot Acts. I don’t see why actual physical presence is always necessary.” The paler blond said, undisturbed. “I’ll probably enter the Auror Corps too.”

“Your family is obsessed with the hunt.” Abraxas retorted, fine brows furrowed.

“The hunt?” Hermione asked, her attention split between the two of them.

“The hunt.” The Malfoy heir answered with a firm nod, fine long fingers and finer jet-black robes waving carelessly in emphasis. “No prey more challenging than humans, right?”

She hadn’t expected Pendleton to flick an irritated glance towards his House mate before he closed his eyes and took a breath.

“It’s not quite like that. But yes, a strong dislike for people who managed to escape from the consequences of their crimes is a family trait.”

“I wouldn’t really call it dislike for escapees. More like hate or obsession…” Abraxas began to murmur, but it faded into unclear mumblings as Pendleton’s stare was aimed squarely at him.
She pretended she hadn’t been listening to the fidgeting blond that carefully and simply sipped her tea. It was rather strange to realise that their black robes weren’t the same black—Pendleton’s shade was similar to Hermione’s. She’d have thought it was black enough if she hadn’t seen the intense black of Abraxas’. The brunette restrained a snort. Those pureblood families—even their uniforms seem designed to make a statement. Compared to Abraxas’, theirs just look a little faded, or perhaps a more greyish sort of black.

“Personally, I enjoy untangling people’s actions.” Pendleton finally said to Hermione.

“His father brought him to work more than once before. Can you imagine that?” Abraxas said with slight disbelief.

“It had been enlightening,” he countered, ash grey eyes already even once more, “to see the types of people who usually ran afoul of the law and to see him at work.”

“I don’t see what’s interesting about all the hedge witches, petty counterfeiters and potion dealers,” his Housemate grumbled. “Lowlife rabble, all of them. Once you’ve seen one thief, you’ve seen them all. The Wizengamot is where anything of importance in the wizarding world happens.”

“And I don’t see what’s interesting about the gossips of people who feast, fete and fall asleep with scarcely a change in their activities year by year, herded from one party to another by those they acclaim as ‘most fashionable’. I’ve seen sheep with more interesting lives.”

Pendleton’s smile had a little more teeth this time. Abraxas’ grin was just as sharp. Just when Hermione was getting concerned about the rising tension, they both broke into laughter, surprising her.

It was…it sounded as if it had been a well-trodden path.

_Huh_, she thought, relaxing once more. She had to admit that it was interesting to see where their natural tendencies lay, undoubtedly after years of patient teaching by both of their parents. The politician and the investigator.

For some reason it occurred to her that two minds are better than one. She would usually have brought the topic up with Harry, who usually had the bad luck of tripping over the schemes of yet another aspiring dark lord or lady, and had been an investigator in the Auror corps too (the details skittered away from her as she tried to grasp it, and she can’t even remember how long Harry had been there).

She was still trying to solve the Fall of Jemima Avery. Since Pendleton was here, she might as well pick his brain a little.

“Pendleton,” Hermione began. “Do you know how someone can find out the exact time an attacker will attack them?”

That line of questioning brought out Abraxa’s curiosity, she could see. For all his expressive blue eyes filled with questions for her, he held himself well as he voiced none of his thoughts. Pendleton placed his teacup and saucer down to the table and laced his long fingers together, seemingly uncurious.

“An attack. Is the attack more like a brawl or a fight in an alley, or one where a politician is suddenly attacked by an assassin in a crowd?” _Ah, he made a good point of differentiating them_, she thought. Hermione found herself nodding once slowly in agreement with that division.

“If it was the first, then it would be rather predictable, in a way, isn’t it? Is the victim one who
drinks too much and easily picks fight? Or is he one with rivals who meets and argues with him often and took the argument too far, for example? The second is more difficult. How do you tell which one of these tens and hundreds of people, almost all who had no prior contact with the victim, would suddenly decide to harm him?” Pendleton asked.

“The second is like searching for a needle in a haystack,” Abraxas mused.

“Precisely.”

Hermione couldn’t help her sigh. “I was thinking of the second, I’m afraid. Attack on a public figure in a public place…”

Pendleton shrugged, “that one is a difficult problem, Hermione. If you can help with that, I’m sure the Aurors guarding the Ministry of Magic would very much like to hear from you.”

And that was the end of that thought. The conversation moved away to newer topics, such as the bands Abraxas had heard of in various London clubs. Pendleton did ask another question or two on the previous topic, one of them being him wondering what could have driven her interest that way. She redirected him easily by saying that of course she thought of it—it was hard not to when she’d encountered a muggle sniper during the Hogsmeade Crisis! He understood her impetus then and their conversation was of lighter concerns after that for a while before both wizards took their leave.

It was when they were gone and she was piling the tea set on a tray that Hermione mulled over it again. She realised that she had misrepresented her problem to Pendleton.

No, you’re wrong, or at the very least not entirely correct. Jemima’s attempt to attack her (before Tom verbally shredded the Slytherin witch) was in a public area, sure. Yet she wasn’t an unknown, one person in the crowd, of which all have an equal probability of being the attacker. The probability that she will attack was not something that Hermione needed to calculate using a stochastic equation. It was not stochastic violence, where for a politician taking a stance on a controversial issue where there is a known violent movement against is, there is a non-zero probability in any public venue that an attacker will slip among the audience and try to attack the politician.

She was a known rival. The odds of Jemima attacking her was, frankly…approaching 100%, especially as the time interval the attack was projected to occur was stretched to include the entire academic year. The Ravenclaw couldn’t imagine Jemima sitting still and being accepting as Tom slowly pulled his relationship with Hermione public.

It really was a matter of time.

Then, was it a matter of finding out Jemima’s movements, and then figuring out when she would attack Hermione in that time? Hermione shook her head. No, she felt that she was still overly complicating this for some reason. She rubbed her temples. This really was more Harry’s field than hers. It would be much easier if she could talk to him…

What would you do, Harry?

What would you do if you have an enemy you know is out to get you? And you don’t know when their next attack would happen?

She had sat, cross-legged, on a chair she’d turned into a cosy armchair, trying to clear her mind of clutter, to calm herself and watch her breathing rise and fall evenly. It was something close to
meditation. Don’t force any memory, just do free associations.

She started with Avery, moved to ‘possible threats’, drifted to the half-formed memories she had of the investigations Harry and Ron did. Her last conversation with Pendleton and Abraxas still stayed with her. To go on hunts. Harry wouldn’t have minded the term at all…

Her memories worked this time, or she just happened to not have lost this fragment among many others. She caught a glimpse of herself in a pub, Harry and Ron with her and Neville to her other side. There was even Luna on Neville’s other side. Their faces were still unclear, and she couldn’t get enough details about the pub to save her life, but their voices, the mannerisms, the hair colours…it couldn’t have been anyone else.

Closing her eyes, she let the memory flow and just listened.

*If you know someone’s out to get you, then you better get them first, isn’t it?*

Harry, that was Harry. The messy black hair hadn’t changed—she could still see its outline sticking up in places even with the blurred recollection.

“Why sit still like sitting duck? Why don’t we bring the fight to them?” Harry said again.

“Seize the initiative—attack them first.” Ron said from Harry’s other side. “There’s a good reason playing black gives you an edge.”

A small smile graced her lips. *Ah, Ron and his chess metaphors.*

“But…but you still told them to sit tight…” Neville added, confusion clear in his voice.

Harry grinned, wide as the Cheshire cat and almost as weird as she couldn’t exactly see the details of the rest of his face.

“Well, Neville, there are two ways to hunt. Do you know what they are?” He turned to her in the memory. “Don’t help him, Hermione, I need to know how much everyone knows.”

Hermione could feel herself closing her mouth and the fleeting memory-feel of annoyance. What annoyance? That, perversely, annoyed her present self. She didn’t even have any idea of what her past-self was about to say.

“Well, Neville, there are two ways to hunt. Do you know what they are?” He turned to her in the memory. “Don’t help him, Hermione, I need to know how much everyone knows.”

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“Um, you just go out into the forest and hunt?”

“That’s the first, true. You go out to where your target is, to their home field, what Hermione would call their habitat, and you hunt for them. It would be a bit of a challenge since they generally have the home ground advantage.”

“Oh, yeah. I wouldn’t want to be in that position,” Neville said, subdued.

“But there’s still the second way,” Luna added, her voice light.

“Aww, Luna, let me be the one to tell it!” Harry whined. It surprised her for a moment until she realised that Harry was probably letting off steam, because she knew he had to be the charismatic and responsible team leader for his Aurors. The only time he could relax was with his friends—with them. *Ron was wisely not saying a word and simply signalling for another glass.***

“Alright, go on, Harry.” Luna replied with flourish.

“The second one is, you set a trap—”
Hermione’s eyes opened immediately in shock. She knew how the entire conversation went. With that, she’d also figured out what Tom did.

“That—that schemer!”

She couldn’t wait. She was going to get her hands on him and then—

Hermione took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She wasn’t going to get angry with him and build herself up into a snit, perhaps piling one imaginary harm after another, when he wasn’t even here to defend himself. She’d like to think that she wasn’t the same Hermione who could go into spectacular rows with Ron—her attention to detail and bluntness coming together with his carelessness and conflict-avoidance hadn’t been a good combination.

(She knew that much and it felt true in her gut, even if she could barely recall any memories about that relationship. (Perhaps not remembering the arguments and fights wasn’t such a bad thing.))

Whatever was going to happen, they needed to talk. She found a spare scroll and penned a short missive after some thought.

*When the sun goes down, you’ll find me there,*  
*Where three came together for a reason,*  
*Yet two deceived one, new plans they wish done*  
*To which I came later, a spectator*  
*To a debt being repaid, of equal numbers fair.*

They lines were serviceable instead of artistic and it was fine. It wasn’t a great limerick. She didn’t intend to write poetry in the first place, just enough to make it sound like an actual riddle instead of an outright description to distract possible snoopers.

She did not write her name, as usual. He would recognise her handwriting and her preferred ink colour. Not to mention that her handing it to Hattie to pass to him would be the most obvious sign of all.

'—

Hermione sat on a fallen log in the clearing at the outer edge of the Forbidden Forest. In front of her was a bluebell flame.

For all the flame’s appearance of burning on a fallen branch, it had yet to turn it to ash. She was still channelling magic to power it. Not that it would be necessary for long, once the waxing moon had risen high enough (it would be full moon in several more days), but why take the risk now? Besides, the presence of fire was a good enough warning to the creatures of the forest to stay away from her.

Every once in a while, she would need to cast a warming charm on herself. Otherwise, her stay in the forest did not trouble her.

The sound of steps through the underbrush caught her attention, standing out from the background noises she’d gotten used to in her wait. It didn’t take long for Tom to arrive, black robes fluttering behind him, dramatic in the half-light. He could pass for the main lead in an opera. She stood up, her lips twisted wryly—whether in a grimace or a grin, she didn’t know.

“Tom.” She said, trying to keep her voice even.

He noticed something, she knew, since he stood two steps away from her and no further. He cast
Lumos twice, to fill two lantern balls that she’d seen him use earlier before he floated it in the air. The greenish and bluish lights gave them a ghostly cast to their pallor. For an instant, a morbid feeling overtook her.

Two ghosts clinging desperately to life—I suspect we’re both dead in my timeline, fragments of old history. But you don’t even know that, do you?

“Hermione. What seems to be the problem?” Tom’s voice cut through her dark thoughts.

She shook away her doubts and went straight back to business.

“I needed answers about Jemima.” Straight to the point and neutral. A good start, she told herself. Let’s start from the simplest ones, shall we? She had a small note in the palm of her hand, with a list of the main points she wanted to get through.

“What are your questions?” He queried.

“Why did you destroy her?”

“I only told her the truth.”

“You did give her the truth, sure,” Hermione acknowledged, “but the way every statement of yours was a fatal hit to her sensibilities is either extremely lucky or extremely planned. I’d go with extremely well-planned.”

“Perhaps I’m simply that good.”

“Against Avery?” Hermione made a half-hearted chuckle in disbelief.

“Why not?”

“Why would you even practise disarming overpampered pureblood twits? Even if you only hit back with half of what you did, she’d still be emotionally scarred. To go to such ends is a waste of your talents. Ergo, you planned that one event.” She raised her left hand in a careless wave to stop him from replying yet. “Or well, perhaps now you’ll tell me that I’m only imagining things, but let me remind you that I don’t accept being lied to. Whether it’s simple avoidance or omittance, it would still make it not the entire truth.”

Her voice hardened.

“Whatever your answer is, above all else, let it be true.”

Even she could hear the tension the end. She bit her lip and looked down for a moment, gathering her calm around her once more. Yelling or accusing things was not going to get her answers nor would it solve any problem or mystery. She could see him carefully taking in the weight of her words, saw the tautness of his jaw as he realised that he’d walked into something more serious than he’d expected.

“The truth is, we checked my food before you did. I was dosed with Amortentia that has her as the target of affection.” Tom said casually. “Did you know that?”

Her throat was a little less tight now. “I had suspected. I remember that Ves had Amortentia among the potions of his creations. I thought that you must have known who the culprit was even if you’re not telling me, and that you were giving them a taste of their own medicine.”
A corner of his lips rose.

"You noticed that." Now, it was the faintest of smiles, as elusive as the new moon and as striking.

"Melchior didn’t notice it at all. Well, he noticed it later, but it was too obvious by then—"

"—because you’d ordered him to be your double and feed Jemima’s daydreams, whose grandeur is then magnified with the strength of the Amortentia."

"A perfectly poetic revenge." He finished.

Hermione nodded slowly, considering her possible words with care.

"I suppose."

"If I didn’t do it, she would still be a bother for years, Hermione. Most Slytherins—or any other House, for that matter—don’t consider it as something dangerous. Mostly, it’s because people in general aren’t that great a potioneer to make Amortentia that’s too intense." He explained, giving more details than she’d expected.

"And I thought you said you didn’t feel all that different on Amortentia or not. What I do know was that you didn’t even care about your own poisoning." She pointed out, remembering full well his reaction.

"I didn’t. Then I found out that the Amortentia was supposed to make me feel immensely attracted to her of all people. If I were to retaliate, it would be within my rights as the target."

Dark blue eyes met hers unwavering, and she knew he was right. It was how the laws of Slytherin House worked, and she had to fight the indignation that the current Hogwarts could not have stood up more for its students. His content expression told her how he was unaware of the thoughts churning in her head.

"It was such an excellent opportunity to remove a known pest. I took it."

Tom cast a warming charm over himself and then her. Hermione had been so intent on the conversation that she hadn’t really noticed the goosebumps rising on her skin or the slight shiver that began to pass through her as her previous warming charm faded away. She murmured her thanks and he inclined his head in reply.

If only their entire partnership were as easy and straightforward as his courtesies to her.

"You hunted her down." She gave her conclusion first.

"I did." He did not deny. For all his flaws, he never outright lied to her.

"The sudden deluge of flower crowns from you was the trap set for Jemima, wasn’t it?" She began again, looking at her boots, lit with the greenish light. "I was wondering that there was no particular occasion for them."

"But I do want to give them to you, Hermione. You’re worth all of them."

Her chuckle was dry and she was still not looking up yet, couldn’t look up yet even if her gaze flickered to his for a moment. She wished he did not look so at ease in her presence, that she couldn’t even deny that he preferred her company above others. It would have made being angry with him easier.
“Perhaps you do. But you rarely do anything for just one or two reason, isn’t it? You might be merely feeling sentimental, but it’s more probable that you do and you were also looking for a way to pull her attention towards me at the same time.”

She sighed. “The rumours of me about to gift you a flower crown of my own had circulated enough before I finished it.”

“You made no secret of it,” Tom pointed out.

She let out a short bark of laughter. “And you knew that, didn’t you? That I wouldn’t care for subterfuge. It was something you can expect, predict.”

Tom’s gaze was too calm, as if he had been a complete innocent.

“So, you planned all that and then executed it all the way to the end, and you didn’t tell me.”

Hermione knew her voice had changed entirely at the end of the sentence, but she didn’t care.

‘-’

“Suddenly I’m not worth sharing plans with.”

Her left hand swept out as she stared him down, her curls vivid and alive. Her gaze was intense even under the pale lights and the staticky haze of magic grew around her with her rising emotions. She was powerful, beautiful, his—now, if only she wasn’t so coldly pissed off.

“I would have told you.”

“Really?” She drawled, packing more sarcasm in one word than even Abraxas could.

“I know you’d find out in the end. To hide it from you is the height of idiocy, so why would I even try?”

“Yet I’ve only found out now—” Hermione stopped herself as her voice began to crack in the end, taking to just staring at him.

He paused too, finding the change unsettling. His Hermione was not one for histrionics.

“I was waiting for the entire plan to come to its conclusion before telling you,” the admittance fell from his lips even if he would prefer that it never did. He was rationing his truths to bargain with, like a prehistoric man measuring his sacrifices to the Sea for the entire year. This one was simply one that he had to spend now.

“Ha.”

“You would have thought the plan too unfeeling.” He pointed out.

“It is too unfeeling!”

“An example had to be set for anyone thinking of doing the same thing. If I had been unfeeling, she would be dead or truly destroyed.” It was most probable that he would only choose death. He had no need of a possible blood feud with the Averys by seeking her total destruction, even if he could. And so, he moderated himself.

“You—!”
“I had been thinking of you.” The calm was starting to slip away from his voice and he clawed it back towards him with a sense of urgency rarely felt. The wind brought the faint scent of pine to him.

She snorted. “Not enough to actually tell me about it, apparently.”

“Because I was afraid that you’ll do…this.”

Hermione’s glare pinned him, as cold and raging as winter rapids in Scotland. Instantly, he knew he’d said the wrong thing.

“This is precisely because you didn’t tell me!” She snapped. “What am I, Tom? Do you truly consider me your partner, or am I just another pretty doll by your side to distract the unknowing masses?”

“You’re not a mere doll.”

“Didn’t you just move me in a way you wish me to move, without telling me why? Pulling my strings?”

That was a bolt of lightning out of the blue. He was surprised that she’d thought that way.

“I didn’t—”

“You did. You did it when you goaded me into reciprocating your gifts, when you strongly suspected that she’d move with my movement. Then, you told me nothing of this, nothing when you’ve apparently set me to dance to your tune, for a plan of yours I don’t know about.”

The anger didn’t scare him. He’d seen anger often in other people and he’d learned to deal with it. As she closed her eyes, her rage somehow half spent already—it was the closed-off distance in them that he didn’t like. When her words were caught in her throat and her gaze was part regret. What he didn’t want to see was if she was giving up completely (was she?)

He could hear the hurt in her voice and it vexed him that he knew not why.

“That’s because she is nothing.” He replied. “A technicality. A mere obstacle on the road to be cleared. Mere debris. I haven’t exactly told you of all the details of all the arrangements I have in Slytherin, have I? And you have no issue with it as long as you know the broad outlines.”

“This is the same thing.” He emphasised.

The Forest was quiet, but he was not too concerned yet. Their presence and their agitation probably steered many of its denizens to avoid this corner.

They were going nowhere. But that’s not true, is it? The thought crashed across in his mind like an incoming tide roused and fed by storm, battering all the smaller, feeble thoughts that stood in its way. She had no family here. Hermione could go anywhere.

“Are you leaving?”

The use of chains came to his mind before he dismissed them as silly. Firstly, it would certainly annoy her more than hold her back. Hermione was a powerful witch. Secondly, they wouldn’t stop her—even taking her wand away was just going to drive her straight into wrath if she had to rely on blood magic to free herself (he knew several powerful wandless spells and he had no doubt she did too—none of his Knights were her match).
Yet his question seemed to call her back from the edge for a reason he didn’t know. Hermione eyed him strangely. Perhaps it was the rising tone of his question. Tom cleared his throat instead.

“Leaving? Why would I leave? We’re not even done talking.” The brunette said.

“You’re not going to go off to fight Grindelwald on your own in Europe right now?”

She frowned. “Don’t be absurd.”

Tom had no name for the passing light-headedness that came and went with her words, the feeling that his world had tilted so far that he had to scramble to find his balance again, and yet now it tilted upwards correctly. The sky was up and the earth was down once more, even if he had to reassert control over his limbs and knees. All things were as it should be. He hadn’t realised he’d taken a careless step until she closed the distance and held his arm.

“Tom?”

Laughter bubbled from inside him, buoyant and free of the fears he’d just had and it was hard to hold it back. He was rubbing his face for a moment because he had no idea what expression he was wearing and he did not want to chase her off. When he looked up, Tom wondered how was it possible that for all her suspicions of him right now, she was also clearly concerned.

The Ravenclaw didn’t stop him when he took the last half step to reach out and pull her into his arms. He leaned his forehead on her shoulder. The scent of roses and ink caught his nose, with something sweeter with a hint of lemon that was all her. In the strange calmness of his mind, what he should do next to earn her grace again rang clearly.

“I’m sorry. I just…I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

As long as he lived and could remember, it was the first time he said the phrase and truly meant it instead of only half-heartedly saying it to get people to stop hassling him. It was true—he hadn’t truly realised how important it was for her to be embedded deeply in his machinations, to know. Though considering that she was a Ravenclaw, it should have been obvious, shouldn’t it? It should have been easy to guess that she preferred to have all knowledge no matter how discomfiting to none. He had been the fool here. With how tight he was holding her, he could feel her chest rose and fell with her sigh, her warmth and softness that was only his.

Hermione was still his. Everything else can be fixed. His plans for the future realigned itself ahead of him.

“You’re not forgiven yet, you know?” She murmured, even as her arms slowly held him in return.

“I know. But I can work towards it as long as you’re here.”

“I can’t stay if you don’t give me your trust, and I won’t stay if you play me like another puppet of yours again.”

Tom wanted to disagree, that she was never a puppet and that he merely…nudged her the way he had always done to other people from time to time. And it was far, far milder than anyone else, but he knew she didn’t want to hear that. He might not feel he did, but she certainly felt used. He wondered what sort of friends Hermione had to be able to consider such a slight nudge to be a very grave sin to her. It was so normal that he barely even noticed it these days; everyone does it to everyone else in Slytherin.

Now that he thought about it, her world was probably rather alien to him, wasn’t it? What were her
friendships like?

“Yes, I’m starting to realise that. You will know all the plans that involve you, I swear it.”

His hands had started to stroke her back when he heard the slight waver in her voice. That reminded him that he was remiss with the warming charm for a while and so he casted it for them both. Hermione was so independent and self-contained that he forgot that she was still human, with human vulnerabilities. One of which he’d inadvertently stabbed. Tom winced.

He kissed a spot slightly below her jaw and felt her shiver in his embrace. Hermione hadn’t tried moving away.

“You should’ve tried arguing to me about the necessity of bringing Jemima down first instead of going off like that. I’m not completely dense on how Slytherin works, you know?” She said again before sighing. “And as much as I don’t like to admit it, I don’t like Jemima. Never has.”

“Of course.”

“But just…don’t treat me like another puppet again.”

“Of course not, Hermione. Never again.” It was not a difficult promise to make.

After a while, he let out a soft exhale and pulled back slightly, though his hand was still on her waist.

“So, do you have a three-hour slot in your schedule this week to sit down and talk about the existing alliances in Slytherin and beyond?”

He would never say it out loud on pain of torture, but her confused expression was adorable.

“What?”

“Three hours at the very least, thought I suppose we could push anything more to next week and December. You want to know everything, right? Just in case you thought that a coincidental meeting with some of them on one of our dates is something I manipulate instead of actual happenstance. How would you know to trust me when you don’t know enough of my affairs?”

This time, the brunette was the one who slumped and leaned on his shoulder.

“Urgh, you have a point. We’ll just…this Saturday, I think. I have enough homework to finish this week.”

Her concerns were so mundane and yet he found them perfectly charming. If she could think about homework again, that meant there were no larger problems that she was putting her mind on solving.

“That reminds me, Melchior had managed to track down the parties involved with the Daily Prophet article.”

“Which one?”

“The mess of counter-blame faulting anyone but Grindelwald? As if any other possible threat right now warrants as much attention.”

Her expression cleared. “Ah! That one!”
Incredulity grew in his mind and he stared at her with a flat look.

“…you forgot, didn’t you?”

“No, no. Of course not! It’s just that there’s this apprenticeship thing I had going and I’m already starting to look up the technical details of my Herbology final project. Not to mention I’m still debating as to whether to go with studying and actualising my animagus form or something else…”

Tom knew the left corner of his lips were twitching upwards, which was why her long sigh after she trailed away didn’t surprise him. His left hand had drifted upwards without thought, sinking themselves into her curls and caressing her head.

“…alright, it’s not at the top of my concerns, no.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

The Slytherin was unaffected by her vexed look. “It was the work of Irwin Avery, in a misguided attempt to assist the Knights—well, me. Most of his arguments are courtesy of Gamp.”

“Help you? Why on earth—”

“He was forwarding the cause of pureblood supremacy. I would gladly strike him yet again for this particular mistake of his.” He simply watched the minute flickers of her expression. “Considering your general reluctance on delivering hurt, I suppose I can be forgiving this once. After all, he’s still miserable about his sister’s malady, isn’t he? Last I heard, he had been losing enough sleep that his classes suffered.”

There was a reluctant sigh from Hermione as she bumped her forehead lightly against his collarbone.

“Thank you for your restraint. And yes, that’s pretty generous of you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“It’s going to take us a while, isn’t it? To trust?” She wondered out loud.

Tom shrugged, unconcerned. “Nobody’s worth trusting until they earn it. The point is, as long as you’re here, any problem we have can be worked on.”

That earned a huff from her, and half a wry chuckle, but he could almost hear the beginnings of a smile in her voice.

Carefully, Tom tipped her chin up, so their gazes met.

“Hermione,”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to seal our agreement and kiss you.”

He thought he saw colour blooming over her cheekbones, which was odd because it wasn’t as if they hadn’t kissed before.

“…sure.”

He leaned slowly, to give ample time for her to retreat, but she never did.
For a moment he remembered the time he kissed her in broad daylight in a Hogwarts corridor, at first
mainly following his impulse to unsettle the strange yet annoyingly even-keeled transfer student. He was no
longer thinking of that soon enough as she pulled him under, the connection between them unexpected and
unmistakable.

Her mouth greeted his in a gentle welcome. He was not a wizard given to staying still, to simply be
satisfied with a mediocre lot in life. It was in his nature to always be prepared, to run dozens of plans and
keep a hundred more in reserve. For him, equilibrium lay in dynamic motion.

Yet in that still moment, in the growing night, there was nowhere else he’d rather be.

'~ End of Second Arc – Opening Gambits ~'

Chapter End Notes

Additional Notes:

“She is simply of bad humour, Hermione”: Is actually a literal translation of ‘Elle est simplement de mauvaise
humeur, Hermione’ which is more aptly put in English as ‘she’s simply in a bad mood.’ Based on my
experience when you’re speaking quickly in a language that you’re not thinking in, some terms don’t get
parsed adequately and just get translated literally.
63 Intermezzo - Alastor Moody I

Chapter Summary

The experience of one Alastor Moody, Auror, during the Hogsmeade Crisis and beyond, consisting mostly of his encounters with two unusual Hogwarts students. Snippets of Hermione’s shift in St. Mungo’s A&E in two Saturdays. A conversation between Hermione and Tom.

(Summary applies to both intermezzo chapters titled ‘Alastor Moody’)

Chapter Notes

Hi, how’s everyone been? I hope you guys are hanging on alright. Managing my gastritis without my usual runs aside, the most I can complain about is my youngest brother coordinating an online game of mahjong loudly in the living room in the middle of the night. My complaints are mere trifles compared to what others have to face, I’m sure. I haven’t gotten the hang of the third arc’s plot yet, but I think I can upload a few intermezzo chapters for a bit for now to entertain and distract even for a moment. Have a good read and stay safe and well everyone!

63 Intermezzo – Alastor Moody I

The 17th of October wasn’t a good day for Alastor Moody.

He had left the Ministry the moment the panicked woman who rushed in finished her report, only spending a little more time to bark orders to his underlings and ensuring that someone would continue passing the news to Director Bones, by flooing to his house if necessary. It was a good thing that he habitually checked on his office on Saturdays, because as good as the Aurors manning the place was, he wasn’t sure they were prepared for something like this.

The attack at Hogsmeade really could have been worse, Moody thought, cursing the new Aurors who didn’t even think on checking their wards when the number of calls into the DMLE seemed to have dropped in frequency to zero, only too glad for their momentary peace. Bloody idiots. That had almost never happened in his experience, not even on Saturday mornings. He had already mentally assigned them to the graveyard shift for at least the next week, probably two, and he knew that Director Bones would easily sign that order.

They were lucky that the attack wasn’t any worse, though it galled him to know that the Aurors had missed most of the fight and was now practically the clean-up team. Albus’ assuring pats on the shoulder and Orpheus nod of how they ‘had it under control’ almost rouse the fury he felt towards his underlings yet again, but he managed to hold it back. That was supposed to be their job.

The fastest wand and most dedicated mind of wizarding Britain my arse.
A part of him was also trying to think up about setting up stealth attacks and infiltration exercises into the Ministry to ensure that the rookies were more alert, but he set that aside for now. It wasn’t what he needed to focus on, as he was about to meet one of the enigmas of the day. The room in front of him was one set aside in Hogshead Inn for precisely these types of impromptu interviews.

The brass handle turned under his hand and he pushed the door open.

Alastor had started assessing the student the moment he walked into the room. The student had entered before him and he was now observing the view outside the window. The young wizard turned around when he heard the door open.

Two teachers had brought in the hidden shooter, but both said that it was two students who had disarmed him. Two students. He’d thought that Albus and Orpheus were joking and was just holding back his bark of laughter, but one continued to look grave while the other concerned. He knew then that they were telling the truth. The witch of the two was actually the young healing talent raising a commotion in St. Mungo’s recently, backed by the famously-demanding Madam Álava, so perhaps there was something more to her after all—what with rumours of her being a refugee from Europe. There might’ve been things she’d seen and done that she wasn’t too enthusiastic to jaw on about.

The wizard, however...

“Mr. Riddle?” Alastor called.

“Yes, that would be me.”

He didn’t offer him a hand to shake. Young Riddle simply nodded back in greeting, unaffected by the apparent discourtesy.

The student was too slick for Alastor to trust immediately. Tom Riddle was like any other pureblooded brats he’d seen since his Hogwarts days. It didn’t matter that the brat came from his House—considering that the worst pricks came from there, that label should actually be treated as a warning instead. If it wasn’t for Riddle’s unfamiliar last name, he wouldn’t have guessed the boy had at least one parent that wasn’t magical.

“Why don’t you take a seat, Mr. Riddle?” Alastor said. He didn’t make it sound as if it was optional.

“Why, certainly.”

Riddle sat down with ease as if he’d wanted to do that all along. Moody decided to stay standing, walking around this small tea room.

Underneath the dust and grime, Riddle’s clothes were still more impeccable than even Alastor managed in his Hogwarts days. It accentuated his handsome profile very well, and even his tousled hair was just so. He inwardly grimaced at his own reflexive distrust from it. He could’ve secured a patron already or three. He’s certainly not born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

“Why did you decide to enter Hogsmeade?” The Auror asked.

“Hermione was going to go and check whether I went with her or not—you see, she’s too caring. It was safer if we both go.” He answered.

“You didn’t try to stop her?”
Riddle chuckled. “Hermione? Oh, she knows her own mind and she knows the risks. She’s not exactly inexperienced at this, Mr. Moody.”

Based on the rumours about her, of her background, he could see why it might be true. There young wizard’s calm attitude, however, made his Auror instinct twitch. Something was just a little off…

“And you went—what for? To keep the little lady safe? Be the hero she needed?” He chose to go with a casually dismissive tone.

“She needed someone to watch her back, yes.”

“You let her walk into a place with an active attacker with a muggle weapon. Do you actually hate her that much?” He asked, askance, exaggerating his disbelief.

A flicker of something in his eyes, but too fast to read before it disappeared again.

“She knows the risk. This isn’t the first Grindelwald attack she had to weather.”

Riddle’s tone didn’t change. It was still even; his dark eyes were placid even as they met Alastor’s. He recalled that the young wizard even carefully checked his tie in one of the mirrors in the hallways before he walked here, as Alastor had been surreptitiously observing him from a distance. That realisation coalesced in his mind. He’s not even worried.

“Not the first, you say?” Alastor asked.

“As far as I know, she’s the only survivor from the British wizarding circle of Kopervik. I’m sure you can find out the rest of the details yourself, Mr. Moody.” His diction was precise, perfect. Alastor forced himself to look beyond the image he presented. The student’s quiet confidence would give most people pause.

“You’re not afraid she’d be hurt? Nobody knows how many attackers were there at the beginning.”

“There is a higher probability of her being hurt if I’m not by her side. I went.”

“It was a gamble, Mr. Riddle, and an unnecessary one.” He warned, staring the student down from his standing position.

“It’s not as if the Aurors were coming at that time, was it?” Riddle replied mildly.

Ah, here are his fangs. He might be polite but he was not a pushover. Alastor loomed forward.

“So, you were rescuing the damsel after all, Mr. Riddle.”

A light cough. “Not really, no. Hermione can take care of herself, but a second wand arm and a lookout can only help. I’d have preferred to go straight back to Hogwarts, perhaps inform the teachers. Yet life doesn’t always give us the easy choices.” His tone was that of mild boredom, a feat considering their topic.

Riddle’s only concession to their height difference was a slight glance upwards, the tilt of his face barely moving. That there was less than a foot between their faces didn’t make the student move back even the slightest. Not one to easily give ground, are you?

Alastor pulled back and grinned. That flash of intense annoyance crossing the student’s face just now was that of a predator.
Now we know what you are, Mr. Riddle.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Alastor casually agreed as he took the seat across the table, more relaxed than he’d been since he first entered. He unrolled a scroll and floated a verbatim quill over it.

“Right, let’s start this interview from the beginning properly. This is Investigating Auror Alastor Moody in Hogsmeade at 3 PM. I’m interviewing Hogwarts student Tom Riddle as an eyewitness to today’s attack on Hogsmeade. Mr. Riddle, please state your full name and identity in your own words.”

“My name is Tom Marvolo Riddle and I’m a fifth-year Hogwarts prefect from Slytherin House…”

Alastor had weighed Tom Riddle within five minutes of the interview.

The conversation after that was only a matter of filling in the details. The Hogwarts prefect was self-assured and it did not change when Alastor’s questions were more pointed and suspecting. He might have mistaken it as the result of a privileged background, but his patience spoke otherwise.

He had yet to let Alastor rile him.

It did not matter whether Alastor was questioning his manhood for simply following Curie when she decided to head towards the screams, said in a too-knowing tone that he understood the drive to be a hero. Riddle deflected that easily, saying that he valued his life more than being a martyr with a sardonic gaze, casually saying that he has a mere common man’s worth of valour instead of one that can rival Heracles.

Alastor had even tried the rather unsavoury angle of imitating what the blinkered Blakeshaw would’ve done; Alastor wondered aloud whether it’s really possible for a Hogwarts student to manage all that. (For all of Alastor’s questionable methods, he was not slimy enough to outright question anyone’s ability just based on blood).

Riddle shrugged away and said that perhaps he wasn’t managing it as well as it seemed.

“Who would know? It’s not as if it’s a good idea to let your housemates know how weak you are, is it, Mr. Moody?”

“Your housemates are like that, are they?” He asked back causally.

“You would know. You speak just like them the moment you came in; throwing barbs, casually probing for a weakness.” Riddle replied, dark blue eyes meeting his gaze head on. He did not even bother to put his words as a question, laying them as a statement instead.

“I’m a mere Auror doing his job, Mr. Riddle.” Alastor didn’t hold back his slight grin at that.

“I’m sure you are.” Came the dry reply.

The boy’s canny enough to suss out that I’m probably from the same House. He was certainly amused; he did not always have the opportunity to sit across someone who had at least two brain cells left to rub together.

Other than the occasional flashes of annoyance in the prefect’s face or posture that was readable to an interrogator like him as time goes, Tom Riddle kept his calm demeanour and even his ruddy look-at-me, aren’t-I-perfectly-relaxed sitting position. Any pureblood heir would’ve burst a vessel
by now and demanded to contact their father or the family retainer, probably some experienced legal magister.

After ten minutes, Alastor was grudgingly impressed that he did let off the pressure slightly. Only slightly, mind you. No sense in giving the boy a clue to his thoughts.

Not one to run off when things gets tough, is he?

There were several rookie Aurors that Alastor could name that would benefit from learning from Tom Riddle.

After their interview, he managed to invite himself on Albus’ table during lunch to get more information on this Riddle boy. It had taken him several years after he graduated, and certainly after he’d gotten into the groove of being an Auror that he could bring himself to call his former professor by his first name. Albus had insisted on it for a while too. It was much easier to do so with Orpheus, as he’d only took up the post of the Head of Ravenclaw House a few years into Alastor’s time in Hogwarts.

“So, can anyone give me a précis on Tom Riddle?”

He pretended not to see the flash of worry on the professor’s face and heard just what he’d expected.

Perfect student with outstanding scores across the board. Excellent prefect, even though this is his first year as one. Helpful. Charming. Polite. He had made many friends across his House, his year mates, and even beyond them.

“Sounds like the type of student every teacher wants.” Alastor said this sarcastically. Albus, however, was unusually brief in his reply.

“Quite.”

“What, no defence of the oh-so-nice student?”

The Auror noticed the tension in Albus’ smile just then.

“Oh, you know how it is, Alastor. He’s not in my House. I’m hardly as well-informed of the particularities of his character as his Head of House.”

Albus, claiming that there was no way for him to know a student well simply because he was in a different house? That’s something short of a miracle. Albus made it his business to know every student of note that had passed under him. Alastor had snorted wordlessly at the reply, but asked nothing more. If Albus clammed up, well, it was simply time to find his information from somewhere else. There was no forcing the Transfiguration Master.

Orpheus huffed from where he was sitting to Albus’ right.

“Don’t mind him, Alastor. He’s trying to politely tell you that he doesn’t wish to speak ill of such a stellar student.”

“I said nothing of the sort,” Albus defended himself.

“Perhaps not, but your intention is the same. Heaven forfend that you ever put in a good word for him,” the blond astronomy professor continued as he turned his attention back to Moody. “Tom Riddle is simply very Slytherin in his ambition. Surely you know such character? Not that it’s even
a surprise, what with his background. I would think that he’d like to escape that.”

Ah, yes, that muggle background that he’d heard of in passing earlier. The Auror leaned forward.

“What of his background?”

“He’s a muggleborn orphan,” Dexter began, and he soon continued with a tale of woe that was almost Dickensian in scale. An orphan whose wardrobe was half second-hand, who did not quite fit the magical world at the beginning. How did he turn to the young wizard I saw?

“He’s very…polished, though, not what I expected of a muggleborn student at all.” Alastor started.

“Very pureblood, you mean,” Albus murmured.

Alastor grinned. “I was trying to avoid stereotyping.” Albus twitched, something that was satisfying to see.

“Touché.”

“That is all thanks to his circle of friends,” Orpheus answered. He thought he could hear Albus mutter ‘followers’ under his breath. Orpheus merely gazed heavenward and let out a long-suffering sigh. He had a feeling that this was an old and familiar topic of discussion for them.

“Yes, he’s charismatic and he has them under his spell, but I still think they are also his friends. I suppose he’s practically adopted in by his coterie. Of course, you’re better of asking Horace for more details. He is the Slytherin’s Head of House and he’d be joining us sometime soon.”

He was trouble, this Riddle. Alastor knew exactly what type that was—the sort of Slytherin that rose to the top. Tom Riddle would have subdued enough of his rivals inside his house to be able to get other purebloods to follow. That was simply how the House worked.

Riddle was a dagger inside a beautiful silken sheath. The last smile you see before a killing blow.

Moody would swear he could feel the shadow of future headaches haunting him just then, born from gut instinct and experience with such Slytherins. He rubbed his temples after he’d finished his own lunch and bid the two Head of Houses farewells. Slughorn he can always meet later—he was always enthusiastic to see a former student.

Just what I need. Another bloody up-and-coming politician that would calmly cut his way through the Ministry in a few more years, stirring the pot with infighting. Inwardly, he huffed with aversion. Another person to make my job harder than it is.

That was why, even as he asked Orpheus to send Hermione Curie to talk to him at his table at the corner of Hogshead Inn’s dining room, a bubble of sound-proofing charm cast already, his expectations were low.

If Riddle was the slick politician in the making who could stifle any indication of his actual sentiment in front of Alastor, he could guess what Hermione Curie would be like. Sure, someone’s patronage probably generated that flattering piece on the front page of the Prophet for her, but even the Prophet does not rumourmonger without actual sources and events. Curie was definitely a talented witch for her age.

An ambitious overachiever like Riddle would not have accepted anyone less for his possible partner.
Oh, Riddle would not have admitted it, would have dismissed the question out of hand with a chuckle, a disarming smile, before simply moving on unbothered. He was not besotted, Alastor knew—he could recognise the lovesick from a mile away now. Yet something was there, even if Riddle himself might not be prepared to admit it to himself yet. It was there in his pride of her easy competence; in the easy way he dismissed the other students he’d encountered during the Hogsmeade attack just then by saying that they ‘didn’t hold a candle to Hermione’s talent’.

Of how it was an extremely logical conclusion to take that he was best served to simply continue investigating Hogsmeade with only Hermione and without anyone else. Not Crouch, the sixth-year Gryffindor prefect he’d met earlier, and not any of the adults either.

Mr. Riddle had his heart set on someone even if his head might not know it yet. Something deeper than mere lovesickness.

This, in return, piqued his curiosity about Hermione Curie. What sort of witch would have captured the interest of an over-achieving political operator in the making like Tom Riddle?

The Auror could already see her in his mind’s eye. Friendly and yet genteel, her very air would be that of a lady—the perfect politician’s wife. She would have impeccable poise, with kind and polite words hiding her brilliant mind most of the time—because a measly bureaucrat of a wizard would easily get peeved at a younger witch that was smarter than him that someone of her intelligence would know how to tone down her ability too and act all nice and demure. That was the most effective way to get people’s guards down around them.

Hell, he knew several excellent Aurors who happen to be witches who did the same around certain superiors. He supposed that Curie would watch him with the same care and scrutiny that Riddle did, with sweet talk and sweet nothings. Their interview would probably be just as tediously drawn out and guarded as his interview with Riddle.

Alastor sighed and rubbed his bristly chin.

There was no avoiding the routine, though.

His musings continued as he waited for her arrival in the room. Riddle’s distaff counterpart would be a diamond; encased within the elegant cut, she would be bright, hard and sharp. Above all, she would be just as perfect—

“Oh, you must be Mr. Moody!”

The bright tone pulled him out of his thoughts and he paused to ensure that he was staring at the correct person.

“Miss Curie?” He hazarded.

“Yes, that’s me.”

Her confidence was all he had expected, though her genuinely warm smile surprised him—he had expected a polished but charming one, but this was only a slight difference. She was pretty enough, but surprisingly not to the level of extraordinary beauty he’d expected that Riddle would demand of any woman close enough to him.

Everything else, however…

There were tiny splatters on her right sleeve as well as parts of her torso. That colour...old blood, unless she’d been carving a particularly stubborn roasted leg in her best togs. She offered her
hand, he politely bowed over it. *Calloused. No stranger to hard work and didn’t care to hide it.* Her hands were clean, but there was the occasional spot or three on her arm of the same shade of the sleeve spatter.

“You’ve been busy, Miss Curie?” He opened a line of conversation.

She shrugged. “Oh, you know how it is. I’m the first person with medical training on the spot. That means I have to do something for all the shooting victims.”

It was not fake nonchalance—she truly did not think much of it. She did not say much else, stopping her answer short instead of turning it into an opportunity to showcase her ability and performance.

“Quite a change of plans for your Saturday agenda, isn’t it, picking up all the wounded and bloody people?” Alastor asked with studied casualness. “This must be hell on your social schedule.”

Curie’s smile was tighter. “Yes. My Saturday is still much better than any of theirs, though. I can still walk away on my own power.”

That was not just annoyance. Curiously enough, the attack angered her.

Hmm, that’s rather Gryffindor-ish of her.

Her dress was nice but not one from the exclusive fashion houses that only allow people to walk in by recommendation (and how such recommendation brings no guarantee on the ability to buy anything yet). With her voluminous hair (*probably from the static of many strong spells*), she was the last thing from impeccable. Yet she was certainly effective.

“Well, they’re just unlucky that way, aren’t they?” His answer was light and glib.

Curie was quiet for a moment except for a subtle tension across her jaw before she suddenly smiled. Her gaze never left his in the meantime.

“Does the DMLE actually measure the time the Aurors take to respond to a developing emergency situation? If no measurement is done from time to time, well, nobody can say for certain whether it has improved or actually…deteriorate, right?”

The young witch didn’t even try to couch her criticism with platitudes first, or tried to butter him up with compliments, which was what a well-bred lady would have done.

No, not just a diamond. *Curie is the last thing from decorative.* She wasn’t even a knife—she was halberd, functional and effective, cutting through shoulders and limbs without a second thought.

Alastor couldn’t stop his snort, the hint of an aborted chuckle.

Curie narrowed her eyes slightly at him and he waved a hand at that.

“I just lost a bet with myself, don’t mind me.”

“What bet was it?” Her smile was not in the neighbourhood of friendly.

“I had thought that Tom Riddle would’ve wanted to go out with some Little Miss Perfect. Seems like he has more personality than I credit him with.” Alastor bluntly replied as he met her gaze head on. She was unexpected, this Ravenclaw witch that had as many claws as a lion.

Curie huffed, her cheeks reddening, but she settled easily into the chair across the table from him.
Instead of bristling or even hiding any feeling of offence, Hermione Curie was unruffled and unbothered. She was even-keeled in a different way than Riddle; she easily matched his maturity. It was nice to know that he wasn’t completely wrong in his profile of her, at least.

“Yes, he just hides dissatisfaction so well from strangers. Particularly nosey Aurors who knows nothing about him and yet assumes so much already.”

Curie’s smile was amused this time. He let out a rough bark of laughter.

“Nosey Aurors is a redundant term, Miss Curie. It’s practically our job to snoop.” He answered.

“Ah, well, I know it's really difficult, but I do try to be polite.” The edge in her words was anything but.

“What a coincidence, I do too!” His reply was cheerful and unbearably dense. There was a slight tic to her expression that he found entertaining. “I’ll ask almost everything that comes to my mind now. Hopefully, there would be no need for further interviews if this one is comprehensive enough.”

“Please, Mr. Moody, I may like a free lunch as much as the next person, but I never expect it.”

The dryness in her tone implied that she had a far better idea of what the life was like than the average young witch. That world-weariness of hers was slightly harder to account for in one so young. Where did she come from, again? It all comes down to her past in Europe, doesn’t it?

He was not so curious anymore, though. What little of war he’d seen, it had been enough for him to not wish to see more.

“Really, the DMLE will do our best in this investigation.” He replied.

“If they don’t, I’d worry about the British Wizarding World.” She said as easily. The uninitiated might have thought she was being nice. He knew better.

Moody didn’t take it as a personal slight. Hermione’s answer was something he added to his mental note of her person. His grin grew wider as he unrolled a scroll on the table and floated a verbatim pen over it. When he flashed that many teeth, the new recruits usually started to duck out of his sight, in case he had yet another interesting training idea he’d drag all of them into. Not knowing that, she was of course unfazed.

“Very well, then, let’s start this interview from the beginning. Your full name and identity, Miss Curie?”

“My name is Hermione Sophia Curie. I’ve just recently transferred into Hogwarts and Sorted into the Ravenclaw House as a fifth-year…”

Moody was only too happy at being wrong. No, interviewing her was very unlike interviewing Riddle, other than how just like with him, he could see her intelligence with every answer she gave. If she thought he’d insulted somebody undeservedly, she was not one to let it go without correcting him about it. Usually, this came around because he acted as if he underestimated Riddle.

“Why are you so certain that he wouldn’t have simply backed away once he realised that the attack was more serious than he had guessed?” Alastor asked.

“He wouldn’t, you know.” Curie said.
“Wouldn’t? Why, because he loves you?” He needled, watching the teenager.

The brunette snorted. “He doesn’t.”

His raised eyebrow was the only expression of surprise that he allowed to show. Curie did not even look the slightest bit concerned as she said that. It was a rather unexpected trait that he noted down.

“It’s just that Tom is thorough when he’d decided on a goal or action. If he said he’d do it, he’d see it to the end. Besides, I’m sure that he doesn’t think that a mere muggle or three would be enough to stop him.” Her voice was conversational even as her words were frank.

“Are you implying that he’s so self-confident, so narcissistic?”

“I’m not implying it. I’m saying it. I know what he’s like, Mr. Moody.” Her words were blunter than a sledgehammer.

And Alastor couldn’t help but chuckle at that. To him, she was far more entertaining than Riddle and the interview passed in no time between them—he’d never bothered to put on airs or play games in front of her since she’d never bothered to hold back her experience or her opinion. She seemed to have found him somewhat amusing as well, for some reason, for he realised later on as he observed her chat with several of her lecturers that she’d been nowhere as blunt with them as she had with him. Now, he could actually read the slight twitch or discomfort in her face whenever someone was over-praising Riddle.

The two students were unexpectedly interesting, and he resolved to keep track of them from time to time, out of curiosity.

‘-

It was right in the middle of the Hogsmeade Crisis when Dexter informed Hermione that there was someone who had wanted to talk to her at a corner table in Hogshead Inn. One of the things that had surprised her was seeing how young Moody looked.

Oh, he was older than her, that much was obvious, in his twenties, or early thirties if she had to give an upper bound. Yet he looked more akin to a worker who had dragged themselves home from the pub in the small hours of the morning than the paranoid, grumpy old hermit she could recall better in her flashes of memories. It was there in the shadows under his eyes, his bleary-eyed expression and a beard that seemed to be the result of lack of maintenance than any conscious effort. His hair was as dark as it was thick, and the lopsided way he carelessly flopped his hat on his head reminded her more of cowboy hats placed at a rakish angle in old westerns.

Still, that feeling of warmth, as if she was actually meeting an old friend, was a welcome reprieve in the tiring day. If her greeting was a little more friendly than a stranger would expect, she didn’t think twice about it.

“Ah, you must be Mr. Moody!”

“Miss Curie?” He sounded mildly surprised for some reason.

“Yes, that’s me.” She confirmed.

Handsome wasn’t a word most people would easily choose to describe him, but he already had the charisma that could force people to follow his orders. His eyes were sharp and assessing from the moment he looked up as he scanned her quickly. It barely perturbed her; it was something Moody just did, and apparently the habit started early.
“You’ve been busy, Miss Curie?” He asked.

Hermione realised then that he might have been trying to reach her earlier, but she’d been unavailable for one reason or another, including her lunch with Tom. She shrugged.

“Oh, you know how it is. I’m the first person with medical training on the spot. That means I have to do something for all the shooting victims.”

Their eyes met and she could see that he was waiting for something that didn’t come—not that she knew what. She simply blinked.

“Quite a change of plans for your Saturday agenda, isn’t it, picking up all the wounded and bloody people?” Alastor asked with a casual air she didn’t think he felt. “This must be hell on your social schedule.”

The interview went on a little less familiar than she’d been expecting, and Moody sharper. That she was expecting it to be familiar in the first place was something she chalked up to foolishness, and probably not a little fatigue. It was no surprise that he would treat her like a stranger, and that he would prick and needle as he asked his questions. She knew his interviewing style well, which was why she had instantly answered him the same way she answered the old Moody that she could remember; bluntly and to the point. It would amuse him enough that he’d follow suit instead of trying to weave circles around her that she was currently not in the mood for.

Her assessment of his later character was already applicable now, it would seem, for their conversation went on in a more-or-less friendly basis.

“This is going to do wonders for your reputation, isn’t it? Little Miss Nightingale, and now one of the heroes of Hogsmeade?” Moody idly commented.

“*Or* it would just make me little old muggleborn me more visible, which translates to having a larger bull’s eye painted on my back.” She answered in a tone just as bland. “Not that I’m unfamiliar with that feeling.”

“You make it sound like the wizarding world is so dangerous,” he mused.

“You make it sound like we’re not currently in a war,” she answered, “where Grindelwald had clearly fired the opening salvo against Britain.”

He nodded, mildly impressed with her concern. “Excellent awareness.”

“It’s actually just common sense. Which, unfortunately, isn’t actually all that common.”

And that earned her another shark-like grin. She simply replied it with a smile of her own.

The pointed comments and fishing conversations were simply how Moody worked, if he didn’t outright just throw Harry’s Auror gear at his head and then saying that they had a raid to go to. Or perhaps dropping in at Ron who’d fallen into a micro sleep at his desk and then suddenly describing a situation that needed handling and challenging Ron to come up with a plan for it on the spot. In five or ten minutes, he’d be dragging the redhead out of the office to go with him to handle practically the same situation he’d described. She couldn’t remember when Moody ever did casual or easy.

Then she was back at Hogwarts and the intensity of her schedule and Tom’s plans hit her like a tropical storm as The Society started with a bang, and she did not remember her encounter with him for a while yet.
Chapter Summary

(See previous chapter’s summary for summary)

Chapter Notes

Second part of Moody's intermezzo! Wow, I'm apparently on a roll. Let's hope that this will last for at least another ten chapters. Thanks for everyone asking about how I'm doing. I'm doing well enough compared to most people, no worries on that front (I'm not short on cash and I can weather this whole isolation thing alright).

Happy Eid to anyone celebrating! Yeah, yeah, I'm late by a week. I usually perceive what holidays are close according to the mall decorations/ lanterns hanging/ people filling houses of worship and whatnot. It's no surprise that being stuck does not make me feel festive at all.

64 Intermezzo - Alastor Moody II

A week after what the papers had dubbed the Hogsmeade Crisis had Alastor Moody at the Ministry yet again, working on a Saturday and cursing at Minister Spencer-Moon for even bringing the foul Dementors into his workplace. He hoped at least one of the foul things would hang over his house during the night and give him nightmares to scream about. That would teach him.

He had resignedly accepted the responsibility from Director Bones to put out the fires caused by the Hogsmeade Crisis. To say that the public was not amused by two attacks on British soil within a week was putting it mildly. The Minister of Magic may have a cool professional relationship with the Chairman of the DMLE, but they still had professional respect for each other to ever stoop to muckraking. The newspapers on the other hand, were calling for blood.

Chairman Flint and Director Bones had to allow themselves to be interviewed to help calm and assure the nation. Not that he thought that their differing opinions on the matter of muggles and muggleborns helped much, but he caught himself hoping that the dense public would be as oblivious as they always are, and to continue missing the underlying tension and unsaid subtext between his two superiors.

“Since I’d be too occupied to handle all administrative concerns of the week, you’ll be the one planning for our new exercises.” the Director had outright told him. For all his friendly smile and light brown hair, there was still an intimidating presence about Amalric Bones.

“What about Captain Jones?” Moody had asked back. Asking about his captain was a valid question, as he hadn’t expected such a responsibility to fall into his hands when Hypatia Jones was more experienced and had the seniority to boot.
(And yes, he wasn’t looking forward to spending another Saturday at the office. Just because he liked his job did not mean he always wanted overtime. Sue him for trying to dodge that.)

“She’d be answering administrative and budgetary questions from the Wizengamot. Unless you’re volunteering on changing places with her?” the Director’s smile was flashing canines now.

He backtracked immediately at that. He’d rather walk to hell first. “Not at all, Sir.”

So, it was reviewing the results of old training exercises, then, as well as planning for new ones on top of his day-to-day work. It was a pain to find the old results, as that had him tracking down archives and had him walking all over the place to chase and retrieve them, judiciously avoiding the lobby with their swarm of unholy presence all the time.

What he hadn’t expected to see was strained-looking Tom Riddle stalking down one of the hallways, another student a little behind and to the side of him.

“Riddle—”

Alastor had only meant a light tap at the shoulder. He certainly didn’t expect the student to draw his wand at him—not that it mattered much since his defensive reflex was fully triggered with the sudden movement and his wand was right against the younger wizard’s ribcage.

“Tom, please. This is just a misunderstanding.”

Alastor glanced to the side to see who had said that. He saw a familiar pale face under paler hair. “Ah, you’re Old Pendleton’s boy, aren’t you?”

A short forbearing sigh was followed by a nod. Alastor saw that Riddle had only just realised who he was facing, for he drew his wand down immediately. Alastor followed suit.

“Apologies, I’m slightly high-strung today.”

“You don’t say,” was his dry reply.

Riddle actually ran his hand through his hair once, his gaze unfocused at some distance over his shoulder instead of locked at Alastor, wand hand hanging at his side. *The boy’s distracted.* He didn’t even check whether Alastor had holstered his wand back (he hadn’t—his arm was down, but his wand was still subtly aimed at the student).

“Why are you both even here?” Alastor grumbled.

“I’m here to retrieve Hermione because some stupid Auror kidnapped her.” Riddle said with unexpected bite.

“What?” He found that hard to believe, but Riddle didn’t strike him to be prone to flights of fancy or to make a foolishly blatant lie. There was more to this than it seemed.

“It was Orestes Blakeshaw, Mr. Moody.”

It was Pendleton the Younger who answered. Riddle was occupied with muttering a spell under his breath and then holding the middle of his wand aloft as it spun like the needle of a compass. In his left hand was a bronze-and-blue tie—*A Ravenclaw tie.* Alastor could recognise a focus-based locator spell anywhere.

The Slytherin seemed to be seeking for Curie.
Merlin, it just had to be Blakeshaw. Blakeshaw who was a few more conspiracy theories away from going postal. The Director couldn’t side-line him easily—he was from an old family and he had many family friends in the Ministry. Chairman Flint seemed to consider his mild paranoia to be ‘a risk of the job’ and that Blakeshaw can still do acceptable work as an Auror. Director Bones had placed him in the most mundane job he could think of, to check up on underage magic or follow-up on misbrewed domestic potions. And yet…

“You’re going to need me to get her out.”

Riddle’s glance was a little too sceptical. Alastor scoffed at that.

“Oh, don’t be an idiot, Riddle. You think you can get her out of anyplace you find her, and you might not even be wrong. But are you trying to get this little rescue of yours on front page news, or are you trying to do it as quietly as possible? Use your head.” his voice was stern but not cruel.

“He’s right, you know,” Pendleton Jr. chimed in, his gaze fixed on his friend. It was intent and not a little worried.

“Alright. Lead the way, Mr. Moody.” Riddle finally answered.

“That only makes sense if I cast the locator charm myself.”

It was rather interesting to see Riddle’s jaw muscle actually clenching at that—this was the most emotion he’d seen from him so far, and that was including the interview in Hogsmeade. Alastor hadn’t even raised his hand yet, and the student had already tightened his grip on the Ravenclaw tie that he was holding, his expression complicated. Letting out an aggrieved curse, Alastor decided to just turn around and lead the way.

“Fine. Just tell me which way to go whenever we reach an intersection,” the Auror said instead.

Merlin save me from lovestruck fools.

“I heard that,” Riddle said not long after. Not that Alastor even cared.

The Auror thought he could hear Pendleton Jr. covering his chuckle with coughs, which prompted him to hide his own smirk. “Yes, but I’m not wrong, am I?”

He heard no answer to his question.

-U-

Unease sat in his gut like a stone the moment he realised which corridor they were heading towards, as he met other staff that can confirm that they did saw an Auror with a student going in this direction a while ago. The discomfort was worse when he saw one of the hourglasses had just been turned and yet the door was open to an empty room.

Alastor had dragged the first uneasy-looking clerk that looked like he knew something and proceeded to grill him. What he heard didn’t make him any happier.

“He did what?”

The junior clerk quailed under Moody’s cold glare. “That’s all I know! I’m just telling you what happened!”

“Tell me that she’s at least at St. Mungo’s,” he ordered. Unsaid was the threat that he’d do
something if it turned out that Hermione Curie wasn’t immediately taken to a place that can give her medical treatment.

“Y-yes. Yes, she’s definitely in St. Mungo’s. I saw the whole ruckus.”

Alastor stopped trying to shake the clerk by the lapels. Another week and the Auror Corps had dropped the ball yet again. It was starting to get on his nerves and he couldn’t imagine the sort of mood Director Bones would be in after this.

“Riddle,”

“So, St Mungo’s, is it?” the dark-haired wizard asked, his head down.

Alastor took a deep breath, “I wish I could help you more, but if she’s in St. Mungo’s…”

“…then all I need to do is go straight there.” he finished.

“Yes.”

“Thanks all the same, Mr. Moody.” The Hogwarts student finally met Alastor’s gaze. For all his flat expression, the depths of his eyes were cold and brittle.

“No thanks necessary. S’not like I did much, did I?” was his gruff reply. “Good luck, boy.”

Riddle’s smile had only half the shine of his usual one before he set off with Pendleton Jr. again. It did not reach his eyes.

‘-

It was yet another Saturday, this time in November, when Moody was waiting in St. Mungo’s A&E with a large chunk of wood sticking through his right forearm like a bloated and unfashionable piercing. The smell of antiseptic and who-knows-what herbs met his nose and he did not feel any happier for it.

His mood might have been worse if he was still actively hurting. The ice covering said forearm numbed him to most sensations, and even when it didn’t, he was a little too used to simply gritting his teeth and bearing it (not that he wouldn’t get an earful from his captain if she noticed him doing that). He wanted to simply lean back against the wall and slump down into an undignified pile, but one of the junior Aurors insisted on accompanying him and now he had to sit properly. All this effort of being an exemplary Auror (“you’re an example to them, Alastor”) was starting to wear on his nerves.

“…Moody? Mr. Moody?”

Alastor tilted his head up slightly before his eyes widened in recognition. The thick brown curls, the confident way she stood and the sharp, intelligent gleam in her eyes that added up to someone that was not just merely pretty.

“Curie? What are you doing here?”

The corners of her lips twitched slightly as she broke into a friendlier grin. “I work here. Well, at weekends, anyway. It’s part of my apprenticeship training.”

“Apprenticeship?”

“Nursing, I think, though I’d like to actually finish being a field healer, but nursing is fine too.”
Her eyes had finally taken his entire being in and her brows creased in thought.

“What on earth happened to your arm?”

“Eh, you know how it goes. A house sometimes falls down on you,” was his gruff answer.

“...Right.” she drawled, nonplussed. It struck him then that her expression and Riddle’s were similar when they were both being cynical. *What an odd thing for them to share.*

“It happens often enough in my line of work,” he continued, unbothered.

“It doesn’t not really. It’s just that Mr. Moody is still faster than most of us that he got hurt ensuring that we all get to safety.” The third voice pulled both of their attention away, and Alastor sighed as he remembered again that he didn’t come here alone.

“Oh, how great of him,” Curie commented. The gleam in her eyes told him that the young witch was now interested in the whole embarrassing farce. Alastor rubbed his face with his left hand.

“Brinley, this is Hermione Curie, Hogwarts student and nursing apprentice to Madam Álava,”

“To Nurse Edelstein, actually, she’s the Hogwarts Head Nurse. It’s because, as Madam Álava told me, I can’t yet follow her everywhere, so on paper, I’m Maggie’s apprentice.” the young witch corrected him. He only stared at her with a dead-eyed expression as he waited for her to be done. It wasn’t as if he even kept track of these society things much.

“Right. Curie, this is Idalia Brinley a junior Auror I’ve been working with.”

“I’m still new to the unit. I would’ve been lost without Moody’s help. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Curie.” Brinley insisted, her smile still wide and sweet as she greeted Curie.

She was still so new that the Auror life seemed bright and promising, and just looking at her open expression made him feel jaded and old. *No, you’re not as much of a pain to work with than Jape, the reckless idiot that he is,* Alastor thought to himself.

Curie shook Brinley’s hands easily, without thought. Alastor noticed that she didn’t even began the initial moves to a curtsy and her background flitted past him in that moment. *(Orphan, presumably muggleborn or at most halfblood).* She looked so at home in her apprentice nurse’s uniform that he could easily believe that; Curie was clearly used to hard work. *(Hands unashamed with callouses).* She wasn’t one of those overly-pampered pureblood princesses.

“Now, as much as I’d rather have met you at a time when no one’s hurt, it seems like neither of us can ever help it. You look better than the last time I saw you, anyway.” Alastor commented before the birds could get started on their chinwag.

Curie furrowed her brows. “When was the last time you saw me?”

“Here, around a month ago. Your beau was standing guard over your bed while Orpheus was wreaking havoc somewhere else. I only glanced from the door before moving on. That was a nasty Dementor drain that you got.”

The certain blankness in her expression was the only sign of her remembrance. Curie shrugged the memory away soon enough as she focused back on him. He can almost feel Brinley’s curious gaze on him too, but he knew that she was savvy enough to simply shut up for now and ask about it later.
“The marvels of modern medicine. Now, let’s see what modern medicine can do for you. Follow me please.”

The brunette witch led him into a ward, and to one of the empty beds, but he voted for just a chair, considering that this wasn’t going to take long. He had tried scaring Brinley away with how gory the extraction was going to be, but she was determined to be there every step of the way. A bit of cajoling allowed him to extract Brinley’s admission of guilt as she felt that she’d caused it.

“You didn’t cause it. Jape was the one who started poking around without checking first, not you.” Alastor snapped.

“I followed him in, though.” Brinley spoke under her breath, head still bowed. Alastor groaned. Why was he always the one left to smack some sense into the new Aurors?

“If we’re blamin’ people for ensuring their partner doesn’t go off alone, half of the Auror Corps are guilty of that shite. Might as well flame half of us down.”

He’d realised a little too late what he’d just said, but the student seemed unconcerned. Well, maybe she didn’t hear that.

“I bet you’re going to drill them on how to explore abandoned buildings properly now,” Curie unexpectedly spoke up as she defrosted his forearm.

“Oh, I will. Even if I have to shove Jape through fifty of them myself. Constant—”

“—Vigilance.”

Now both Alastor and Brinley turned to the apprentice healer in surprise. There was an odd little smile on her face. “I do talk to Amelia and Daedalus, you know. They remember you.”

He’d only remembered that Amalric Bones’ children were still at Hogwarts right now, with vague memories of seeing younger versions of them following behind their father on some day or another before. They’d be around Curie’s age now, wouldn’t they? Alastor was barely paying attention to all the poking and prodding that Curie was doing.

“Wait, who healed this wound?” Curie sounded surprised. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter. I’ll just cut it open again to clean it. It’s not that difficult. Next time anyone gets a dirty wound like this, just freeze it directly before you get to a healer. Healing the skin over before freezing it is just going to make our job difficult. Though I suppose freezing it is a good idea if you think there’s a notable risk of poisoning.”

“It’s not supposed to be healed?”

“Not for dirty or poisoned wounds, no.” Curie repeated, her voice somewhat distracted. Brinley, however, was starting to heap guilt on herself yet again. “Just freeze it.”

“Oh, Moody, I’m sorry!”

Alastor let out an impatient sigh. “Stuff it, Brinley. I barely felt the difference—”

—then he had to stop himself right there and hold his breath because Curie had started slashing his arm open again without as much as a by-your-leave. The last thing Brinley needed was for him to yelp however accidentally. He can even feel some blood trickling now as the pain subsided again as he glanced sideways at the apprentice, stuck between peeved and disbelieving.
She really needs to work on her bedside manner.

“So, this might hurt a little, but I’m going to try to take that wood chunk out.”

“Oh, so it’s only going to hurt now?” his tone was sarcastic. Curie bit her lower lip in thought.

“Wait, I can get some salve that’s a local anaesthetic. I’ll be right back.”

Well, at least she did remember this time.

“Is she…is she that Hermione Curie? Morgana’s Mane, I wouldn’t believe her to be still in Hogwarts if you didn’t say so. She’s still a bit on the short side, sure, but other than that…”

Brinley spoke with a hushed voice.

“Yes, Brinley,” even his voice sounded tired. “She’s that Hermione Curie. The papers did say that she was a student.”

“Do you think she’d want to join the Auror corps after graduation?” Brinley asked, her bright carrot top hair visible at the corner of his eyes.

Alastor didn’t even bother to hide his laughter this time though he explained nothing.

_Lass, if she was as canny as she seems, she’d fly a hundred leagues straight the other way. Why would someone who can be anything else would want to be an Auror was beyond him. There were many that would pay better and many a Ministry post she could take where she could go further._

“Well, I’ll make the offer,” he said out loud.

It was rather amusing to see Brinley’s easy and visible brightening as she started chattering again, not that he was even paying attention at this point. _Just because the offer is made is no guarantee that she’ll accept it_. But sod it, what did he even care about? It didn’t make a difference to him either way, but he’ll hold himself from ragging on it if Brinley was so enthusiastic about the prospect.

At the very least, it was going to be entertaining once she took it upon herself to expound on and on about Hermione to her other team members. As a senior Auror and general dogsbody of the director who’d been relegated to spending yet another Saturday in the office, he’d take any entertainment that he could get.

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Hermione Curie stood in St. Mungo’s A&E ward on yet another Saturday. She was starting to feel thankful for her Saturday afternoon shifts schedule, as focusing on the patients certainly distracted her from overthinking her first blown out argument with Tom two days ago, their resolution on the same day notwithstanding.

The _‘he lied’_ and _‘Slytherins lie to each other often when you’re not actually friends with them, and they consider that as not a problem’_ and other, similar arguments and counter-arguments kept popping in her head recently. _‘He promised the truth’_ was soon met with _‘he doesn’t understand the full extent of that promise’_.

Look, Tom had apologised and changed, she told herself, what with all the extra Knights/Slytherin meetings that he’d started to drag her into. It was a bit of a drag on her schedule, but she’d appreciated the effort; he certainly showed that he was serious in changing. Yet even with all that, her inner voices were still hashing out the old tired arguments in her head (ruminating). She was
ruminating and even if she knew it was unproductive, a part of her brain still couldn’t stop.

Her own brain was getting on her nerves. She knew at some level that fears are simply irrational, and when even reasonable arguments don’t work, the next best thing to fix them was just time. Since they hadn’t faded yet, distracting herself and drowning them out with work was a good alternative. The brunette rubbed her temples and walked out to check the waiting room.

“Was it another falling house this time?”

Her question was bland when she saw the familiar Auror figure in the waiting room again. He didn’t look much injured this time, so she was probably wrong. Still, it was a fun question to ask and he probably had an interesting case that can distract her too.

Moody looked up the moment he heard her voice and shook his head.

“Of course not. Repeating that would be a boring experience.” he answered, before pulling someone else’s arm, to his left. “Now, Jape, show the nice nurse your damage.”

“Are you even a nurse?” the younger wizard asked, sceptical. Before Hermione could answer, Moody had already swatted him at the back of his head. “Ow!”

“Don’t be an arse, Jape, and stop sitting like a lump of mashed potatoes.”

The young wizard turned to him, his smooth forehead creasing. “It’s a good question, Moody! She doesn’t look like she’d even graduated Hogwarts!”

“That’s because she hasn’t.” Moody muttered.

“Then how do you know—”

“Hermione, this is Ivor Jape, Auror and current idiot of the day. Jape, this is Hermione Curie, who knows a lot more about fixing your burns and tying your entrails in knots than you do, Madam Álava said so. So, shut up and mind your manners lest she thinks you might be better off without a mouth. Merlin knows I do.” he growled.

The Auror that she presumed to be his junior shrunk under his withering glare. Hermione was trying hard not to grin in the middle of Moody’s rant. That would probably not help his junior’s self-esteem at all.

“Right, so what’s the problem this time? If you’ll follow me…”

“Burns on his feet and leg.” Moody’s answer was brisk, as he helped the other Auror stand and yanked his arm none-too-gently over his shoulder. Hermione glanced back, trying to see the extent of it.

“You seem to be managing just fine, Mr. Jape.”

“Well, it helps that it doesn’t hurt.” the younger Auror answered.

They walked through the doorway once more and Hermione went in the direction of an empty bed. Moody helped Jape climbed up to it. He was more than tall enough and strong enough to do so.

“We used up half of our stock of anaesthetic salve. Garthener was apoplectic about that too, but it can’t be helped.” Moody explained. “Garthener’s our field healer.”

“You have your own field healer? Why come here, then?”
Hermione’s eyebrows rose as she took a nearby stool to observe Jape’s legs and feet better.

“Because she knew that if we use up her stock, it’s not going to be resupplied for weeks. While if she sends us here, we’ll have to send the bill back up and someone’s going to moan and groan about it, but it would be done in a wink. If there’s any arguments about budgets later, it wouldn’t be her problem,” was Moody’s dry-as-dust reply. Hermione nodded in agreement.

“Ah, life in a bureaucracy. Can’t say I disagree with her, though. It’s a lot more important to have a properly stocked field healer’s kit.”

“You and me both.” Moody said.

She turned her attention back to the smooth-faced Jape. “Now, let’s see how bad this is underneath the clothing. What has been done already?”

Moody stood next to the bed, still within arm’s reach of his junior. “Brinley’s getting pretty handy with her water spells. Per Garthener’s instruction, she doused him with Aguamenti for a while. No need to let his flesh cook much longer.”

Jape rolled his eyes at that. He was actually a rather typical Auror—fighting fit with some muscles on him. Any chance of Hermione to even consider him as cute went down the drain with each of his new annoying behaviour.

“It would be nice if you don’t talk like I’m a piece of ham, you know?” Jape said.

“It would be nice if you don’t act like a piece of ham even on exercises, but we don’t always get what we want.” Moody remarked.

Hermione hid her snort in a cough.

Alright, I’m going to start removing shoes and other parts of your clothing.” she announced, picking up a scalpel from a nearby tray. Jape blanched.

“What are you doing?”

“Preparing to cut your clothing away.”

“Why don’t you just use a wand?”

“Do you want me to cut your feet along with your clothes?” her voice rose in disbelief as she cocked an eyebrow up. “I’ll be using my wand when I can angle it to not hit your skin at all, but that’s not applicable all the time.”

Hermione was trying to understand Ivor Jape, she really did.

She knew it was probably a little frightening, and he might not have been so extensively wounded before that his nerves were frazzled, but his complaints were really getting to her. She pretended that she didn’t see Moody grinning at his junior from his position by the bed, an expression closer to that of a mastiff about to attack a bear than anything friendly. Yet if she saw that now, she wasn’t going to manage holding back her urge to snap at Jape to stop whining.

It was when the junior Auror yelped for the second time when she had unstuck a piece of his trousers that she stood up, deciding to go get more anaesthetic salve. A chuckling Moody that she passed on the way to the cupboard wasn’t helping.
“I knew you would do that.” he said, still chuckling as he went along with her. Hermione pressed her apprentice pin to the keyhole, unlocking it, and then pulled two bottles out of the cupboard. She then wrote down what she took on the ledger at the nearby table.

“Do what?” she asked.

“Start yanking on the poor boy’s wounds.”

“I don’t yank.” Hermione insisted as she greeted another passing nurse (Amanda) with a nod. The nurse eyed Moody speculatively, something he completely missed. A corner of Hermione’s lips twitched upwards. It was odd realising just how young this Moody was compared to the one she knew.

“You did the same thing with my wound the last time around, start cutting it up without as much as a word of warning.” Moody said.

“I didn’t!” she insisted again, before wavering, “…did I?”

“You certainly did, lass.”

She sighed as she made her way back to Jape’s bed. “Damn, I knew I have to change my habits.”

“Where did you get the habit of cutting people open willy-nilly, Curie?” Moody asked, with the half-question and half-order tone that brought memories back.

“When you’re in the field and your friends are wounded. It doesn’t matter if you don’t have anaesthetic handy because fixing them up quickly is more important.” The answer tumbled from her lips before she could think about it, it was more than she’d intended to share—she bit her lip. He just reminded her of the Moody she knew too much.

The unexpected quietness from Moody’s side confirmed it. She avoided his gaze and just focused on Jape.

“Here, I come bearing anaesthetic salves.”

“Oh, thank Merlin! I really could kiss you for this.” Jape actually extended his arm towards her.

“Please don’t,” she replied drolly. “Now, let’s apply this first before we continue…”

Moody’s silent company after that and his unsaid understanding weighed heavier on her shoulders than further questions. She wondered what he was thinking. The Moody she knew had a tendency to see too much.

’-

Hermione was walking rather rapidly on foot around Hogwarts yet again, sighing for the umpteenth time as she tried to either find a convenient spot to sit and finish her report. She was writing the case highlights of yesterday’s shift at St. Mungo’s as part of her apprenticeship; the burns experienced by Moody’s junior was mildly interesting. It was the same way that she’d done the week before (and she was morbidly curious whether Moody would come in again next week, escorting who knows what training accident this time). All in all, it wasn’t going to be a long report and should be rather quick to write, but the words simply did not come to her easily in the library.

She had left the library precisely because she was feeling rather uninspired. For a Sunday, the place had been rather full—she went there a late breakfast and after she had meandered somewhat
in her routes. The moment she stepped into the library, was taken aback. Sure, the current Hogwarts seemed to have more students than her time, but she hadn’t realised how many! It was not just the group study tables that were approaching full, but also the individual tables. She hadn’t managed to find an empty carrell either, even if she did not really look forward to being cooped up again in a small space.

The Ravenclaw wondered what had contributed to the difference in crowd until she realised that the end of term was approaching; Christmas was only a month away and before that would be the end of term test. Some students had clearly decided to make some headway through their studying backlog, especially the upper year students with their advanced classes.

A glance out of the nearest window drew another sigh from her lips. Snow was falling in a steady drift and the entirety of the grounds that she could see was already covered in white. If it was any other season, she could be out there, sitting by the lake. Now, though? Now, she was stuck indoors like the rest of them and she found herself sympathising with members of the Ravenclaw quidditch team that she had heard griping that morning in the common room.

Her feet took a left turn at the next corridor while Hermione ignored the sound of grinding stone behind her that meant the corridor was shifting away. Sure enough, she saw a wide flight of stairs when she looked back, of checkered black and white marble and a rather recent, late 19th century light fixtures. It would be one of the stairs that can lead you to the Muggle Studies class, but she was not interested in checking it out now.

A long walk always helped clear her head.

It was another corridor and two more flight of stairs later that Hermione felt she was starting to get rather high up, based on how far the snow-covered forest looks from the windows she’d passed. Even the rather neglected Muggle Studies was not relegated to a corridor this high. Just when she was starting to muse about the need to start finding stairs that headed down, the bend before corridor in front of her had a ‘Please Detour, Do Not Pass’ sign painted on a board.

‘Corridor in Use’.

Never one to let a head full of curiosity go to waste, Hermione did not detour at all. She pushed the board aside and raised the chains to pass underneath.

As she proceeded, it did not take long before the wooden floor changed into earth. A light dusting of snow alternated with yellowed grass. The scent of oak and something more fragrant caressed her senses. *Wait, this is unfamiliar. What is it?* Ah, cedar! That was it. It wasn’t something she encountered often in Britain and that was why it took a while to identify. Lavender poked in through the snow intermittently with their fragrance also in the air at times, and she had to grin at this out-of-season detail.

She was at the beginning of an opening between denser lines of trees, a small clearing. The place certainly felt wider than any corridor had any right to be.

“Well, this terraforming feels familiar,” she said, even if the terrain that was imitated this time was a different one.

“Hermione?”

To her surprise, it was Ceres who had greeted her. Her shoulder-length blonde hair swayed with her movement. She was wearing a khaki outfit that Hermione identified with safaris, unabashedly wearing trousers with only a light robe-coat over that, a Gryffindor prefect pin over her left lapel.
“How did you get here?” The blonde asked.

“On foot,” Hermione gave her dry answer.

Ceres smiled. “I suppose that’s true.”

“What’s all this?”

“Well…” her words trailed away and she looked down, on the grass and snow. “I wanted to blast Reducto indiscriminately in the Forbidden Forest—not just me, to be honest, Pip too. Yet Paul and Peter overheard us and came up with a better idea.”

“Uh, what?”

She let out a soft exhale of breath. “It’s a long story, you see…”

Hermione walked alongside the Gryffindor prefect, two pairs of booth crunching ice and drying grass as they made their way through the opened path. It was not a particularly happy story that she told, but as they met familiar figures at the end of their trek, its weight fell less heavily over them.

The particular details of this story will be told in another day. For now, suffice to say that at the end, as they bid their separate ways, Hermione felt a renewed sense of urgency to do something in the midst of both this muggle and magical war.

'—

Tom Riddle lingered near the infirmary door as Hermione did a routine check on Jemima.

Why Hermione had gotten so attached to Little Miss Waste of Space was something he’d given up on figuring out. He was more interested in figuring out who the other patients in the infirmary were. A young Gryffindor boy who seemed to have gotten in a flying class accident gazed up curiously at him. He gave an absentminded nod before moving away. It would seem that there was no one else apart from that student and the waste of space. *How mundane, how uninteresting.*

Perhaps this misplaced sympathy was a Healer thing rather than a Hermione thing. For one, he had eventually told Madam Edelstein about how Jemima was responsible for Hermione’s fall down a flight of stairs, which was why he had no qualms rejecting her affection harshly (that was the only guilt he admitted to, then). Yet as conflicted as the Nurse seemed, she still felt bad for the Slytherin. *Not that different from Hermione.*

“Done yet?” Tom asked once Hermione was heading his way.

“Of course.” And that was that.

They were finding their way around each other better every day. He’d stopped asking why she had to care so much even for someone as annoying as Jemima and she stopped going on and on about how it’s the humane thing to do, and one of the traits that set humanity apart from earlier hominins were the ability to cooperate and create society, to contribute to advancing a common good instead of merely focused on individual survival. This was how civilisations grow.

The last time around, he’d argued back that isn’t one of the benefits of being a social creature being the ability to actually exile the unwanted elements from said society? Why would anyone want to continuously contribute to a society that doesn’t expel the leeches and those who obstruct other members? The right way to treat a parasite is to cut them out and burn them. That would certainly ensure that they’re no longer a danger to you or your society. Even the Romans have *damnatio*
memoriae. He can remember at least that much from the private Latin and history lessons he’d attended with Abraxas, Melchior or Gallus over several summers.

This was probably one of those things that they were just going to have to agree to disagree about.

It was also around this point that Tom figured out that he should be rather thankful that they’d comfortably figured out sex between them, and that Hermione was nowhere near missish or wracked with some sort of guilt about it. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have finally understood that they’d probably never see eye-to-eye about this without another fight.

He was still not in the mood to get into another big fight with Hermione after their last blown up argument when she took issue with how he baited Jemima Avery without informing her. He didn’t think she’d take the suggestion to request Jemima to be moved to St. Mungo’s well, never mind that she’d already done two shifts at the hospital by now and that another one was coming up in two days. The pureblood witch didn’t deserve her mercy, not for her crimes. For the time being, sex was a much better method of letting the steam out while they hash out some form of conflict resolution.

“What are you thinking about?” Hermione asked from his left.

He’d realised that he hadn’t said a word as they strolled away from the infirmary for a little while.

“Nothing important.”

“Really?”

“Well, argumentative sex is actually pretty great.” he replied. She huffed and rubbed her forehead at that, and he thought there was some colour up to her ears, but Tom was undeterred. “It’s not like there’s anyone else who’s listening, Hermione, and you did ask.”

“Yeah. I’ll just pretend I didn’t, then.” Hermione muttered. They went down a circular stair, arms still linked.

“What’s the hurry?” he asked.

“What hurry?”

“You usually hover around the infirmary longer than that. Ergo, you have something else you wanted to do or discuss today.” Tom stated. In the last week or so, he waited for five minutes before going off, and when he went back some twenty minutes or half an hour later, she would still be there.

“The Society, actually. We know that Bernadotte had coordinated things with his family, and so had Von Moritz. We still don’t have someone to help us liaise with the Ministry, though.”

“Ah, so that’s it.”

“Yes. Which reminds me…”

Hermione was biting her lips in thought. The way her lips reddened would’ve been an interesting distraction if he didn’t already have this discomfort in his gut. He had a feeling that she was considering something he would not be enthusiastic about.

“Yes?” Tom prompted.
“What about Alastor Moody, the Auror?”

It was a good thing that they waited until they were already up in an unused classroom in the Astronomy Tower once more. It was slightly inconvenient, considering how he figured that Hermione did not seem to have much of a sense of self-preservation here, but he thought she was better now. Well, and that he wasn’t about to let her stand anywhere near the edge.

Tom felt the first twinges of the possibility of a headache, a phantom echo. “Moody? Of all the people…”

“He’s dependable and responsible,” she started.

“Dumbledore is dependable and responsible.” he countered.

“Well, Moody’s not dead convinced that you’re going to be the next dark lord of the British Isles, so he’s ahead of Dumbledore here.” She deadpanned. Tom pinched the bridge of his nose.

“He’s an Auror, which means that I can’t imagine he’ll be fine with some of the historical spells we chose to study and use.”

“You’d be surprised,” she murmured. She said, in a louder voice, “We’re not trying to get him to be the teacher of a duelling club. We’re not going to spend a lot of time with him while casting offensive spells. It won’t be an issue.”

“I know that this may not cross your mind, but he doesn’t exactly trust me.” Tom’s reply was dry.

“Newsflash Tom, he probably doesn’t trust anybody.”

“Why would that make him be the best choice you can think of?”

She took a deep breath, thinking through it. “Because Director Amalric Bones respects him and considers him a promising young Auror. I’ve talked to Amelia about him because I wanted to dig into his background, and what her father thought of him. He’s even rather good friends with Dumbledore, from what I’ve heard.”

“It’s not going to make Dumbledore trust me,” he pointed out.

“Oh, believe me, I’ve stopped trying to do that now. I’m fine if he was simply to become a little less wary.” Her words demonstrated just how realistic she was being now.

Hermione seemed to be unfazed by his concerns, confident that they could be worked on. He was unsure whether this was merely her optimism or if it was based on something else, a deeper knowledge she had yet to mention. Her confidence was a hint, really. He leaned back against the nearest desk. Hermione had actually sat up on one not far across him, her legs dangling down in their knee-length socks and boots not covered by her robe.

He forced his own gaze back to her face. “Did you see him?”

“Excuse me?”

“Alastor Moody. Did you see him in your dreams of future? What did you see him as?”

He could see the flicker of recognition in her eyes and waited for her words even when he was almost certain of what her answer would be. Waiting was an art, really, and one he was always practising and perfecting. A voluntary surrender was sweeter than manually putting words into
other people’s mouths, not to mention that the latter usually generated some resentment.

“…maybe.” Her gaze wandered to her hands clasped on her lap and fiddling with her wand.

“What do you see?”

She raised her head to meet his gaze before answering.

“That he’s not one for betrayal. The only time people thought he acted suspiciously turned out to be due to Polyjuice Potion. It wasn’t him at all. Then again, he was more than a touch paranoid and he’d…” she took a deep breath. “…he’d seen too many of his friends, colleagues and juniors die. That would’ve left a mark even on the strongest of men.”

Hermione wasn’t lying about this; her brown eyes were warm and open. He could see that.

“If you didn’t attack him first, if you didn’t go insane and attack other people first…if you still stayed your course, he would not suspect you as excessively as Dumbledore would.”

The cool wind blew in from the open balconies. Hermione merely tightened her robes. Tom glanced out towards the horizon, watching the lake and the mountains beyond that and the dark forest covering everywhere else in between. Half the trees seemed aflame with their reddened leaves while the other half were evergreens. A silent vista seemed to lay below both of them, far above the world.

“Well, he’s a Housemate, so at least he has that edge over Dumbledore.” Tom mused.

“He’s a Slytherin?”

He did not mistake the surprise in her voice and his lips lifted up at one corner.

“What, you didn’t know?”

Hermione shook her head. “No, not at all.”

“Ah, your visions aren’t perfect after all.” For some reason, he found this amusing. She only shrugged.

“I didn’t say they are. They’re fragments. Most of the time, they’re enough, though.”

Tom stood up from the table he had been leaning against, offering her his hand. She took it within a moment and pulled herself up while gripping his hand as an anchor.

“Let’s table this until we’ve found several other candidates to compare, then.” he said.

“I’m not sure I have anyone else right now, but alright. What deadline should we set for the decision? Monday? We can’t draw this out for too long, the Search has started already.”

“We’ll decide this Tuesday.”

Chapter End Notes
Some notes on narrative flows from the author:

As for Hermione’s meeting with Ceres, I’ll put the full story together in a chapter that does deal with the wider issues faced in that segment. I just thought that putting the beginning here would provide better context of the timing for most people. Heaven knows that the Intermezzo already involved scenes with time that’s non-concurrent with the primary narrative, but I don’t think I can force the story to be strictly chronological either since that would take the readers all over the place and over Hermione (and Tom’s) various projects.

Everyone knows the two main characters have around half a dozen projects going on at any one time, right? One of the downsides of actually having genius-level overachievers as the main character. You either have to be highly organised, with a planner at hand to keep track of all of that, or have an eidetic memory. That’s a bit too much and probably not most people’s idea of fun, so I thought it would be easier to make sense of all the things occurring if I (generally) group it according to idea or the main people or project involved. I usually do try to leave some hints as to when something is happening, but they might be a bit too subtle or is pretty taxing to keep track of when this story is pretty bloody dense in details.

I suppose I can give up and just put a date at the top of every scene and then just write scenes as I wish to, going back and forth in the timeline as I wanted, but I doubt you really want me to take that approach. That’s putting a lot of the work of putting the jigsaw pieces on the reader. People are going to kill me for that.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

Damnatio Memoriae: (Latin, History) Actually a modern Latin phrase meaning ‘condemnation of memory’, in which a person is erased from official accounts and other efforts to scrub their existence away. Note that it’s not something easy to do, to try to completely erase people from history. The Roman’s efforts at it may be what gave rise to the term as it is used in Europe, but other civilisations have been doing that for a while too. In Ancient Egypt, the records of the woman pharaoh Hathepsut were also tried to be erased by at least one of her succeeding pharaohs.

Additional Notes:

Alastor Moody: A young Auror from the DMLE who had started to make a name for himself as a shrewd and sharp-tongued investigator, he is the first to arrive in Hogsmeade after the attack there took place. He is also the Auror who had taken most of the witness statements in that event, including Hermione and Tom’s statements. He has yet to lose one of his eyes. Grouchiness is his default state. He is in the unit lead by Captain Hypatia Jones, and like everyone else in the Auror Corps, is under Director of the DMLE, Amalric Bones.
Galatea Merrythought has a drink with old friends in a pub. Conversations about their students. Reminiscences of a different conflict. Daedalus drops in at the Search’s headquarters bearing gifts. Galatea Merrythought invites Hermione over for tea and stories.

In which Hermione voices the Promise that she made to herself.

~ Third Arc – To Navigate Scylla & Charybdis ~

It was Friday night, and even if the official Hogsmeade Weekend hasn’t quite started yet in
Hogwarts, it was clear that some teachers have already decided to start their weekend now and unwind. Hermione and Tom would have no idea about it (nor would they care), as they had their own affairs to tend to after the unsatisfying discussion as to whom their ministry liaison for the Search should be.

For now, let us return to the Three Broomsticks.

The witch’s shock of white hair was easily identifiable from almost anywhere in the establishment, though her face was still unlined. It certainly made meeting up easier when she’d arrived earlier than her friends. Galatea Merrythought was nursing a tumbler of firewhisky in front of her when her colleagues showed up.

“I thought we agreed to do this two weeks ago? This is a bit late, isn’t it?”

Orpheus Dexter took the stool to her left, dark robes the colour of the night sky shifting behind him. She could see the faintest dusting of stars on them. “I did say I was sorry, Galatea. It’s not like I can safely leave writing test problems to my assistants. The term’s end is already here.”

“You say that like I don’t need to write test problems too.”

“Half of your tests are practice tests!”

“You can do that with yours too. Do oral tests.” She teased. He let out an aggrieved sigh and peevishly scratched his hair. They both knew that it was an issue of the standards set by Hogwarts board of governors than anything they could change. Astronomy’s written tests still had to cover 80% of the materials (and of the final weight). The fact that it hadn’t been changed for three centuries did not make the board more inclined to review it soon. Orpheus had been collecting signatures and essays from his colleagues in the continent expressing how the modern curriculum and approaches used by current Astronomy Masters and Grandmasters had moved on.

Needless to say, it was slow going.

“I’ll pay for your next drink.” The blond wizard conceded instead.

Her smile grew as Orpheus hailed the bartender to order his drink and hers. A draft passed through the pub as the door opened yet again.

“That would be great, yes. Thank you.” She nodded.

Heavy footsteps thudding in an alternating pattern on the wooden floor alerted both of them to the third member of their little group. She glanced back over her shoulder to see the grizzled visage of Silvanus Kettleburn, Hogwarts Professor for Care of Magical Creatures along with his salt-and-pepper hair. He took the seat to her right.

“Evening, all.” Silvanus said.

“Evening Silv.” Galatea said, ignoring the glare he sent her way under bushy eyebrows. This, too, was already an old habit of hers, and if Silvanus muttered under his breath, he had yet to really argue with her about it.

As he pulled off his coat and dropped it on the stool next to his, she could hear the ‘whump’ of its solid mass—Hogwarts’ professor and official beast keeper had yet to give up his old dragonhide coat, even if it meant continuously mending and darning it. On the upside, the number of
protective runes he’d sewn on its lining meant that at this rate, it probably counted as light armour (the dragonhide itself was rather magic resistant, but not the fabric lining). He’d ordered one of the local beers to start with.

“And what’s your excuse for cancelling on us last week and the one before?” The witch asked him.

“Needed to get the iron leg calibrated, what else?” He grumbled. “Winfrith had warned me that anytime the season changes, if I start feeling some aches, I’d need to reset the connection, sensitivity and whatnot. Well, I tried it myself but it wasn’t getting better. It was actually hurting more.”

“So, you stopped trying to be so tough and actually call her.” Galatea finished the story with a wry grin.

“So I floo-called her,” Silvanus continued, not bothering to answer at her comment, “and we set a place to meet, you know how fraught it is to floo travel to the continent and back. We only managed that last week to meet in Helsinki, since going to-and-fro neutral territories are much smoother. You wouldn’t believe the number of floo jumps needed to achieve that—”

“Wait a minute, if I’m about to hear you complain about your last weekend’s travel, I’m not even tipsy enough to enjoy that yet. Let’s hold that back for at least another half an hour.” Orpheus cut in as he picked up his own glass of wine.

Silvanus muttered something about unappreciative friends and Orpheus only grinned.

“Did Winfrith chew you off for taking too long to fix it?” Galatea asked.

“Are you telling this story, or am I?” He groused. She could hear the heavy *thump-thump-thump* of impatient metal fingers against the countertop. His right hand was busier holding his stein. She raised a hand in peace.

“Sorry, sorry. Do go on.”

“Wait, *don’t* go on,” Orpheus added quickly. “Let’s just circle back to it later. I’ve heard her name a few times before, but I hadn’t made the connection. Her name isn’t common and I’m sure I’ve heard it before somewhere.”

“None of our names are exactly common,” Galatea dryly remarked. “After all, you can always check the registry to see who’s already using what.”

Names confer destiny. For the average witch or wizard, it may not be a major Destiny, with a capital D, but it does not mean that most magical parents would like to have their children’s fate intertwine with someone else’s. It was why the wizarding world scarcely have the same first names within the same generation or two.

“Winfrith, Winfrith… is it actually Winfrith *Hohenheim*?” Orpheus asked in surprise.

“Who else?” Silvanus murmured into his glass. “There’s not a lot of prosthetics master, definitely not with that name.”

“Huh,” Orpheus mused, “didn’t really know her. I know her husband better; the Sages needed to construct this large-scale orrery, back in the late 20s. The thing is, we wanted the model planets to also accurately reflect the conditions on the real planets, and apparently that required some rather finicky metal alchemy to create the connection. That was how I knew Eduard.”
“Why go with Hohenheim, though? I thought you’d have asked Albus, what with the Royal Stargazers being based in England.” Silvanus asked, his metallic left hand drumming a slow rhythm on the countertop yet again.

“Because Albus was working to finish his grandmaster in transfigurations or alchemy under Flamel. I don’t even know which one then, possibly even both. Like hell I even know how to contact Flamel of all people.”

Orpheus’ tone was a little self-deprecating as he said this. Galatea sipped her second glass of firewhisky. Silvanus had already ordered more beer for himself. Expectation hung heavily in the air, as they were still skittering around the primary reason that they did this at least once a year, usually twice. Tension skittered back and forth among the three of them.

“So…” she started.

“So,” Orpheus replied.

Both of them turned to Silvanus who bristled. “What? We’re drinking and talking among friends, isn’t that enough?”

The white-haired witch did not let herself be goaded. She let a calmer quiet settle between them for a while before she spoke up.

“You know it’s not, Silvan.”

There was a sigh from her left, and Orpheus leaned his head against one hand. “I’ll go first then. I still avoid going through the Forbidden Forest during heavy rain, especially if I was alone. It’s not as bad if I have company, because the conversation can distract me enough. If not, though…I can still catch the phantom scent of gunpowder sometimes. It’s not there, but my head fills in the blanks all too readily.”

“Anything happier?” Galatea asked instead.

“I had cause to visit muggle London last month and met Stevens, someone I knew from the Warwickshire Regiment. We went for drinks.” His answer was succinct.

“And you laugh at the idiots that you both remember.” Silvanus murmured.

“At idiots that only we remember,” Orpheus corrected, his tone warmer for some reason, yet his expression was mixed. “He wanted to invite me to meet the rest of the boys around Boxing Day.”

“If they’re fundraising for their widows and orphan funds, owl me their accounts.” Silvanus said.

“Send it to me too,” Galatea added quickly. His friends’ easy rejoinder left the astronomer slightly off-kilter as he knew not what to say so.

“Ah…thank you.”

Hogwarts head of beastkeepers shrugged. “No problem at all.”

“Do none of them find you…odd?” Galatea mused. “Even if you’re from some strange detachment with single-letter codes that the headquarters stay mum about? No comments on how surprisingly well-preserved you are for a man your age?”

It was Silvanus’ turn to laugh. For the first time that evening, his gravelly voice had lost its
reluctant edge. His wide shoulders shook with mirth. “Honestly, Galatea, the regular soldiers know that they’re never told much. They don’t care. If you had their backs, you’re a good fella. Even if nobody can ever get your hair into what they call ‘regulation’ hair. Especially when you always have more rations to pass or trade than anyone else.”

“True enough,” she nodded. “Nobody asked many questions about how I was able to pass messages swiftly during night time in Passchendaele, over several trenches and large stretches of no man’s land.”

“More night heron than swift, I wager.”

She quirked her lips into a smile but said nothing.

“Good thing you were in Hogsmeade at that last brush up, Galatea,” Silvanus said again. “Merlin, I regret not going there from the morning. At least with you, the kids are certainly in good hands.”

“I wasn’t alone,” she pointed out. He rubbed his beard with his flesh hand and scoffed.

“Who the hell expects you to do it alone? Not me.”

“Not me either,” Orpheus chimed in.

“I mean, if I was there, a few weeks ago, somebody’s going to end up dead and that person weren’t going to be me.” Kettleburn said, with a certainty of someone who had killed people before and knew how to live with it.

“It’s really not advisable to throw Avada willy-nilly when you’re back home, you know. We’re not even supposed to be killing anybody back then.” The Astronomer casually pointed out. It was met by a snort and coughs of disbelief, to which he only gave a mysterious smile.

“Well, men may plan all they wish, but when your plans hit reality…” the duelling mistress trailed away.

“Still, Order of Merlin for the children? Pffft. Where was the one for you and the others?” Silvanus was on a roll now, his voice almost rising. “They’re not giving you any because it would be so inconvenient for the Ministry’s popularity game, wouldn’t it?”

“Do watch that hand, Silvanus.” The blond interrupted.

The white-haired witch knew what Orpheus meant—the last thing they needed was Silvanus banging his left fist on the top. That was going to break it right in the middle sooner or later.

“We know it’s a popularity game, Silv. Besides, it’s not that we’re adults, it’s mainly because we’d gone off against Ministry recommendation of staying out of it back then. I don’t think that mark on us is going anywhere for at least another decade.” She answered him, a rueful sigh escaped her lips.

“And well, I was involved. No one else was going to get considered now—I suppose I should apologise to Phyllida. Travers is still in the Ministry, isn’t he? I don’t think he’ll ever stop to keep me out its hallowed halls. He will never forget what I did to Evermonde.”

“—buggering nob of an undersecretary—”

“Silvanus, it’s fine.” Galatea spoke up.

Orpheus shook his head. This time, his tone was steel. “You weren’t wrong, Galatea, none of us
were. We’re still *British subjects*. They can’t even outright forbid us to try assisting at the front back then—we even maintained the Statute of Secrecy, didn’t we?"

For all his appearance of a mild-mannered professor, the blond’s opinion was unyielding on this.

“Their worries are not exactly unfounded, Orpheus. You know the people you went in with, same with you, Silvanus. How many of them went back with you? Merlin and Morgana, if Madame Álava and even *Albus* didn’t pitch in with the rescue and extra wards at the hospital, around the end, I don’t know how many would’ve been gone.”

Hogwarts’s expert of Magical Creatures’ nodded thoughtfully at that. “Even with that, the butcher’s bill is several feet long. That’s a lot of wizards and witches.”

“That’s a lot of wizards and witches who aren’t going to have children and raise them. We don’t exactly grow at the same rate as the muggles do,” she continued his sentence.

“Oh, yeah, like jarveys and pixies, the whole lot of them.” The other professor murmured, with more than a hint of envy.

It had only hit the white-haired witch now, after more than a decade teaching, that she seemed to remember her graduating year to be somewhat larger than the ones she was teaching now. It was perhaps not by much, but if one were to observe carefully, the difference was visible.

Orpheus was leaning his chin against clasped hands, his gaze somewhere in some unseen distance. She hoped he wasn’t stuck in another French village none of them were too eager to see again. His voice was still calm that Galatea relaxed.

“I always thought Nightingale was being a tad dramatic when he wrote that poem, you know? But now, one of them did surface in my mind from time to time.”

“Which one was it? He wrote several, didn’t he? Where was he at, anyway?”

The blond wizard paused. “Back then? High Wood, I think. Let me remember it… I don’t remember the entire poem, but the last stanza is…”

*The iris of valour bright in her breast
Were mere fallen petals as life were wrest
His courage rose red as lifeblood poured
The flowers of wizardry fell at Somme.*

Silvanus’ reply was eloquent.

“Well…shit.”

She snorted. The Defence Mistress could recall meeting Nightingale before, probably at the same ‘Thank goodness we’re alive/oh shit, why are we alive/why isn’t it anyone else that’s alive?’ celebrations they’d gone to before. He’d always been good with words, though she’d thought that he was a little too thoughtful (alright, if she were to be honest, he was outright brooding). It wasn’t always a good thing to be stuck in your own head when your recent memories are mostly painful.

The chatter of the pub was clearer now with neither of them talking. The barkeep had the good sense to notice what they were talking about and had left them alone. As Galatea wondered how to stop this from becoming too morose, Silvanus unexpectedly spoke up first after he asked for some scotch.
“You both need to warn your students.”

“Our students?” Orpheus asked, askance.

“You have Little Miss Genius in your House, and ‘Tea has been teaching the Occitan and the Half-English prefects. They need to hear the warning we never had.”

“Wait, Pip and Ceres? Albus would have greater sway over them,” she protested.

Silvanus flattened her objection without a second thought. “Albus thinks that some things are self-evident that I’m not sure if he can build a strong enough argument for it. He never thought it was a good idea to help with the non-magical war back in 1916 and he doesn’t think so now either. Sure, he agreed with medical help, but that’s not what most of the brats are thinking about, is it? I don’t think he’ll manage to convince the young ‘uns.”

“I don’t think Hermione’s that reckless…”

The astronomer trailed away as his friend outright guffawed, bushy eyebrows shaking. “Not reckless? Ha! You haven’t been looking, Orphne! What prim and proper witch would have decided to venture out in Hogsmeade when an attack was happening? What nice and restrained student would decide that looking for the shooters and disarming them is a good idea?”

Silvanus Kettleburn watched his friends digest his words.

“She’s an excellent healer for her age, Silvanus. Surely you don’t think that it would’ve been better for her to hold back?” The blond was distracted enough that his wine was forgotten by now.

“No, not for the civilians.” He was agreeable about it.

“But her ability to not give in to her fear and go straight into danger…yes, that’s very unusual and I’ve trained enough duellists and fighters to know,” Galatea pointed out. “Other trainee healers may be able to match her skills, but her determination…that’s all her.”

The grizzled teacher nodded; she’d easily put into words the understanding he’d known in his gut. He was so animated his hands were waving around, and he missed how Galatea had subtly drawn her stool back to get out of the range of his metallic arm.

“Then, we have that perfect prefect Horace is so proud of, who seemed to have discovered witches for the first time in his life, eh? Why, he went with her without even blinking about it! And does he look much shaken in the days after, Orpheus, Galatea?”

“I saw no signs of it.” The blond wizard was the first to reply.

“Then, we have that perfect prefect Horace is so proud of, who seemed to have discovered witches for the first time in his life, eh? Why, he went with her without even blinking about it! And does he look much shaken in the days after, Orpheus, Galatea?”

“I saw no signs of it.” The blond wizard was the first to reply.

“Exactly! It affected him not at all. It’s not that hard to get Horace to speak up about him; that was how I kept up with news of him later on. I know a couple of people like that from the regulars back then and suffice to say that they either make the best or the worst officers. No in-between. Coldest bastards I know. Yet that allows them to walk through fire easily, and thus steel their men’s hearts and give them reprieve from their own fears. He can lead them bodily into hell and they’d damn well follow.”

“…or to sacrifice his people easily for his own advancement, playing chess on the bloody battlefield, sacrificing men without losing any sleep.” Orpheus murmured. From the way his gaze was fixed on the counter top, the wood either held the secrets of the universe in it or he was lost in his memories in that moment.
Silvanus clapped his hands. “Precisely! You know the sort of sods I’m talkin’ about. Couple that trait with his ambition, then…well, if that did not spoke of an aptitude for danger and glory, I don’t know what does. Cernunnos knows I see that arrogance often in the mirror back when my hair was all black.”

He waited with a grim sort of amusement, flashing his canines in a grin, as realisation and horror dawned on Dexter’s face. Silvanus turned to Galatea next.

“I don’t think I need to say much about the two Gryffindor prefects. They’re in your Advanced Defence II class, aren’t they, ‘Tea?”

Her tumbler was empty but they all knew that she had a high tolerance and an iron-cast liver.

“Yes, they are, and no, you don’t need to say anything more. They might have not been as…effective as Hermione and Tom had been, but they’re cut very similarly, aren’t they?” The witch mused.

“They might have intended just to help a little, but you know what happens in these things. In war, objectives change.” Silvanus shifted his beer steins around. “Governments see opportunities and shift. They’ve always been all too eager to send their young to the meat grinder for a little pissing contest. Once they realise that they have the perfect pawns at hand, well… Why wouldn’t they give a little extra directive here and there? Make requests? ‘Oh, won’t you please help deliver this bit of supplies or ammunition to this half-regiment at the edge here?’”

“Just a little delivery.” The duelling mistress followed his thought easily.

“That would take them across several miles of hell. Who knows what they’ll see? What they’ll do?”

The questions were rhetorical. The Astronomy Professor pushed his glass and bottle away, losing his taste for it already. The occasional laughter of Hogsmeade’s denizens sounded strange to them, distant; sounds of a world they were not part of.

“We’re just a couple of old magicians, not that different from Albus. Why would they listen to us?” Galatea wondered aloud.

“No, I think I get it.” Orpheus looked up. “Because we’ve fought another world war, isn’t it? Even if the Ministry would rather pretend that we didn’t exist.”

His friend nodded slowly under salt-and-pepper hair, grave and solemn now.

“Yes, precisely. Somebody has to tell them.”

‘-

Daedalus knocked and then entered the room without bothering to wait for a reaction, still feeling the confidence boost provided by his natty coat and robes of dark blue with a contrasting claret tie. He always felt a bit more himself on weekends.

The seventh-year wizard gazed around the repurposed classroom curiously. There was a large map of Europe covering over almost the entire wall opposite of the blackboard. One long table that was unexpectedly wider than usual was placed near the far wall, with a lot of chairs. It was a meeting table, he surmised. Spread across the walls were either a bookshelf or a pigeonhole shelf—all the better to store scrolls in.
At the centre of the room was a large, maroon Persian carpet with a rather detailed pattern of vines and flowers from who-knows-which-storage. The colour was a little faded, but it seemed fine otherwise. It was as unexpected as the medieval-style chandelier, or heck, the damask curtains by the window.

“Wow, you’re really serious about redecorating, aren’t you?” He mused aloud.

Hermione turned from where she’d been chatting with Melchior Nott, a scroll in one hand.

“Daedalus! It’s good to see you here.”

“Take your time, I can wait.”

She made her way easily towards the doorway. Hermione wore a floral-patterned dress belted at her waist. He would have no idea how to describe it in more detail to his sister if she ever asked. What he was a tad too aware was how the hem stopped slightly higher than the knee, and the long stretch of stockinged legs were a little distracting. He managed to drag his eyes back up only by sheer force of will. Then he started to forcefully imagine pink elephants stampeding around the room.

*I wouldn’t be surprised if Riddle starts having ‘little chats’ with half the wizard she passes.*

“So, how hard was it to transform an abandoned class to this?” He asked.

“Oh, half of this must’ve been due to Pinny’s diligence while the shelves are certainly due to Abraxas’ creativity in digging through the castle’s old inventory.”

“I bet the curtains were also his work,” Daedalus eyed them while leaning back against the door. She seemed surprised.

“How did you know?”

“Hermione, they’re green and tied with silver ropes.” His voice was dry.

“Ah, yes. I didn’t pay much attention to them since other things seem more important.” Daedalus didn’t even blink at that answer.

What he said instead was, “I’m actually astonished that he hadn’t changed the carpet.”

Hermione pursed her lips.

“He did say that he’d find a better one to replace it. I kept saying that it’s not necessary, but he didn’t seem to care,”

“To our everlasting astonishment—”

“I know; I know better now. No need for sarcasm.” The brunette sighed and leaned her forehead against a hand. “I’ll just ask Pinny to find a dark blue carpet from somewhere, along with a dark grey tablecloth for what used to be the teacher’s desk.”

“Who’s Pinny?”

“One of the house elfs of Ravenclaw House. She seems so enthusiastic to help that I hadn’t managed to turn her down at all. What are you here for, Daedalus? I’m sure you didn’t drop in to complain about the interior design.”
He didn’t tell her how curious that was, since the elfs do not often get attached to a particular student, but he was sure that she would completely miss the point if he mentioned it that he said nothing. Instead, he simply focused back on his actual purpose of dropping in there.

“Well, I have some starting points for the French teams, I’m sure…” as he said this, Daedalus entered the room further, looking for a random table to drop his book bag on.

From there, he liberated several scrolls, unrolled them and flattened them in two spells on said table. He told her that he had reports that can confirm just where the Ministry had tried to look for Grindelwald before, though the thoroughness of the search varied, as they did not always have a firsthand report. Sometimes, the investigator was not someone who had lived and worked at the locale for a while.

“…These are the reports from some areas of Burgundy, and then a few cities on the Loire valley. I know that there are more reports for the second part, but what I do have is Tours and Orléans, and there may be more reports from Burgundy than the ones I brought right now. These aren’t the entire reports that the Ministry has, alright?”

Hermione scanned the heading of each report and skimmed the first paragraph or two. The monotonous handwriting was rather exact, closer than a printed font type than actual handwriting. He knew when her eyes widened that she recognised it immediately as the result of a copy spell cast on a verbatim quill.

“Daedalus,” she murmured. “Did you copy these from Auror reports?”

The Ravenclaw prefect hid his surprise well. Did she really read all that quickly to be able to recognise it? He didn’t intend on keeping the source a secret, as it was rather obvious to his trained eye. Yet he hadn’t counted on her knowing what it was immediately.

She glanced up at him. He was aware that he was too thick-skinned to be embarrassed, eyes bright with mischief instead.

“How could you accuse me so? I cannot possibly comment.”

“One of us actually has a parent placed rather high up in the DMLE. That person is emphatically not me.” She replied with a bland smile of her own.

“To smuggle or even copy a document of restricted access is a misdemeanour.”

“I’m surprised that you even know it’s not a felony.” She muttered, and he restrained his surprise. Why was he not surprised that she was even aware of the distinction?

“I’m not foolish enough to risk that. I’m a prefect, you know? Have to be a good example and all that rot.” He continued as if she hadn’t spoken, even if he was holding back his grin.

“So, these aren’t actually restricted documents.” Hermione finished. Her raised single eyebrow challenged him to tell her that she was wrong. He simply nodded.

“Precisely. It’s still not something you want to be caught copying, though—”

“—Me? You mean you don’t want to get caught copying—”

“—because it may result in some…misunderstandings. So, believe me when I wholeheartedly encourage you to find a way to officially gain access to these files and the rest of the bunch.” He finished, trailing into little chuckles when he heard her pointed protestations.
“Truly, I’m certain that it won’t be difficult for you. Healers usually have several Auror contacts, for obvious reasons since they often hold shifts at the A&E. I’m sure Madam Álava have some colleagues she can recommend if you ask her.”

Her brown eyes lit up. “Ah, I see. Excellent point. So, are you staying for a while?”

“No. I’m not like you, Hermione, all-too-happy to use up Saturday morning for work. I’ve given you some head start on the search for now, and I’ll contact you later if I have more. In the meantime, I’m going to go to Hogsmeade and just enjoy the fresh air.”

“What fresh air? You’re just going to get stuck in the bookstore.” That was an actual hit to his ego.

“Only in the evening. I actually have a date.” He emphasised. The wizard didn’t think he was that much of a bookworm, not compared to most of his Housemates. “And you’re still going to spend your afternoon in St. Mungo’s. That’s just insane.”

She shrugged as she turned towards him with a smile, as effortless as a ballerina, as if the weight on her shoulders were non-existent. He had no idea how she did it.

“The rotation for healer’s apprentices is four weeks on and then four weeks off, and I’m already doing less than most since I’m only doing it part time. So, it’s just for four Saturdays in a row. It’s not that big of a deal.”

Daedalus shook his head in disbelief but said nothing more on the subject, simply rubbing his forehead under his bangs. There really was no way to get Hermione to understand how crazy her schedule was to lesser mortals, so he’d given up trying after a certain point. Curie was certainly a law unto her own.

They chatted for a few more minutes after that, her trying to get him to say who his date was and him enjoying being able to stump her for a bit that he actually stayed mum on the subject. Not that he even thought it was a secret, but there really were too few things that escaped her notice at this point that he appreciated the little things that she still didn’t know. Nott joined them after a while; he was probably bored just working alone in his corner when they were making a ruckus chatting. That wasn’t a problem for him, as the Nott heir had been one of the less prideful Slytherins that he knew.

“What are you working on, Nott?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” The other wizard’s smile was affable with a hint of something more. He relented when Daedalus eyed him sideways. “Well, it’s nothing exciting. There is the early draft for some precautions against Grindelwald’s most recent methods, along with the mire of legal precedent to go through to back it up just in case it’s something that comes across as a little too daring for the current bureaucracy…”

Whether Daedalus even chose to or not, some points of the law were still what his parents often talk about anywhere, not just at the dinner table. A veritable orchard of legal ideas grew wild in his head by dint of sheer exposure seeding them, bearing fruit easily with how often he was watered by concepts hashed out and fed by their ongoing arguments (‘discussions’). His mother passed the bar to become Counsel to the Wizengamot and she’d married another avid scholar of justice—her husband merely ended up in law enforcement instead.

The fifth-year trailed away after another two sentences or so, his expression of light embarrassment. It wasn’t a strange thing to do, for Nott must have expected him to already yawn at such a dry topic.
“I apologise; I must be boring you.”

“Actually no, not at all. I’m not simply being polite when I say this. How do I put this…”

Rubbing his chin, Daedalus sighed. He was regretting his decision to listen to Ignatius’ pleadings to take over his prefect position when he resigned last year (for personal reasons). He was starting to grow an utterly inconvenient sense of responsibility. He wanted to say no. The blond wizard really, really wanted to say no; it was going to be such a bother and he appreciated his free time very much.

His mouth said something completely different.

“I’m probably as much of an amateur at this as you are—not a proper legal scholar here—but I’ve been swimming in some of those cases and discussions for as long as I can remember.” He pointed to the thick case book that the Slytherin had carried with him, easily recognising it for what it was. “If you need a second opinion about something or if something got confusing, you know how to contact me.”

…and Merlin help us both.

Daedalus accepted Nott’s outpouring expression of thanks and his vigorous handshake with a feeling of restrained gloom.

Hermione threw the floo powder and called out her destination. “Hogwarts’s Infirmary.”

She stepped through the fireplace at St. Mungo’s staff lounge into the green flames, closing her eyes halfway to not become disoriented by the swirling vortex of green fire. In the next step (or ten) the young witch exited the fireplace at Maggie Edelstein’s office, Head Nurse of Hogwarts. While waving away the ash and occasional embers floating in front of her face, she opened her eyes to take in the room.

Warm lantern glow lit the room. It wasn’t even five yet but the sky was fully dark now and filled with millions of stars—a contrast to the reddish sky of London with its purple-tinted clouds where the sun had set some ten minutes ago. Rather stark latitude difference. The sound of quill scratching had stopped the moment she arrived.

“Welcome back, Hermione,” Maggie greeted from her desk.

She returned the smile. “Thank you.”

“Ah, here’s an invite for tea from Galatea before I forget it.” Hermione took the envelope from Nurse Edelstein’s hand, while the older witch continued. “She said she wanted to chat a little with you this afternoon, but you were already out to St. Mungo’s so, I said I’ll pass on any message. She asked me to wait while she came up with something and a house elf delivered this sometime later.”

Like many wizarding world envelopes, it had a wax seal on it even if it was small. The colour of dark amber, which was either a personal preference or a primary colour of her crest. Who knew that the Merrythoughts had a family crest? She could even make out the motto.

Rideamus in faciei mors.

Ouch, her tired brain didn’t have the capacity to be untangling more complicated Latin conjugations yet and looked up. “Can I borrow your letter opener?”
“Sure.” She handed the blunt knife to Hermione.

It was not difficult to carefully pry the seal open (she didn’t like destroying them if she could help it, especially if it’s one she hadn’t seen before). Her wince was unavoidable when she saw Professor Merrythought’s elegant flourishes on the thick paper. Practically all the adults she knew here had handwriting that was elegant to look at. She told herself yet again that it was a different time as she gamely moved on and focused on the contents.

Ah, there it is, “I cordially invite you to…” ah, tea at her office. Alright. She skimmed past the formal language easily, only pausing at the highlights to get the gist. The speed with which she understood it was probably yet another thing she owed Daphne, even if she couldn’t remember it now.

I’ll make sure your family gets out of this century alive and well, Daphne, she promised to herself.

“Great. Thanks for the message, Maggie!”

“Anytime, Hermione.”

As she walked out, Hermione thought that she would certainly be detouring to Merrythought’s suite now. Tom had informed her of his schedule for the day beforehand, probably expecting her to join him after she returned. Change of plans, then. She set off for the Ravenclaw Tower quickly even as she rummaged her bag for a new scroll and quill. It would be easier to write of the situation once she was in the common room, not to mention that there’d be many first and second years looking for an extra bit of pocket change by playing messenger. Once she’d showered and changed, she’d be set for tea.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOSEq1n8bYg, "Come Back to Us", OST of "1917")

“Come in, come in, Hermione! Please, take a seat. I’ve been waiting for you.”

She peeked into the room from the doorway, taking in the cosy sofa and the shelves and dining table of light-coloured wood. The interior was warm and cheerful, in shades of maroon, pumpkin and yellow (the Tiffany lamp patterned with graceful art nouveau bumblebees and sunflowers was a surprise, and so was the floor lamp done in the same glasswork and style).

“I’m sorry that you couldn’t find me earlier.” She took steps into the room as she said this.

Professor Merrythought ushered her in to the gingham sofa. “Oh, it’s not a problem. We still managed to meet up all the same, don’t we? How was your shift at St. Mungo’s?”

Hermione described her experiences, both today and the last two weeks before that. Some of the accidents that people came in from were interesting. Sure, there were the Aurors (Moody and his juniors were not unique there), but the household accidents were sometimes even more bizarre. There was at least one person saying they had ‘fallen down’ by accident on a bottle and that was where it ended, up his backside and basically irretrievable except by a trained professional. She was gamely doing her best not to let her expression change, even if she had to bite the inside of her lips and sink her right nails into her left forearm.

She’d had chats with the other apprentice healers, and they passed on stories that they’ve heard from their seniors and the innocuous ‘giant glass jar of knick-knacks’ on display in a quiet corner. That, Hermione, are the items retrieved and cleaned from a hell lot of people ‘accidentally falling on top of them without pants and getting it stuck up where the sun don’t shine’, as Amanda told
That got a good laugh from Professor Merrythought.

Another accident or two later, she reached the story of the wizard with a spiky vine, wrapped around his right arm, dripping water as he trailed in. The vine oozed something that smelled as sweet as sugar yet with a similar burning edge that made your eyes water like caustic soda. He laughed and simply said that ‘Dear Gertrude’ was being ‘a handful’ today, and he just wanted her to be able to unwind it carefully so he can go back and reattach it to the main plant. She wouldn’t let him leave without doing something about the open cuts and reddened and swollen skin he displayed.

Hermione truly did not care if he decided to keep a whole pond full of carnivorous plant, or breed them for faster reflexes and greater toxicity, but there was no way she was going to let him exit St. Mungo’s in anything less than good health.

“I had to threaten to tie him down before he took me seriously, you know?” The brunette complained.

Merrythought nodded. “Ah, I know the type. You’d have just as much difficulty dragging Silvanus away from dragons, even if it had costed him both limbs now.”

The Ravenclaw blinked. That was interesting. She could hear Professor Kettleburn’s heavier right step, of course, and see his metal left hand, but she hadn’t wondered how it came around.

“Wow.”

“Of course, some people thought it was from the war, and he never tried to explain it. It wasn’t exactly wrong—if he hadn’t had a metal left hand, he’d have lost it twice again when he crossed the trenches.”

That was when Hermione froze and watched her professor’s expression carefully. Merrythought wasn’t saying what she thought she was saying, was she? The master duellist’s expression was still serene, her gaze unwavering. With her shock of white hair, she truly seemed ageless in that moment; a passing divine, an unearthly visitor.

“Um, the trenches, Professor?”

“Certainly. Orpheus and Silvanus were in Ancre and another wood not far from there. I only joined later myself—I was in Passchendaele. I hadn’t known either of them until the whole nightmare was over. More tea?” She offered.

“No need for now, thank you.”

Passchendaele, there was an uneasy echo of familiarity of the name to Hermione, and she avoided it for the moment in favour of an easier question to ask. “Ancre, Professor?”

“Oh, you know. One of the battles at Somme. My own crucible was at Ypres.”

Somme. Now that was a name Hermione knew only too well. Her hands tightened, clutching at nothing while Merrythought’s hazel eyes were still too open, too understanding as she tried to process the words and came up with nothing. It would explain the scars on her arm, an unthinking part of her mind opined. Considering that the usual wizarding world outfit usually involved robes, such covering up did not bring second or third thoughts in anyone. The last time Hermione saw Merrythought stepping in the middle of a particularly vicious fight between a Slytherin and a
Gryffindor, however, shredded her left sleeves.

She had seen burn scars with slashes of thicker areas and keloid formation at the centre of several. Then the defence professor mended her sleeve and they were no longer visible.

*Impossible* she’d first thought when she saw it. *There’s practically no burn so severe that it would leave a scar tissue that obvious in the wizarding world, not with the healing methods and spells available.*

“Somme,” the word felt foreign on her tongue as she tried it out. She was shaking her head without realising that she did. “That’s…that’s the previous World War, isn’t it?”

“It is. It was the Great War, as we knew it then. *The War to End All Wars.*”

The young witch couldn’t help a sceptical scoff at that, even if she immediately covered her mouth in surprise. Merrythought’s expression merely drifted slowly into a smile.

“I know. Such hubris,” she added.

“But-but…it was a muggle war!” Hermione exclaimed. “We’re *not* supposed to interfere with muggles!”

“What we’re not supposed to do is to break the Statute of Secrecy. Trust me, when people are tenacious, they can be very creative. Not to mention that most muggle soldier has no wish to question good fortune or inexplicably able assistance either. If being uncurious would help them live longer, if it could make their life easier, then they’d turn a blind eye to any apparent oddities without a second thought.”

Galatea poured more tea for herself.

“I was mostly a messenger as I flew from camp to camp at night—I had the eyes for it, you see. There had been no message that I failed to send, and barely any that took more than a night. When I told my colleagues and the general’s staff that I was attached to not to ask any questions as to how I manage it, they didn’t—I was from Detachment W, after all, of which most officers knew to be highly classified. If I asked them to stay away from my corner for a whole day, they’d do it promptly.”

“I…no, perhaps not the soldiers. I understand that. Yet I can’t imagine that the Minister for Magic allowing participation all the same.” The Fudge that she knew would’ve forbid it.

“Oh, they disapproved. They forbid direct involvement in the fight, but…” Galatea Merrythought idly passed her teacup to her left hand. “But the Ministry for Magic is *still* a Ministry under no. 10 Downing Street. We are not a separate kingdom with a fully independent government. Would a lower bureaucrat have the power to countermand the position of one superior to him? Both Asquith and Lloyd George were always ecstatic at the prospect of our assistance—their opinion is reflected by both their staffs, across all parties. Evermonde certainly could not go against them. In wartime, that would have veered too close to treason.”

The name *Evermonde* was not immediately recognisable to her, though she could feel an odd sense of familiarity from it, like a co-worker from a distant department you only heard in passing once. It was only after a few seconds that she realised that he would have been the Minister for Magic during the First World War.

Merrythought’s eyes met Hermione’s. “How could he forbid loyal British subjects from assisting their countrymen? He couldn’t.”
Hermione began to gain an idea of what he did.

“What he could was to use the Statute of Secrecy like a shield, isn’t it?”

“Yes. A dozen or two of wizards and witches got pulled out because they weren’t any good at
keeping secrets or laying low, but most of us stayed. He insisted that we couldn’t be directly
involved and fight muggles because that would expose us and our abilities—many of us became
specialists instead after that. You know that mine is direct communications and messenger
services. I know a lot of saboteurs and sappers whose muggle friends insist that they had a ‘magical
touch’, able to light the wettest fuse, to mix their personal proprietary explosive that made green
word burn, to provide somewhat dry powder even in pouring rain…”

The smile that Hermione shared was as watery as professor Merrythought’s at the recollection. She
wasn’t sure that the life expectancy of an explosive expert was very good, magic notwithstanding.
It was difficult to imagine how many people her professor had known personally that were now
simply gone.

“Silvanus told me that even Horace helped—back at England, of course. He never had the stomach
for conflict, but his cauldrons had never stopped brewing once Silvanus told him that he could help
and how. Albus assisted Madam Álava sometime during the last year of the war, or perhaps two, in
the wards of St. Mungo’s. It was where the worst wounded were sent back to. I have no idea why
he even knew so many spells to arrest damage and heal, I’m just thankful for it. He did his part
with the potions too—we could never have too many, not when we were also trying to help
alleviate the suffering of our muggle friends.”

“Dumbledore only helped around the last year or so?”

“He’d been in the depths of Romania or Wallachia with Flamel. Even after he’d returned, our
Albus isn’t exactly the most aware or connected to muggle news, is he? If he hadn’t ventured back
to Scotland once in a while, I’m sure he wouldn’t have realised that a war was going on in the
muggle world for a long while, perhaps only until it was over.”

Hermione covered her mouth again to stop herself from laughing. It was absurd, and yet somehow
the unawareness of muggle things still felt like something distinctly Dumbledore. Merrythought’s
wry expression told her that her teacher was quite aware where her thoughts had gone.

“But I digress. Where was I? Ah, the Minister’s opposition, wasn’t it?” She sipped her tea while
gathering her thoughts.

“I was one of the loudest who countered Evermonde’s words in public, in the newspapers. We
might be wizards and witches but nowhere does it say that we have to be cowards. Our countrymen
were risking their lives and we can’t even spare them some assistance? What yellow-bellied
attitude is that?”

Hermione couldn’t help her small chuckle. “You actually said that?”

Merrythought’s grin made her look younger. There were barely any lines on her face. “Oh, I did. I
did that in the newspapers and wireless and worse. I insisted that we could keep the Statute of
Secrecy and still help. The two goals didn’t have to be mutually exclusive. Many of the public had
read and heard and clamoured to give us support, in letters to the editor and such. I know that he’d
never truly forgiven me for bringing his career down in flames.”

“He did that to himself. You just took the opportunity that he set up” Hermione muttered. She
probably didn’t realise how Slytherin she sounded in that moment, which was why Merrythought’s
“You certainly picked up the weirdest things from Riddle.” She commented.

“I’m sorry?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Don’t mind me.”

Her pleasant expression didn’t last long as more of her memories brought her back. She sighed as she glanced towards the window, only a wistful smile now remained.

“You’re still young, Hermione.”

“What does that even mean?”

She returned her gaze to her waiting student. “I meant that I was young too, back then. Oh, the core idea that I expressed was true, definitely. Yet what I failed to see was how Archer’s worries weren’t exactly nothing either. He had a point, even if he just had to put it in the most stupid and cowardly way and insist that the lives of the wizarding world were worth a hundred muggles. I don’t think anyone could be more tone deaf even if they tried.”

Hermione couldn’t help but smile at the way Merrythought insulted the ex-Minister so easily.

“Archer?”

“Archer Evermonde. He was my year mate in Hogwarts and Ravenclaw prefect. A fussier wizard than him you can scarcely imagine. He once wrote a petition to shift the house elves’ cleaning schedule in the morning back by one hour in summer because he thought the stones were still a little on the damp side in the corridors where the first and second years were to take their classes. At one point he was prepared to argue his hypothesis with the Hogwarts caretaker by brandishing an entire scroll filled with his attempts at measuring the slipperiness of different corridors at different times in the morning. It was something that he managed by mobilising a couple of second-years. Unwise cleaning schedule, he said, and reckless disregard of the safety of the youngest members of the student body.”

Hermione’s lips twitched slightly. “Oh Merlin, he sounds like an experience.”

“Oh, he’s an experience alright. I was told by a mutual friend of ours that a foreign diplomat once jumped straight into a pond to avoid him—he’d miscalculated the distance from a viewing pavilion to the stairs.”

Hermione’s laughter rang clear and Merrythought grinned widely in that moment before she continued her story.

“I told him that badgering people don’t get them to do things for you, it just annoys the hell out of them and making them more negative in their opinion to you. You have to make them like you first, and then you have to make it sound like that the change can only benefit them more. Do you know what he did next? He took the effort to ask around what cake the caretaker liked and then went down to the kitchens for a week until he could bake it correctly before he marched all the way to the caretaker’s quarters.”

“I doubt the man was inclined to pardon him,” she replied.

“I did outright tell him to apologise. So, it helped that the first thing he did was insist that he was sorry and that he didn’t know how much of an annoyance he was being. There are benefits for being as thick-skinned as he is—he didn’t give a fig about pride. Then, he handed the cake.”
Perhaps she was merely imagining things, yet for all of Merrythought’s annoyance in her anecdote, she thought she caught an undercurrent of fondness.

“If he’d been such a clod about the war, what is it that he got right, then?”

“That we all should’ve been more careful to not get killed.” The older witch explained. Hermione’s brows creased as she thought over the answer.

“Even the non-magical soldiers would agree with that,”

Her teacher was already shaking her head that Hermione paused and waited for her to speak. “No. It was years later that I understood what he was trying to say, his tone-deaf phrasing and lack of tact notwithstanding.”

There was a restlessness in her hands, in the way she gently passed her teacup from one hand and back again.

“I met more of other fellow veterans, heard about their units and the friends they had known. That was when I thought that someone ought to start writing their experiences down. I asked around for the name of someone who’s good at recordkeeping and arithmancy and that was how I was introduced to Septima Eccleston.”

“Let’s make a record of the veterans and the dead, I suggested. She agreed that it was important; she had always wanted to understand what had driven four of her older brothers to go to the continent where two were never to return alive.”

Eccleston? Hermione wondered. Is that Emma’s aunt or mother?

“She said that we can probably even get the Ministry to fund it if we phrase it correctly—I deferred that to her expertise and she made a proposal. Septima confirmed that we had some funds ready to cover some expenses now, and it was a good enough start. We started tracking down as many people as we can think of, and asking them to speak of us to their friends. It was a very effective method.”

Merrythought’s hands stilled now, the teacup cradled between both palms and yet there were no more movement. She was gazing into it as if it held the answer to the universe itself. The moment extended indefinitely and all that Hermione could hear were the crackling of logs burning merrily in the fireplace, the faraway hoot of an owl.

“Professor?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I was a little distracted.” The white-haired witch placed the teacup on the table. “Of the volunteers from the wizarding world, only around an eighth of us made it back reasonably unscathed. Only a third of us made it back alive. I believe I have the summary around here somewhere.” She lifted a few pillows of the sofa and pulled out a scroll Hermione hadn’t seen and unrolled it on the table. The professor turned it around and pushed it towards her.

One out of eight were well…and two-thirds dead. The numbers were horrifying.

“The non-magical world loses many people too,” Hermione murmured softly, simply because she was numb from the sheer number of people lost.

“That was what I thought so too back then, when everything was too fresh and painful. But the muggle world in general survived at a rate higher than us, and the people we lost were actually spread over a wider range of generations than theirs. It’s just…” She sighed. “Hermione, let me put
this in the simplest term I can. After I started teaching in Hogwarts, something niggled the back of
my mind about my classes.”

“…alright?”

“They were smaller than the ones I remembered—smaller than my classes back when I was still in
Hogwarts. Your and Riddle’s Society is one of the few societies that exists in Hogwarts now. When
I was in Hogwarts, I can choose from at least eight or ten of them. Compare the number of students
on the rolls in your year with the one in mine, if you really want to see the hard numbers.”

Hermione could almost feel her throat tightening at the idea.

“Septima and I had talked about this often—we’ve talked about this with our friends too. We of the
wizarding world marry at a later age than muggles. The purebloods among us do not always have
many children, for one reason after another. The degree of inbreeding that have is certainly one
reason.”

“If you were to search for Grindelwald’s base, I could not reasonably object to it, not with all the
daring things I’ve tried out in my youth. But if you were coordinating this with people in France
and even Germany, then there is no way that you would not brush up against the muggle war
sooner or later—no, no need to defend yourself, Hermione. It’s inevitable.” She raised a hand to
stop Hermione from protesting.

“Perhaps you’d see a fleeing resistance fighter and thought to provide shelter, perhaps it would be
something else, a refugee trying to escape their burning homeland. It does not really matter.
Perhaps the muggle ministries wish to exchange information with some of your assistance, a little
message running or escort of people. This is all to be expected. I trust your sense of humanity,
Hermione. What matters after that is to always be careful to stay mostly uninvolved with the
muggle war, to preserve you and your friends’ lives the best you can.”

Her exhaled breath seemed to carry the memory of too many losses.

“The wizarding world can’t afford to lose yet another generation, Hermione. Not if we wish to
avoid extinction in the next century. Please promise me this.”

“I…I promise.”

There was no other answer Hermione could’ve given. She’d suspected something like this before,
but not to this extent. Hermione was now acutely aware that she, Harry and Ron had come of age in
what was actually the twilight of the wizarding world.

Then, she spoke up again with a much firmer voice.

“I promise that I’ll change the future, Professor Merrythought. I promise I’ll save as many people
as I can.”

She’d thought of it often, but it was the first time she actually put her own ideals and purpose here
into words. It was a promise not just to the DADA professor, but also to herself; to the future witch
with a host of inchoate nightmares that she very much wished to avert.

“Thank you, Hermione.”
For some reason I don’t quite get myself, I ended up trying to recreate the feeling of End of the Third Age that I get at the end of the Lord of the Rings novel into the HP canon. The result here is probably a bit of a hit-and-miss.

That Silvanus Kettleburn has missing limbs is canon, possibly due to his overenthusiasm for his field of study (it’s not hard to see between the lines who inspired Hagrid with his enthusiasm). I just thought that it would make sense for him to have picked up some prosthetics after his wounds healed. The non-magical world managed prosthetics easily, ergo, the magical world should be at least up to that standard, and possibly even progressed much further.

Like Leonard Spencer-Moon, Archer Evermonde is also a canon Minister for Magic in his particular period. He is also described as trying to stop people from getting involved with the muggle war since he is worried about the Statute of Secrecy. As with Galatea Merrythought, I took a lot of liberties in fleshing out his character in the direction I wanted.

Also, there are certainly random expies here, simply because it’s easier to populate the background characters of the world that way.

For those without a western history background to put things in context, the Battles of Somme are famous (notorious) series of battles in World War I.

**Quick-and-dirty overview of some aspects of WWI:** What made World War I’s fronts more gruesome than World War II (nuclear bombs notwithstanding) is that this is a time of rapid technological advancement in technology, including war technology. The army doctrines, training and exercises, however, have yet to catch up (training takes time…heck, getting your officers to gain enough experience and know-how also takes time). So, things get rather bloody as people start to get the hang of it live, practically troubleshooting shit in the middle of a real conflict, with the cost expressed in terms of life. That war was a real knock-down, drag out slugging match.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Cernunnos:** (Celtic Mythology) the horned God of Celtic polytheism from the Gallo-Roman period. The name [C]ernunnos appears only once on the *Pillar of the Boatmen*, a Gallo-Roman monument from the early 1st century CE, which is the best evidence for it though the exact spelling is still uncertain. It may also be *Carnonos*, from Gaulish *karon* for “horn”. Since there are barely any surviving records on him, his possible role varies from being the god of animals, nature and fertility to god of travel, commerce and bi-directionality.

**Misdemeanour:** (Legal, Common Law) is a ‘lesser’ criminal act in some common law legal systems, generally punished to a lighter degree than a *felony*. Both ‘felony’ and ‘misdemeanour’ may still sound familiar to those with a passing acquaintance with the US legal system, but the UK used to have these categories too (where did you think the US got it from?), until the abolition of the distinction between felonies and
misdemeanours by the **Criminal Law Act of 1967**. After that, the categories that exists are *summary offence* and *indictable offence*.

As is mentioned in-text, the wizarding world is still under the Minister for Magic, which is part of His Majesty’s Government and territory of UK instead of a separate sovereignty. Thus, in general, the laws of the UK still apply. As Hermione is currently still in 1942, you can guess what legal categories are still in effect here.

**Occitania:** (Geography) a historical region mainly covering southern France, with parts of north Spain, Monaco and northwest Italy included, where Occitan was historically the main language spoken. Occitan is also the demonym (the name for its inhabitants). Occitania is recognised as a linguistic and cultural concept since the Middle Ages, but there has never been a legal or political entity under the name.

(Credit mostly to Wikipedia).

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**Additional Notes:**

*Rideamus in faciei mors:* (Latin) We laugh in the face of death.

(I didn't use Google Translate for this because GT's Latin translation frankly sucks. I used a dictionary with conjugation tables, of course).
Chapter Summary

Merrythought has some final words. Hermione, Ceres and some Gryffindors, sixth-years and prefects. Two games of obstacle run. Melchior has a couple of messages to pass on to a few Housemates. Mordred also meets with Melchior. A practice between two Gryffindor prefects.

(Summary applies to both intermezzo chapters titled ‘Life on Mars’)

Chapter Notes

I'm feeling uninspired and that all that I write is crap. I have enough self-awareness now to know that it's probably just that wonderful mélange of mild depression and perfectionism at work, so I just decided to butt my head through to the end since I can still get myself to write even at half the usual speed whether it's crap or not. I just thought it's better for me not to lose my writing habits than fall into no updates for another year (I'm sure you guys don't want that, right?)

So yeah, here's my best effort, and you'd have to forgive me if it tends to be crappier than usual and if I have been a bit out of touch than usual. Not sure if I can get it better than this right now :/. But at least I'm still writing! Hooray for sheer cussedness, I guess.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

66 Life on Mars I

Hermione was about to walk out of her DADA professor’s door when she paused her steps. Something in her compelled her to ask, to turn back to face the white-haired witch. Perhaps it was the shade of old Hermione that was speaking now, the young woman who had not quite let her school friends go.

“You are friends with Minister Evermonde, aren’t you? Have you talked to him recently?”

“I was once. I don’t know if Archer ever forgave me.”

“Why not?”

Merrythought took a deep breath. “I was a trigger. My vocal criticism started the avalanche of attacks that ended up crippling his political career. I was the beginning of the end.”

She did not try to excuse herself. Hermione respected her more for that.

“Why would he forgive me?
“Because you’re his friend? I’m not saying that he’d *definitely* forgive you. I’m only saying that you wouldn’t know unless you tried talking to him again.” Hermione said. What she’d give to be able to say goodbye to her friends. “Nobody lives forever, Professor. We never know how much time we have left with our friends.”

The white-haired witch shrugged, but her expression was a little rueful now. “Speaking from experience, are you? Perhaps I’ll do that.”

“Thank you.” A pause. And then, because she wanted to admit it no matter how difficult, she answered Merrythought’s question through the heavy lump in her throat. “And yes, I was—a little.”

Her professor’s eyes were kind now, her touch on Hermione’s shoulders was feather-light.

“You know you can always talk to me, don’t you? Or any of the other professors. Orpheus would understand loss as well, if you want to chat with your Head of House instead—he’d lived through many of them already.”

“I understand, but…I’m only slowly coming to terms with them recently too. What helps so far is staying busy.”

“That, I can see,” her tone was wry. Hermione chuckled. “It’s not that bad. I’m doing alright, I suppose. It’s not the best feeling, but I’m not at my worst either.”

“If you think so, then. Take care not to overwork yourself.”

“Of course, Professor. Um, if you don’t mind, I’d like to ask a question, possibly connected to your old experiences.”

“What is it, dear?”

She bit her lower lip in thought, gathering the words she was looking for. “The scars over your left arm. Any wound immediately cleaned and healed by a field healer would not…have that intense scarring. That happens if it healed up on its own, more often with, well, questionable cleanliness.”

Hermione was watching her carefully, but her professor didn’t seem disturbed at all.

“There aren’t that many healers in the field, Hermione. Field hospitals, perhaps, but they’re too valuable to be risked.”

“You could clean and heal most of it yourself…” she began.

“And then what? Use magic in front of the muggles? There are times when I could not get away far enough from scrutiny. To risk exposure in that case would mean to risk being taken away for breaking the Secrecy. My friends, the people I know…they’d be down one messenger, and one that could actually fly at night with night vision, at that. I couldn’t risk that—couldn’t risk them. Letting my upper arm heal mostly naturally wasn’t such a big deal.”

“I see.”

The brunette did see. There were many things she would do for her friends, and she was not surprised to find out that her teacher had expressed a similar sentiment. *Some things are worth their price, for other things are priceless beyond measure.* She nodded once, feeling that she now carried even more hopes with herself and yet not weighed down from it. The young witch was ready to
walk back to the Ravenclaw Tower when Merrythought called her back.

“Hermione?”

“Yes?”

“Be careful of gaining the disregard of Tasgall Travers; he has been the Undersecretary of Justice from before Archer’s time. He has held the post intermittently, again and again, under different Ministers. There’s a saying at the Ministry, ‘Ministers may change, but Undersecretaries are forever’. It’s not true half the time, but the saying exists for a reason.”

“Umm…alright?” She was uncertain how to take it.

Well, she’ll remember the wizard’s name and post, but it wasn’t as if she was worth the attention of any undersecretary. She was just a mere student with an extracurricular activity that was perhaps more well-connected than most.

“Perhaps I have harmed Archer’s career, but I’m quite certain that Travers actually hated me—as much as his cold self would.” Merrythought concluded.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Professor Merrythought.”

“Just be careful. That’s all I ask.”

A week ago, Hermione was inside Hogwarts and yet she was walking on open fields of yellow grass and snow, interspersed with incongruous lavender blossoms following Ceres. A line of trees, cedar among others, hemmed in their open path.

“So, what’s wrong?” Hermione asked. “Are you alright?”

Ceres kept her gaze straight ahead instead of turning to her, but the brunette could see the tightening of her jaw that told of heavier thoughts that she was trying to pull together. She didn’t push; she waited.

One sharp intake of breath later and the blonde witch raised her voice,

“We lost Grenoble, Hermione! I…the wizarding enclave would survive, as it had done during the Wars of Religion, but the city is not just its wizarding side! Pip had family on the muggle side there too, not just out in the country!”

She faltered. “Now, to hear that it is an occupied city, like the rest of Vichy France is simply…”

Dammit. Hermione didn’t remember the precise dates of major events in WWII. She’d known this day would come; she just didn’t know when. Yet what could she do, even if she’d known? She was just one witch, one young woman against the machinery of state-commanded violence. The scale of the war and the distant theatres certainly meant that meaningful interference was out of her hands. Dammit, dammit, dammit! She felt helpless—she hated feeling helpless, and she was sure that Ceres felt the same.

The blonde’s chin was tucked to her chest, the very picture of grief. Hermione was about to gingerly pat her before Ceres exploded in a flurry of movement, wand arm raised and moving in loops and cuts as she firmly cast, a streak of yellow escaped from her wand.
The nearest tree had its bark was destroyed into pieces, and so did another one to their back. The bark closest to them was gone and the wood underneath it was still cracking. Yellow sparks still fell from her wand to the ground for a moment or two before ceasing.

Ceres met her gaze and what Hermione saw was an anger that would burn long into the night after other impetuous flames die out precisely because it was fed by sorrow. The Gryffindor prefect blinked rapidly, shaking her head to free herself of the maelstrom of emotions. Her voice was level when she spoke up again, her eyes clear even if the shadow in its depths was still there.

Hermione’s gut feeling told her that perhaps that shadow would never leave her eyes again until the Second World War was truly over.

“I had to drag Pip to the infirmary the first time we heard the news; he’d punched the wall so hard without thinking that he’d broken his little finger.” she shook her head. “He was so careless that he wasn’t even watching his form there.”

Her heart broke for her friend. She felt the cold burn of her own anger when she heard Hogwarts had fallen, she couldn’t imagine how it felt hearing an entire city you know to be lost. “Merlin, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I can do to help… I know that there’s really nothing I can say to make it feel better.”

She laid her hand on Ceres’ left arm, gingerly, hoping that she wasn’t trespassing a private grief.

“Thank you. Thank you for trying to understand. It…helps, a little.”

“So, what’s our plan for today? We’re going to try to burn this fake forest down?” Hermione tried for a little levity in her voice. The tension in Ceres’ face actually lessened at that, even if her lips seemed to still be too awkward for a smile.

“No, not at all. Well, that was Pip’s plan that I was about to go along with. Paul and Peter had a better idea.”

“What did they say?”

“Ah, what did we say?” a third voice chimed in.

Hermione and Ceres glanced towards the newcomer who’d cast *Aguamenti* on the tree. The redhead in casual tweed, robes and boots was one of the Prewett twins. “Probably something like this, ‘let’s make the most challenging obstacle course you can think of, and you can take turns with us to lob spells at the poor unfortunates who have to run through it!’”

“Which clearly meant that unfortunate person is you some of the time,” Hermione pointed out.

He shrugged, still grinning. “Of course, but it would be *excellent* training.”

“Join us Curie, it would be *fun*, I guarantee you! Plus, we can get very creative once we have a healer here!” His every step was a little leap on its own, excitement overflowing as he soon overtook them in distance. He turned back when he saw that they weren’t keeping pace.

“Come on! What are you waiting for?”

Ceres and Hermione shared a small smile with each other before they picked up their steps.
“I have to warn you that Pip had actually gotten into the spirit of planning this with Peter earlier. He’d been digging some holes around here at random.”

“Don’t worry, we didn’t put spikes at the bottom,” Paul hollered from the front. “We, um, might’ve filled it with slime, though.”

“If there’s anything I can’t wash out, I’m blaming you, Paul.” Ceres rolled her eyes.

He flapped his hand at her as he hopped on forward. “Sure, sure. No problem.”

At the end of their path was Philippe Bernadotte—of course—whose expression was oddly serious, brow creased, as he read through a scroll that Verrault was also reading over his shoulder. Julia enthusiastically waved back once she saw Hermione. Her quidditch-player friend from Ravenclaw was also here, talking with the other Prewett twin who seemed to be intent on impressing the quidditch athlete. There was also two Hufflepuff prefects whose name she couldn’t recall (again), awkwardly waving to her too and a few others she hadn’t seen before.

One arm raised, the brunette waved back at them.

“It’s good to see you here, Hermione.” Amelia Bones hailed. She might’ve thought she did nothing unusual, but Hermione didn’t think anyone with less lung power would’ve managed to do that across their still-significant distance.

It was rather interesting to see the fair head of Mordred Montmorency, in a set of black suit and robes that still felt too formal to her even if it was at least not the Hogwarts’ uniform. He stood next to Julia with a crease in his forehead while staring at the motley crew assembled, his expression eloquently saying that he was wondering how on earth he was even here in the first place. Hermione thought she could relate to his confusion—she didn’t think she’d ever see him without Emma and Oswin nearby. They were the trio of Slytherin prefects who seemed to have moved the *Wizarding Society for Better Governance* in step with Tom Riddle’s aspirations.

It was a contrast to the pureblood not far from him (she can tell this from the cut of his waistcoat shaded like a sunset, and robes in matching tones but in lighter colours) who seemed content to simply sit at the bottom of a tree. There was a leaf on his head while his nose was stuck in a book next to Lysandra Burke who was doing the same…ah, she could see the family resemblance now. That would be her brother, then, the Slytherin Burke.

“How did you assemble the people, Paul?” Hermione asked.

“It was on a short notice, so this still isn’t everyone we could think of, just people I know would be interested from my Advanced Defence II class, Pip and Ceres’ prefect friends, or just people we met in the common room.”

Well, that *does* explain Montmorency and Amelia—both of them were prefects. Hermione didn’t think Lysandra would be that interested in unappealing physical exertion if her Housemates hadn’t bodily dragged her from the common room before she relented.

“So, who’s setting this up first and who would be running the gauntlet?” Hermione asked around.

“I’m just here to write everything down and watch over everyone,” Lysandra hugged her book tighter, defensively. “I have a large pensieve so people can watch my memories together later.”

“And I don’t know how crazy you guys would get,” Julia’s quidditch player friend said with both of her hands raised. “I don’t even take Advanced Defence! Based on the numbers with Hermione here now, I’d unbalance your team. I’ll just be at the side with Burke.”
“Fine. Now, let’s split into two teams!” Paul enthused.

“I’m on Hermione’s team!” Julia declared just as swift before she planted herself on Hermione’s left. Her fellow brunette found no reason to disagree.

“Ah, sure,”

Bernadotte had looked up from his scroll and gazed at Ceres. “We’ll have to be on opposing sides.”

His blond prefect partner shrugged. “Alright, let’s do that.”

“Uh, why?” Hermione asked.

“Because I know how he thinks and he knows how I think. It would force us to be more creative.” Ceres answered. She’d managed to put on a smile now, but the heaviness in her eyes were still there.

“It would force both of us to be better, Hermione” was Bernadotte’s answer to her.

Hermione noted that Bernadotte’s eyes weren’t much different, his grin was sharper now—a little less kind or easy-going—and a quiet discomfort grew from how familiar the expression seemed to her. Perhaps she was merely fooling herself…

“Alright, as the healer here, I retain the right to veto on any of the traps or set up that I think are too dangerous, alright?” Hermione spoke up. “And no poisons or the like.”

There were some mumblings from the twins, but they didn’t disagree with her.

“Thank Merlin. Yes, please do that, Curie” Montmorency seems relieved to have found one sane person among all the Defence enthusiasts. The other Burke had closed his book and stood up, eyeing Hermione curiously. One of his eyes were slightly covered by a lopsided bang, but he didn’t seem to even notice. She glanced up at his hair and restrained her reflexive wince.

“I think we haven’t been introduced before, have we, Miss?”

Hermione shook her head, “I don’t think so?”

Lysandra stood up in one smooth movement, book closed in hand. “Very well, then. Allow me.”

She made the introductions between Hermione and her brother, one Balthazar Burke, Slytherin sixth-year. He bowed formally over her right hand.

“Enchanté, Mademoiselle.” It would be far more impressive if his voice wasn’t the tone of one who was generally mostly bored with the world. This was mostly routine for him. She didn’t restrain her smile.

“The pleasure is mine, Mr. Burke.”

“Balthazar, please. It would get confusing pretty quickly with two Burkes here.”

The Hufflepuffs had come around too, along with the others she hadn’t recognised at all. “So, how are we going to split ourselves?” Casimir asked.

“Well…”

“Each captain picks members in turns, obviously.” one of the Prewetts cut in.
"And the captains are…?" Balthazar drawled. "Who is it? The Wonder Twins or les Français Fatals?"

Philippe rubbed his face with a hand. "You make us sound like some hero in a wireless play…"

The Prewetts seemed to open their mouths at the same time before closing it again at once, with a kind of synchronisation that could rival dolphins at a circus. It impressed Hermione. They seemed to find each other’s eyes at the same time and sighed before speaking in half-sentences with each other that no one else could quite understand.

"We should…?"

"We should." A sigh followed this.

"But really, after all the arrangement…"

"Well, yes. But we really should, you know…"

"Have some sense, Mum would say."

"Yes," his brother nodded. "That’s it exactly."

Their rather cryptic back and forth went on for a while more. She gathered after it ended that Paul and Peter really, really wanted to be the captains of the respective teams, but they deferred the position to Ceres and Philippe with what seemed to be a lot of effort on their part; Ceres simply watched them with amusement as they come to a decision, Bernadotte didn’t seem to be aware of his two friends’ pained expressions as Balthazar said something else to prick him.

Perhaps it was because the initial idea had been to help their friends channel their anger at their situation. Hermione had drifted to Ceres’ team, simply because they’d been standing close together. The captains would pick team members in turn, and Philippe insisted rather quickly that the team that had Hermione would only get one more person from ADADA II, while the other team would get two more people who took ADADA II.

"Wait, I'm worth an Advanced Defence II student?" Hermione asked, askance.

"YES." Several voices answered her question promptly and immediately, shutting her up (and raising her eyebrows).

"We’ve seen your fights with Riddle, you know,” it was Montmorency who said this, in a quiet voice she’d only realised was his after a moment. “Julia was kind enough to show it to us.”

One of the wizards she didn’t recognise whistled. He had the feel of a Gryffindor, from the self-confidence he carried himself with. “I saw that too. Mostly silent spells? Wow.”

“Do you realise that you can probably sign up for the second Advanced Defence class at this point?” Paul asked, a little too excited for Hermione’s own preference.

“Err, no thanks on that. Hard no, actually. I wouldn’t be able to relax in class if I have to take a completely new class, and I want to relax more, what with my current schedule,” she clarified.

The Prewett twins predictably sighed in disappointment. Hermione was unmoved by their puppy-dog eyes. Philippe simply rolled his eyes and moved on. Soon enough, who went to which team were sorted out for everyone. The students who took ADADA II were the first to be chosen out; on Ceres’ team that would be Paul and Mordred, with Hermione counting as one too, while on
Philippe’s side it was Balthazar, Peter and Verrault. Everyone else were chosen after that.

“So, who goes first?” Philippe asked.

“Chifoumi?” Ceres asked.

“Oui.” Philippe agreed, and it was decided over a game of rock-paper-scissors. Ceres won and members of the Pip’s team did grumble as they had to move to the corner and let someone cast a smokescreen spell and a soundproofing charm around them. The rest started on their planning and terraforming.

“Excellent,” Ceres clapped her hands together with clear anticipation in her face. She was looking a lot more like herself than she did some ten minutes ago. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, let’s give them war.”

Alright, I take that back, Hermione thought. Someone’s clearly trying to work through their issues here.

“Lysandra, why are you here? The planning process involves only our team,” Paul said, confused. The witch with strong jawline and intricate black dress rolled her eyes. Two dark red flower pins with almost-black leaves adorned her hair. Not that Hermione could recognise the flower… (she ignored the slight guilt she’d felt for not brushing up on her flower language skills yet)

“In case my purpose has fallen out of your brain already, I’m an observer. Hence, I’m observing.” Lysandra’s answer was tetchy.

“But you can’t tell the other team—”

“I’m not going to tell the other team, why should I even care of this entire messy competition? I’m only going to share my memories if anyone wants after everything is done. Please, refrain from treating me like an idiot and I won’t treat you like one.” She said, before proceeding to ignore him. “Onwards please, Ceres.”

The Gryffindor prefect nodded and began their meeting proper.

“Well, Paul had begun to make all those lovely pits. Why don’t we work on top of that?” Ceres started, with a smile as bright as sunflowers.

“But I made it with Peter; he’d know where all the pits are,” Paul pointed out. The twins had agreed to split up to different teams too, for fairness’ sakes.

“Do all of them have slimes?” Hermione asked.

“Around three-quarters of ‘em… or a little less. Thereabouts, anyway.”

“We can empty half of that and use the slimes in other traps. Just fill it with water in exchange.” the brunette said.

Ceres nodded. “Great idea, we’ll do that.”

“What are we going to do with the slime?” Casimir asked, confused.

“Make an aspic ball with it.” It was Paul who answered the question easily. His answer did tell her about how he managed to make those balls of cranberry jam she’d been pelted with when she
walked into their booby-trapped corridor. *Gelatine shells filled with jam. That’s rather creative, actually*...

“So, any volunteers to start making that while we come up for more traps?” Ceres asked. The blonde slipped on the mantle of leadership easily, a natural as far as Hermione was concerned. Casimir easily agreed volunteered himself for the task, along with another Gryffindor wizard Hermione that had expressed his admiration for Hermione’s skills earlier. (“Name’s Anand Patil, sixth-year. Same house as those two defence nuts,” he gestured to a twin).

Paul peeled off along with them as a matter of course, as he was the one who was going to teach the others. Lysandra watched them all leave with mild disinterest before turning back to the meeting.

“Now, what else, what else…” Julia murmured. “Damn, the first thing that came to my mind were spikes, but that’s dangerous.”

“That’s precisely where the challenge is,” Montmorency said. “To find something that’s hindering without it being lethal.”

“I noticed that you only said lethal, not dangerous,” Julia raised an eyebrow at him.

He seemed unperturbed. “Even a pit filled with water is technically dangerous. Hold people under the waterline for a while and they’ll drown just fine.”

The three witches all turned to him.

“Don’t tell me that all of you thought a pit of water is completely safe,” his tone was disbelieving.

“Well, yes, I thought the water is easily a drowning hazard,” Hermione replied, “but that applies for children. We can trust everyone here to at least know how to keep their head above the waterline, right? It’s not like we’ll even make it that deep.”

“I was merely explaining my choice of the word ‘lethal’. Under the right conditions, everything can kill people.” The blond wizard sounded a bit proud of that observation. Julia was giving him a suspicious side-eye while Ceres was clearly holding back a smile.

For all of his thin frame, black robes and bookish appearance, he stood straight and moved with an ease of someone who knew how to wield his own body in a fight. The contrast reminded her of talking to a sombre-looking vicar, only to have him enthusiastically showing you his collection of weaponry.

“You’re not wrong,” Ceres murmured. “Alright, so what’s next if it’s not spikes?”

“I’d suggest bees, but they’re harder to handle,” he mused.

“It’s also harder to ensure that everyone does not get stung at anywhere near the fatal rate. It does go back to the fact that they’re hard to control. I’m not really looking forward to anyone having anaphylactic shock today,” Hermione gave her professional opinion on that. “So, let’s please avoid that along with anything else that stings and bites.”

“By the way, I have to ask, how do you even *dig* into a Hogwarts corridor?” The brunette asked.

“This isn’t a corridor, not really,” Ceres made a vague gesture to the room around them. “This is merely one of the upper galleries, but one that currently housed no major art pieces. The Prewetts also, um, manage to bring a lot of soil here from the Forbidden Forest. You can’t dig any deeper
than a metre down or so before you’d meet the floor, but it’s enough.”

A gallery would explain why the ceiling still felt high enough.

“They dragooned their family’s house elfs, I bet,” Montmorency said this in a bored tone. “This is Sunday—the house elfs at their homes are probably mostly free today.”

Ceres shrugged. “I didn’t go with them, so I didn’t know. What I know they used is a mokeskin bag.”

Hermione blinked at the realisation. That was…yes, you can actually do that with a mokeskin bag. She just didn’t realise that someone would be crazy enough to do so. Apparently, she’d underestimated the Prewetts.

“I didn’t feel any significant elevation as I walk…” she mused.

It was Julia who nodded with a realisation. “Ah, a relative of the disillusionment—a disorientation charm, but of a milder and more specific form. It doesn’t affect the eyes and only shifts the direction of gravity slightly to make the incline less noticeable.”

“So, back to our traps,” Montmorency redirected.

“Ah, yes, traps…” Julia sighed. “What else could we use…”

“I would suggest filling a couple of pits with the carcasses of dead animals, but that would be unsanitary and I suppose not nice to do to your friends. My mother always said that it was what people used to throw on trebuchets into castles and forts during some sieges. It’s an ingenious way to spread disease, really, when a cast spell has limited reach and certainly cannot penetrate a thick stone wall.” Mordred mused, fingers rubbing his chin in thought.

“Ah, we can actually contact the kitchen elfs and ask them to pass us some fruits and vegetables that are going bad. It’s not on the scale of carcasses, but it’s good enough to be an annoyance.”

Ceres and Julia were outright staring at him. He didn’t even seem to be aware of the significance of their looks. Lysandra seemed oddly impressed.

Now Hermione understood why Tom told her that between Oswin and Mordred, it was Mordred who had the larger potential for generating damage.

“What does your mother do?” Hermione let her curiosity lead the way there.

The blond Slytherin actually looked a little awkward at the question. “Uh, research, usually on medical spells, sometimes checking other people’s spells to figure out the mechanism, if something’s too harmful or not, if we can modify them…”

“At St. Mungo’s? Or is it one of those newer potions labs?” it was Julia’s turn to ask.

“Err, not quite. She’s in, well, government research.”

Hermione didn’t hide her interest. There was something about his description of his mother that made her profile immediately sounded familiar to the Ravenclaw. A) An interest in something that has a macabre edge (disease spread edging right into the art of plague creation and spread). B) Research on medical spells that’s not in a hospital or a known laboratory. C) Government research.

“Your mother is an Unspeakable, isn’t she?” The brunette asked.
Julia turned to her, eyes wide, and she knew she hadn’t imagined the gasp she heard from Lysandra’s direction. Yet Hermione’s attention was still pinned on Mordred and as sharp as any scalpel. She could see the tic in his left eye and the aborted twitches of his hands as her eyes quickly took in his body language. He certainly wasn’t a skilled liar like Tom (heck, no one she knew at Hogwarts so far could lie like Tom), and even if the changes seemed small to most people, they easily gave him away to her.

“Oh, relax. You don’t need to confirm or deny. You’re not the only one with some familiarity with Unspeakables. For me, it’s enough that I know,” Hermione said all this easily, with a smile on her face, even.

That only caused Mordred to rub his forehead. “My mother’s going to kill me.”

She only chuckled. “She won’t if you tell her the full story. Anyone else wouldn’t realise it if they weren’t me.”

“Right. So, rotten vegetables aren’t a bad idea, but just how many do we need to carry?” Ceres asked.

“Just borrow Paul or Peter’s mokeskin bag, then.” Hermione pointed out.

“Great. That’s settled then. I’m off to borrow it and head to the kitchen,” Julia declared. “I think we’re also better off if you make some new holes and bury one or two others, Mordy.”

“Mordred, Julia, it’s Mordred.”

“Sure thing, Mordy.” She winked at Mordred before walking towards Paul, her waist-long hair weaving down her back from where it was tied with a navy ribbon at the nape of her neck. The Slytherin rubbed his face yet again while muttering something about how being a prefect and helping your other prefect friends out was sometimes just not worth it.

“Her suggestion isn’t a bad one,” Ceres said as she turned to him. “Do you want to do it or do you have a better idea of what you could do? If you do, one of us could do that instead.”

“No, it’s fine,” he answered. “I’ll just do that. Just casting Defodio repeatedly isn’t really difficult.”

Julia went in the direction of somewhere to their side where Paul had apparently brought two cauldrons with him. Hermione watched him stand in front of one and gave instructions with a lot of gestures. Casimir went had gone off with one cauldron, possibly to collect some of the slime already in the pits (she recognised him by his Hufflepuff scarf). The other wizard stayed (Anders? Anil? No, something else…) while Mordred had set off in the direction of the same open grounds. He was probably trying to locate the pits and choose which ones are to be filled and where to put in one or two new ones.

Now, it was just Ceres, Hermione, and a fidgeting Lysandra.

“Now what?” Hermione asked.

“Got any ideas about the small forests?”

“I think I do have something… Let’s see, most of the traps are going to be set over the open area, right?”

“Yes?”
“Is there a way to shift all the trees to one side, so there’s one large forest to deal with than two smaller ones?”

Ceres tilted her head in thought, short nails tapping her chin in thought. “We better ask Paul, but I think so.”

“Great! Then we might as well make the forests outright impassable to funnel them away from it. I know what we could do.”

Given half an hour, between the seven of them, they did manage to set up a pretty challenging terrain.

“What in Tartarus is that?!”

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand to stop herself from laughing. Balthazar had been trying to sneak through one of the forested areas, only to almost tip himself into one of the shallower pits they had littered the forest with, filled with spikes of ice. It was uncovered, so it was visible from even ten metre away—Balthazar had missed the one in front of him because he’d been running. He was saved by his fast-enough reflex to use a fire whip and haul himself up and back to the hole’s edge. The ice spikes weren’t going to last forever, but they would last long enough to make movement through the forests’ undergrowth to be difficult and slow.

That, of course, meant that the more reasonable alternative were the open plains between the groves of trees.

He backed off again, and she surmised that they were regrouping—or that Balthazar had been sent as some sort of scout in the first place.

“Well, alright, then that doesn’t sound so bad,” the wizard replied.

“Lys,” Balthazar said.

She took a deep breath. “I’m merely observing for the records, as agreed. Please, carry on.”

Balthazar turned his attention back to Bernadotte. “Right. Well, as I’ve told you before, the forest floor is lined with makeshift moats, and they, in turn, are filled with spikes of ice. Not exactly something you want to fall on.”

“Sounds like they’re trying really hard to dissuade us from passing through the forest.” Pip murmured as he gazed between the forested areas and the open ones.
“Which means that the other path is the trap.” Verrault said.

“It damn well is a trap—they probably have the entire place trapped in half an hour.” The Gryffindor replied.

“So, how are we doing this, Captain?” Balthazar drawled; his voice edged with insolence. His friends were so used to it that they simply ignored his tone most of the time.

Philippe turned around to face most of his team.

“We’ll see, Balthazar. So, do we have any volunteers to go through the forest?”

“Over those ice spikes? Are you crazy??” The Gryffindor seeker protested to his Housemate.

“Technically, you can fly over them, Gervase” Amelia Bones offered. “I’ve seen you fly.”

“Rather too late to consider getting extra equipment now, isn’t it?” Verrault muttered, his arms folded.

“You’ll be avoiding the spikes by flying, sure, but if I was on the opposition team, I’d be happy that you did that too,” Peter commented. The redhead cocked his head to the side as he assessed the seeker with a clinical eye.

“Um, why?”

Peter turned to Ethel Macmillan. “My uncles hunt rabbits when we camp. You know what Gervase is? Ten times bigger than a rabbit and much easier to shoot at. He’d be sitting ducks through the forest—place isn’t exactly manoeuvrable either.”

Lysandra snorted but said nothing. A few others were giving Gervase pitying looks.

Gervase Laszki, short for his age, grimaced. “Bugger that! I’m not flying just to be a distraction for you guys.”

“Are we to declare the forest impassable, then?” Balthazar asked, looking far too comfortable than one would expect for a Slytherin among mostly Gryffindors. Then again, he’d partnered with Philippe and Ceres often enough in Advanced DADA II. One supposes that he’d gotten used to merrily hexing and sending harm at each other after several months now that he was no longer concerned about it.

Philippe scoffed. “Of course not. Remember the basic principles of elemental transfiguration, and how it would be useful in battle—”

“Bernadotte, not everyone here takes the second advanced transfiguration class,” Verrault cut through his speech, unimpressed.

Philippe sighed. “Alright, gather around then. Here’s my basic strategy, though I’ll take any feedback too…”

Philippe actually split his team into two, to the surprise of Hermione and everyone else in Ceres’ team. She’d expected him to just write off the forest as a loss.

Julia’s post was near Hermione, so they could still chat. She’d been complaining at the beginning that Hermione chose to sit on one of the tree branches before she ended up casting Incarcerous at
the tree trunk and then using the conjured rope to help her climb up.

“They’re still going to try to pass through the forest?” Julia whispered.

“I have no idea what they’re thinking,” she answered.

Verrault was the one leading the half of the team going through the forests, which made Hermione guess that Philippe was leading through the plains.

The forest floor was pitted with holes, which were filled with very visible ice spikes that made going straight through practically impossible.

“Aguamenti!”

Verrault wasn’t the only one who cast it; everyone else did too. Ethel Macmillan and Peter did the same. They cast it at the ice spikes.

“I don’t think that’s going to melt them,” Julia mused in low tones.

Of course, that was when the other Ravenclaw prefect started to cast the next spell. “Glacia!”

“Oh shit.” Hermione cursed. His team members looked like they had the same idea, though they still cast the spell to differing effectiveness—not familiar with the spell, then.

“Julia, get some of the slime-filled balls from wherever Paul kept them and start hitting them now. Cast Glacia after, just like we’ve talked about.”

“Right. Is that by way of trebuchet or…?”

“Whichever hits them best.”

Julia made a sound of assent and leapt down to locate the slime ball stashes. Verrault’s team had managed to freeze over a flat surface over the pits and they were now casually testing the surface. Hermione cast a ball of silence around her before she jumped down from the tree. Making her way behind bushes and trees, Hermione whispered three Blasting curses, without abbreviating the movements (Confringo. Confringo. Confringo!)

Three fireballs left her wand in rapid succession and headed right at the newly-frozen surface. She’d ducked and moved away immediately even as she reflexively cast a shield to stick at a fixed radius around the tip of her wand. Peter’s answering hex and Verrault’s curses landed nowhere close to her. Before they could start trying to locate her, the first slime ball had been flung from the edge. Peter had leapt to the side, but Verrault had been too intent on locating Hermione that he’d noticed it too late—he dodged, but his left side was still splattered with slime.

Second and third ball came in close succession but Peter was aware of the attacks now.

“Protego!”

He’d raised a large-enough shield in one direction for all three of them. Ethel was rushing through the Freezing Charm and was sloppier in her work than either Verrault or Peter. She must’ve only learned it now. Hermione could see it clearly.

The two slime balls splattered harmlessly on Peter’s shield.

Hermione stood up behind a tree and started casting the moment she saw another slime ball was coming. Peter hadn’t put up a shield yet—Verrault did that. The redhead was throwing hexes and
jinxes in the direction the slime ball came from.

“Aguamenti Maxima!”

Hermione ducked immediately once the spell was done and the water deluge happened. She didn’t have time to check on what sounded like Julia’s yelp. It was enough that the other team was still hemmed in on the other side while she had a wider range of mobility. She started casting freezing spells in their direction. One hit Verrault. Peter was fast enough to use Verrault as a shield. Ethel was hit by Julia’s freezing spell, and considering that she was as sopping wet as her two team members, it didn’t help.

Like any fire spell, a freezing spell was one that you cannot easily undo with a finite—you’d have to reverse the actual physical process manually. It was why Hermione still preferred the elements more than other people’s hexes and jinxes, unless it was the more serious or complicated hexes and jinxes (that, and because she was a transfigurator in the field; the spells were etched in her mind and came easily to her).

Julia was piling up more and more freezing spell on Ethel while also casting it on Peter whenever he extended any body part too far out. Hermione had been doing the same against Verrault. They were winning, of course, because as more ice piled up, it became even more difficult to move the wrist or arm to cast any spell. When no more attacks seemed to be forthcoming for a while Julia came out of the tree line a few metres away, her wand in her left hand since her right arm was now...a wing, covered with feathers that are mostly grey.

Both Julia and Hermione were still on the other side of the shallow pits that were now water-covered instead of filled with ice spikes.

“You can’t hex both of us at once, Peter.” Hermione said as she projected her voice some five metres farther than she actually were. “Give it up. You’re down two teammates against two of us.”

“She’s down her wand arm,” he pointed it out.

“I can cast with my left hand too. It’s not as good as with the right, sure, but I can do Confringo alright. You want to test that?” Julia said, her left hand was actually steady as she aimed her wand at him.

Hermione also had her wand pointed at Peter the moment Julia began to speak, beginning the casting of a silent Stunning Spell. The build-up of the magic made her wand vibrate and the wood warming, but she held it in and still didn’t quite finish the movement. Wait for it, she thought. Wait for it...

“Well…” the redhead mused out loud but.

She took the chance and did the last loop and flourish to finish the spell when she saw his head leaning forward out from behind Verrault.

“Stupefy,” she whispered along with the final flick, before quickly starting the same spell again to be safe.

Her first shot was good. He was down even before she finished sending the second stunning spell. She cast it anyway, just to be sure.

“Hermione!” Julia was certainly surprised. Hermione walked out from behind her trees.

“What? We didn’t say we’d not attack him. Did he hear us asking for parley? Did he ask for a
parley?” Hermione barely blinked as she said this.

She’d picked it up from Harry, of course, from when he’d had to face some run-of-the-mill nutjob with a wand and a hostage. Someone might be trying to talk the person down, and yet at the same time, there’d be more than one Auror who was waiting behind the negotiator, looking for a clear shot.

Her teammate sighed but only rubbed her face…or it would’ve been rubbing her face if she didn’t have a wing instead of a right arm. Julia let out a long exhale of breath before she spoke up.

“Could you please help with my arm?”

“Sure. Just let me defrost our friends across the pit there and stun them.”

“I’ll go with you.”

As Hermione and Julia floated their three unconscious prisoners down to the other end of the converted gallery, they saw pits with frozen over contents as well as those with rotten and half-rotten vegetables and fruit. Hermione wrinkled her nose while Julia covered her face. Oddly enough, there was a half-clean Casimir and Amelia sitting by one of the pits, just chatting.

“You’re both…?”

“Technically dead and out of the game,” Amelia Bones answered this with a roll of her eyes. “No thanks to him.”

“What did you do?” Julia’s gazed moved from Amelia, to Casimir, back to Amelia again before moving on to the wizard once more several times.

“I, uhhh, tackled her right into one of the vegetable-filled pits while yelling ‘self-explosion’?”

“You did a suicide run,” Hermione was unimpressed.

“I…guess?”

“That’s not an ‘I guess’. That’s a yes.” Her tone had gone down by at least ten degrees in temperature. “That’s not a good move and we’ll be having Words about it after this, do you hear me?”

“Y-yes?”

“Good. Don’t forget that. Your move’s only effective in the short run, but it removes a team member from your friends permanently. Not a good move.” She was staring at him through narrowed eyes and Casimir shrunk a little further into the large Hufflepuff scarf wound around his neck, turtling in.

“Alright. I heard you.”

Hermione sighed and shook her head. “Just…later. I’ll probably need to talk about this with everyone else too. Where’s everyone? Up front?”

“Yes, up front.” Amelia answered with ease. “If you’re here, that means everyone is now done. Let’s go.”
Hermione and Julia moved on again, three unconscious students tethered with ropes and floating behind them. Amelia and Casimir took up the rear, and they headed onward to the other end of the gallery. A limping Gryffindor whose name Hermione hadn’t quite remembered soon joined them with a sigh after Hermione de-jellified most of his legs.

“Damn, is it always like this? I didn’t think Advanced Defence was even this vicious!” (Andy? Aaron? …oh, never mind. I’m pretty sure his last name is Patil. He’s probably Padma and Parvati’s father or grandfather).

“Welcome to the professional level, then,” Julia replied, offhand.

“So, who managed to pass?” Hermione asked the group of feathered, tarred and furred people at the other end of the gallery. Julia pulled the unconscious people behind them down and Patil went to help her.

“I did.” Philippe answered proudly, even as he occasionally sneezed a feather. On the outside of his left eye socket was a purplish hue.

“And Gervase.” It was Mordred who said this, and he looked disgruntled. His legs from the knees down were covered in tar. It looked like one of those things that doesn’t disappear from a quick dispelling either; wow, someone’s creative with their quasi-conjuration, was what she thought. Hermione turned to the mentioned sixth-year Gryffindor and did a double-take.

He was on the short end of average and compared to other sixth-years, and reminded her a little of Harry that way (even if Harry had grown a bit more after Hogwarts). That wasn’t what drew her attention—or everyone else’s for that matter. It was the mass of dried grass practically covering him from head to toe, and underneath that seemed to be...

“Is that mud?” Julia asked, disbelieving.

“I couldn’t think of anything else on a short notice and seriously, the way everyone else starts slinging spells scares the shit out of me, alright? I thought I might as well make sure that nobody can see me and then see if I can just crawl my way to the end.”

Hermione couldn’t help her snort, which in turn became the trigger for Paul to chuckle. Balthazar too.

“You could’ve used some notice-me-not spell.” Balthazar said.

Gervase shook his head. “I’m not risking a *Finite Incantatem*.”

“You still would’ve been out if any of us had seen you,” Mordred’s lips curled in dissatisfaction as he said this. The blond wizard seemed to take Gervase’s passing like a personal failure.

“Sure, but none of you did, right? Right.” Gervase scoffed. Hermione couldn’t tell his hair colour under all that mud and straw. She started to cast *Scourgify* at him. “Balthazar’s fake copy fooled you all.”

“I’m good at making human simulacrum.” Balthazar’s comment was smug. Rightfully so, she supposed, if that had allowed Gervase to pass.

“Yeah, a pass is still a pass.” Philippe insisted, one arm swung proudly over Gervase’s shoulder, while another over Balthazar, who did look heavenwards at this gesture but didn’t move away
either. Hermione was more concerned at what seemed to be a long scratch over the shorter Gryffindor’s arm after most of the mud was gone, and asked him to raise his hand a bit so she could try cleaning and healing that.

Amelia, on the other hand, had started reviving her stupefied teammates. Peter woke up cursing as he realised where he was and how the entire run was done.

“We failed? Tell me how bad we failed.” Peter begged Amelia.

“Well, only two out of seven isn’t a bad record for us.” Hermione said this as she glanced at Ceres. She blinked when she realised that there was a darkened bruise on the left of the Gryffindor’s jaw.

“Yes,” Ceres agreed.

“And the second only by accident. Yes, it’s a good record.” Mordred nodded.

Gervase squawked at that dismissal, but one of Hermione’s other teammate (Andy? Anton? Anand? Patil) spoke up faster. “Oh, just ignore him, Gervase. He’s just a sore loser.”

Ethel Macmillan sneezed. Jan Verrault brushed the last of frost from his shoulder as Amelia cast warming charms to all three of her teammates, even if Peter insisted that he didn’t need it as he hadn’t been frozen, just knocked out.

“I am not a sore loser. I’m on the winning side.” Mordred’s didn’t raise his voice, but the tone was as firm as steel.

The Gryffindor snorted. “A sore winner, then.”

“There’s no such thing—”

“We won, Mordy, drop it.” Julia was now standing right next to him, her arm in his and her wide, wide smile was as friendly as a crocodile’s.

“It’s Mordred.”

“So, does everyone want to move to the next round immediately or do you all want to break down what happened now?” Ceres asked instead in a more stentorian voice, over the background sound of Julia needling Mordred and further grumbling from him. “Professor Merrythought always insisted that a post-fight analysis is most useful when it’s fresh.”

“Yes.” Philippe answered.

“Do we want that, though?” it was Paul who raised the question, glancing to both Ceres and Hermione. “That would give them a better look at our preferred spells and styles. Not a good thing to let them figure out just before they set their traps.”

“Which is why we’d like to have that analysis now,” Verrault agreed.

Philippe groaned and Hermione didn’t bother to stop her chuckle. Peter was also giving Verrault a disappointed look while clicking his tongue.

“Jan, you idiot.” The Frenchman cursed.

“What?”

“I think what Philippe meant is that you shouldn’t have showed your hand just now. Obviously
now that we know it would advantage you, our team is clearly…”

“Reluctant to agree to it.” Ceres finished Hermione’s sentence. “Oh, let me just be honest with you: Our team’s answer to that is no.”

“I still suggest a break before we begin again. Fifteen minutes at least, maybe half an hour.”

“Agreed.” Philippe’s answer was quick even as he pulled bits of grass and leaves from his own long braid. “We all need to recuperate and maybe snack a bit before my team can consider setting up our own traps.”

“That would give them an hour of rest.” Verrault disagreed.

“I don’t care. We need our rest too and we can’t manage the prep without a break. Let’s break, people! Now, did anyone bring some food…”

Hermione on the other hand had a different focus.

“Alright, so who had tried what spell to remove what effect and who still can’t remove theirs?” She asked, found a comfortable looking tree stump, and waited for her patients to start making their way towards her. “Also, I’d be glad to tell you what traps my team had considered and discarded as being too risky. Just so you get an idea of what’s probably too dangerous and what is not.”

‘-

“Hermione! Pssst! Hermione!”

Once she’d finished fixing up everyone (well, mostly), she hadn’t even managed to lean back before Julia came skulking around.

“Oh, just take a seat, Julia.”

“So, did you ask about how the fight in the plains went down?”

Peter had handed a picnic mat to her earlier, to use in lieu of a first aid tent. Hermione felt so spent that she simply laid down on it now, staring at the fake autumn sky above her. Julia’s face popped up at the edge and she sighed.

“I didn’t have time. I have to heal everyone remember? I also outlined which traps are generally dangerous and should be avoided. Then I directed the few that I can’t fix properly under our limited time frame to Madame Edelstein. She’ll understand if anyone would say Advanced Defence practice.”

The other Ravenclaw had taken a seat next to Hermione on the mat.

“That’s not it! Sheesh, you didn’t ask the details so you didn’t know…”

“Know what?”

Julia handed her two sandwiches. Hermione accepted it gratefully with thanks as she moved to a sitting position to start eating the tuna one first. The other one seemed to be salami and cheese. Never forget to eat, had been one of the field healer’s primary principles in the field that Hermione followed religiously. Never forget to refuel.

“Bernadotte and Ceres actually got into a fistfight.”
“What?”

The fifth-year had pulled herself up in disbelief. Julia simply nodded. “Bernadotte got a disarming spell in at Ceres, cast a shield spell behind him and then he simply started sprinting. He was so close to the end, you see. She ran up to him before tackling him and punching him in the face.”

“…wow.”

“I know, right?!”

“But where was Paul?” Hermione tried to figure out who he would be facing at that point. She and Julia were out in the forest, and so was Casimir, Amelia and Patil since they met them around the middle of their journey, which meant that they were taken out around the middle stretch of the gallery. Other than Ceres, that would still leave Paul and Mordred.

“Ducking and trying to clear his sight. He caught squid ink straight to the face.”

“Ouch.”

“Philippe is good runner, so even if he dodges once in a while, he’s still pretty fast. So, when he was nearing the end, Ceres tackled him and punched him, at least twice, I hear. Then he started punching back. Mordy was chasing after them and then Laszki pops out from nowhere and sent a giant snake to bind her.”

Julia paused to drink her glass of water.

“Paul catches up. I think he was the one holding off Balthazar and that was why he’s only free now. Mordred banishes the snake from Ceres before casting some hex forward, but it was too late! Bernadotte was over the finish line, behind the boulder made to mark the place. Laszki stumbled from the hexes and jinx cast his way, but even when he fell, he was already more than halfway past the line, anyway, and then Philippe dragged him over in no time. That was how the two of them managed to finish the course.”

Hermione listened to all this while her mind tried to track down the movements of the two teams and tried to conjure what had happened in her mind. She nodded to herself as Julia finished her retelling.

“Thanks, Julia.”

Her friend beamed back. “You’re welcome.”

Hermione stood up at that point and methodically swept her skirt and robes. “Now, we’re going to have lunch with everyone and break down our own performance.”

Julia sighed. “Must we? Now?”

“If we want to be better next time, yes. Besides, we need to move to the beginning spot sooner or later.”

Their team had gathered at the beginning spot now, with Ethel Macmillan waiting for everyone to gather up before she apologised for the Smokescreen Spell she was going to have to cast (and probably recast too). Almost all of them assured her that they would be fine, really, and she should just go ahead. This end of the gallery included a door to a toilet and a linen closet, so it was far
from inconvenient (the stairs had migrated away again at this point, and won’t reappear in another, hmm, four hours or so).

The same way that Lysandra had shadowed their team’s preparation of the field, this time, she was shadowing Philippe’s team in their preparation. Thus, the Gryffindor in the black dress wasn’t with them this time.

If she was honest, it was rather funny to see Ceres’ expression turned reluctant and dreading the moment Hermione said that it was time to review their performance this turn.

“Urgh, I know. I shouldn’t have wrestled him, should I?”

“Um, why not?” Hermione sat down at the large picnic mat that seemed to have been spread there. Her reply seemed to have surprised some of her team members.

“Because Gervase managed to get a hit in when she was too occupied with Pip?” Patil said, askance. Mordred certainly agreed with him. The two of them were a contrast; where Mordred was blond, he was black-haired. Where Mordred’s attire was sombre, his was stylish—just add a jaunty hat and she can imagine him strolling along a pier in wizarding Casablanca, or someone straight out of Bollywood. She can easily surmise that Patil was one of the more popular students in Gryffindor.

“Yeah. Rather reckless, that.” Patil opined.

“Ah, but you saw him going down earlier, right?” Hermione asked. Ceres, Paul and Mordred nodded at that as they exchanged glances.

“And we all know now that Balthazar actually constructed a decoy not long after that. Who, here, even suspected that the fallen Gervase that they saw on the ground wasn’t real?”

Nobody said a word about that.

“It was a little odd,” Paul mused. “But I’ll have to admit that the details are very good. Didn’t even cross my mind that it wasn’t Gervase.”

“So, everybody thought that he was down and out.” Hermione stated, going around trying to meet everyone’s eyes to ensure that they were on the same page so far. “That meant Ceres acted with the then-knowledge that Philippe was the last and only person that had reached that far. Her decision isn’t exactly playing it safe, but it’s not as foolish as it would be if nobody could spot where Gervase is at that point either. In that case, you’d know, he’s still out there and you’d be more careful.”

“We can only judge the decisions made based on the knowledge known at that point, not what we know later. Ceres had been disarmed earlier,” Hermione nodded at her. “And whether she tried to find her wand first before going after Philippe again or to face him without her wand…both has risk, and at that point neither choice is too obviously wrong.”

“What we can do, is check the decision before that, as well as make a plan as to how we’re going to counter Balthazar’s ability to create decoys.”

Hermione might not be in the field regularly like Harry or Ron, but she’d joined them from time to time, enough that she was familiar with the structure of their usual post-op briefing and suggestions for future improvements; this was what she followed. When she faltered or paused in her thinking, it was Paul who picked up the next thread of inquiry or saw where the root of the current problem or topic came from.
“Yeah, I think other than Amelia who got knocked out of play by Casimir’s self-sacrifice right into a covered, vegetable-filled pit, their entire plains-team seems to have good luck—they mostly managed to avoid falling into any of the dug pits.” the redheaded Gryffindor concluded.

“And nobody here is going to use Casimir’s tactic in the future. We don’t want anyone to get used to thinking that their lives are expendable, alright?” Hermione stare was unyielding, and Casimir seemed to have shrunk into his coat and wrapped scarf; a turtle retracting his head into his shell.

“Uh, yes. Understood, Hermione…” The Hufflepuff murmured.

“Then what, nobody fell into any other pits?” Julia asked.

“Gervase fell into one of the water-filled pits. It’s too bad that Balthazar had a good grasp of the Seize and Pull charm. He cast that and pulled Gervase out soon afterwards.” Ceres answered, her expression unsatisfied.

“What spell is that?” Patil wondered.

“Oh, you’d get it in both the Second Advanced Defence class and at the end of Advanced Charms. Attending either one would do.” The blonde Gryffindor gave the answer. “Still, this means that we’ve overestimated just how effective the pits would be.”

“Not exactly,” Julia said, in-between finishing her rice pudding. “I’ve learned that spell in Advanced Charm last year, but I wouldn’t have been able to use it instantaneously without fail in such a situation. I lack the practise. I mean, how many people here don’t know the Seize and Pull spell, or haven’t practised it recently?”

The Ravenclaw raised her own arm as she asked the question out loud. Hermione didn’t, but she saw that a little less than half of their team had raised their hands. Julia’s expression was rather blasé when her head turned to Hermione.

“Why am I not surprised that you can cast it?”

Hermione gave a helpless shrug and a smile at that.

“Well, alright, I forget that our team has more people from Advanced Defence classes in general,” Julia admitted. “In an average group of sixth-years, I’d only expect around a third of us to be able to cast it.”

Ceres sighed. “Which still amounts to the same thing as Pip’s team has roughly the same ability. The pits are probably not that effective when half of your opponent can easily haul their friends out.”

“It’s fine. You live and learn, don’t beat yourself up over it.” Hermione patted her hand.

“Yes, we can go through the previous run later. It’s more important to think for our next run now,” the redhead said as he pulled them all back on track. “At least we know what they won’t have—pits, because they’re easier to handle than we expect.”

“With the current team configurations,” Hermione added. Paul nodded.

“Yes, with that.”

“So, what do you think we need to prepare for? A separate plains and forests course like what we did?” Ceres asked. Mordred raised one hand politely, and he only spoke once Ceres nodded.
“If I may ask, whose work was it to set the forest with moats of ice crystals? It’s so…”

“*Ingenious!*” Paul said.

“…intimidating,” the blond Slytherin finished, the corner of his lips twitching slightly. “But yes, it is a great work. The moats with ice spikes had proven to be an excellent barrier.”

“It was Hermione’s.” Julia announced this firmly and with pride, something that Hermione found a little puzzling… And now everyone’s gaze had turned towards her again, in various shades between perplexity and wonder. She held back the urge to fidget under all the attention.

“It’s not that big of a deal—”

“Practically all the ice crystals are hers. I haven’t managed to make them quickly enough or large enough,” Julia cut in. “Neither could Casimir when he volunteered a little near the end.”

“I don’t think most people would manage to fill the *entire* forest floor that quickly.” Paul said, his scrutinising gaze had a touch of envy in it for a second before it melted away into something more genuine. He congratulated her sincerely. “Great job, Hermione.”

She bit her lip and almost said it was nothing much again if she didn’t feel Julia’s side eye on her. She remembered Daedalus’ complaint about not being able to accept a compliment and Hermione gracefully backed down.

“Thank you. Well, it wasn’t completely impassable, but it would do.” she said.

“Which is why I don’t think they’d try to do the same as we do. It’s not exactly easy. My guess is that the plains would take centre stage, and if I know my brother, he’d probably reduce the amount of forest and tree cover.” the redhead finished, while Hermione had to hold back the urge to straighten his lopsided tie or to start casting *Scourgify* at him. “It simplifies the trapping process when there’s just one type of terrain to deal with.”

“So, for starters, let’s see…”

Paul pulled a blank scroll from his bag, moved the picnic basket over and shuffled some plates before he unrolled it. Quill in hand, the planning for the next stage began for Ceres’ team.

When the smoke from the smokescreen spell around them dissipated instead of being continuously renewed, everyone in their team knew that it was time for them to run the obstacle course. Paul leapt up to his feet with such speed that one might suspect him to be spring-heeled.

“Well, about time! I was getting bored here.” He dusted his hand and stretched.

They all stood up with varying speeds, and Hermione walked forward without concern. The area near them was more open now, and so she was quite certain that none of the opposing team was in hiding nearby—there was no place to hide in, and there was the agreement of not trapping the first five metres of the gallery.

Instead of a forested area and an open plain like their previous setup, most of the place *were* open plains, with the occasional clusters of trees here and there with large enough boulders. Hermione instantly marked those as the other team’s hidey-holes, especially considering that they were placed almost evenly all over the field. One might assume that they were purposefully-placed to shield ambushers...
What was even more surprising were the horizontal ditches roughly dug at intervals in front of them, mostly parallel to each other.

“From which circle of hell is that?” Paul was the first to complain as he walked not far from Hermione’s left. “How are we supposed to get to the end??”

“Don’t tell me we’re supposed to climb down and scramble up each ditch?” That was Julia following up.

“Certainly not.” Mordred’s tone was supremely unamused. “If we go down one, they’ll easily hit us from a nearby copse of trees. Perhaps they can even do so from behind those boulders at the bottom of those trees. Those are some rather strategic arboreal emplacement. I’m not crossing any ditch with trees pretending to be friendly nearby unless I’ve burned them to a crisp.”

“Hear, hear.” Patil was surprisingly as pyromanic as Mordred this time. “I’ll help you with that. I saw some bottles of oil in the Twin’s stash. We can use that.”

“Everyone, please, we’re not burning anything without a plan.” Casimir tried to uphold the peace.

“Of course. Let’s plan where to direct the lines of fire,” the Slytherin replied instead.

The Polish wizard was clearly rubbing his forehead before he raised his voice a little. “Gentlemen, not everything has to be solved with arson…”

Hermione tuned the voices out for a bit, her forehead creasing. She hadn’t said anything yet because something about the earthworks tickled her mind. It felt oddly familiar. *Never mind, I’ll remember it later if it was that important.*

“Alright, people, we’re not going anywhere yet without a plan.” Ceres announced, and the chatter fell at the sound of her command. “Let’s back up a little and figure out how we’re going to handle this.”

Chapter End Notes

And here is the longer detail of what happened when Hermione met Ceres earlier, now you get to see it in its longer glory. Time frame is shifted a bit earlier for now before we continue on from the point in time when Hermione took tea with Merrythought. Next chapter will probably be up in two weeks because I'm almost done writing it.

Additional Notes:

**Mordred Montmorency (OC):** Sixth year Slytherin prefect, cousin to the French Gryffindor Maximilien de Montmorency. Mordred is a notable member of the *Wizarding Society of Better Governance*. Like Oswin, Mordred is glad that Tom Riddle was dependable and capable prefect because he willingly eased back from most speeches and crowd-rousing responsibilities Tom stepped forward to assume them himself. He’s quite aware that he’s a rather cerebral person that fails to display the
appropriate amounts of sympathy and empathy to other people, and is better at the administrative and technical side of his prefect duties. He is not aware that some of the interests that he shares with his mother sounds a little hair-raising to most people.

**Paul Prewett and Peter Prewett (OC):** Sixth-year Gryffindors, the redheaded twins are both beaters on the Gryffindor House's quidditch team. The classes they took are Advanced DADA II and Advanced Transfiguration II, among others. Their family has a strong martial, anti-dark magic bent, with many Aurors in the ranks, which meant they had put in many hours of duelling practice at home, and they would gladly teach anyone who wanted to know more or be better. They’re very good friends with the French transfers Philippe Bernadotte and Ceres Victorinus. What they *can't* always get is when someone might not be too interested in DADA.

They have had points taken from them due to what some prefects consider as booby-trapping Hogwarts corridors and what they consider as ‘teaching their juniors constant vigilance!’ All for the good cause of helping improve their awareness and reflexes.

Tom calls them the defence fanatics.

'
67 Life on Mars II

Chapter Summary

(See previous chapter’s summary for summary)

Chapter Notes

Alright. My head is still sort of a mess, even if I'm good enough at passing for normal/functional these days. Thanks for all the kind words and comments, even if I haven't gotten around to replying to them yet! In my case, to create any type of work usually requires inspiration and effort/stubbornness. So, if I don't drive myself to write, I'd soon fall out of the habit of doing so. Of course, the balance is ensuring that I don't actually burn myself out, but I'm better at pacing myself these days (I'd like to think so, anyway).

I feel like I'm still searching for pizzazz with this chapter too, and it doesn't quite sit well with me, but the last time I said I was uninspired and can only write this, my sister sent pictures/gifs of her throwing vegetables in my direction on chat. So...it's not as bad as I feared, I guess? Without further ado, here's Chapter 67:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

67 Life on Mars II

“So, I think I’ve got the general outline of the field,” Julia said this as she’d finished sketching out a rough map on dirt with a throwaway stick.

Paul hummed in agreement.

“Well, they’re forgoing forests completely and went mostly with plains instead. Now, what do you think they’re trying to achieve here?” Hermione said.

“You already know, don’t you, Hermione?” Patil asked back, his tone amused and his smile lopsided. A curl of hair fell in front of his forehead in a way that drew the eye.

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t put it that way. I have a hypothesis, but there are no guarantees that my hypothesis would be the most accurate one.”

“They’re not trying to obstruct us, that’s for sure,” Mordred muttered, looking out towards the mostly-open fields instead of at his friends. His unhappy expression matched his black-on-black outfit well. “They’re not trying to place hidden holes as traps either—the ditches are all out in the open.”

“We did consider that random holes wouldn’t be much of an obstruction if you have a teammate that can cast the Seize and Pull charm. It’s not a surprise that they would understand that too.”
Ceres replied.

“Rather than waste time hiding that, they decided to put more effort into more digging. Which leaves us with these ditches. Hip-hip-hooray.” Casimir’s words ended with a deflated sigh.

“Outright obstacles. They’re out there in the open, but unavoidable,” Paul finished. “But look on the bright side! The odds are low that there are any hidden traps on the ground—”

“—just everywhere else!” Julia complained.

“Hey, it’s probably just the trees… and the rocks.” A pause. “And maybe someone might even have the bright idea of hiding in one of those ditches, but that’s not much, right? It wouldn’t be a challenge without all that.” The Prewett twin said all this with a relentlessly upbeat tone.

“Merlin forbid that it would be too easy,” Mordred’s reply was sarcastic.

Paul patted his shoulder with pride. “Exactly! See, he gets it!”

Casimir groaned at that as he rubbed his face with both hands, the Hufflepuff muttering something about crazy Gryffindors.

“So, ground is mostly ditches, and whatever they might fill the farther ones with, but you don’t think that most of the hidden traps would be there?” Ceres summarised before the topic could bounce around again.

The redhead nodded to her. “That’s my take on it, anyway.”

“Anyone else?” Ceres asked.

“We should just burn the trees down.” Mordred commented again. “That would remove around 80% of the hiding areas, I’m sure. And they wouldn’t be attacking us if they’re busier trying to not be on fire, or putting out fires.”

“Hear, hear,” Patil chimed in.

Hermione cleared her throat. “There would be no plans for burning the landscape.”

“Ah, so we just have to make sure that it’s unplanned burning, yes?” Paul asked with gleaming blue eyes.

“Let’s just say that whoever starts it is going to have to explain the burnt walls and perhaps burnt hidden paintings and whatnot that’s still on the walls to the Hogwarts’ Caretaker, hmm?” Hermione’s tone was saccharine as she said this, her sharp gaze less so. Suffice to say, any earlier display of bravado was nowhere to be seen after she’d finished. “Fire is not an easily-controlled element, people. It’s better if we don’t even start in the first place.”

“I agree,” Casimir spoke up, voice slightly muffled by his Hufflepuff scarf.

Well, nobody outright opposed her statement, so Hermione counted that as a win.

“Hermione, what’s your take on the field’s layout?” Ceres asked next when it seemed that nobody else was going to speak up.

“They opened up the field to give a clear line of sight to attack; the easier it would be for them to ambush us and attack us from various points, or to just trigger who-knows-what trap. It would be a lot of trouble for us if we have to traverse the ditches while at the same time keeping watch for
possible attacks.”

“No shit,” Patil murmured, and Julia gave his forearm a tap of warning. “Sorry.”

“It’s just too bad that there isn’t a simple invisibility spell,” Ceres mused.

“And even a simple invisibility potion takes a hell of a time to brew, and even then, it’s not exactly complete invisibility,” Mordred sighed as he said this.

Hermione’s expression brightened. “Ah, that reminds me! This could work. We don’t really need outright invisibility as long as they don’t have any better visibility either. Let me explain—could you find pebbles around here? If each of us have at least a handful, I think I can start.”

It took some repetitive work among all of them, though any grumbling was mostly good-natured as no one would argue that it was safer to prepare a lot now than to march carelessly forward without preparation. The transfiguration was the first step—and that mostly fell to Hermione as the best and fastest transfigurator of them all. After that, they moved to the Smokescreen Spell. Everyone already knew that and it didn’t really matter how fast or slow they could do it, since they weren’t in an emergency here. What most didn’t know would be the Sucking Charm.

“The Latin incantation is easy, Sugo, with the name of the object that you’re trying to suck appended to the word as a modifier. In this case it would be the smoke, which would be fumus.” Hermione explained.

“So, Sugo Fumus?” Patil asked.

Mordred shook his head. “No, no—you have to watch the declension. The ‘smoke’ is a description of what’s being sucked, genitive, so it would be Sugo Fumi.”

“That’s right,” Hermione nodded. “That’s the easy part. The movement’s a little more complicated. It is actually pretty easy if you already know the movement for Accio since the spell is a further modification of that. It still taps into the same basic spell structure. So, the movements are the same as Accio but with a few more additions after that.”

The movements were a little fiddly. Yet they’re not trying to get everyone to be able to cast it quickly and accurately in the field, instead of just being slow and careful as they sit around now and stare at every other person doing it. That meant that practically everyone can do it too as each of them picked up one of the bottles they’d piled next to them.

Paul’s grin was wide and toothy as he did this, which could be a little…unsettling to some others.

“I knew there was a good reason I like you, Hermione. I love you, even.”

“Don’t let Tom hear that,” Hermione commented, more amused than anything.

“It’s fine! I don’t mind being your roguish wizard on the side!” He gave her an exaggerated wink.

Mordred actually grew paler. “That’s really, really, not recommended, Prewett. As in, it’s a position that is extremely hazardous to your health and wellbeing.”

“But don’t you think that Hermione’s worth it?” Paul asked back. Oh, he’s actually pouting, Hermione thought, a grown wizard really had no right to look that endearing. It took some effort to stop herself from snickering.
“Oh relax, Mordy. He’s just pulling your leg.” Her fellow Ravenclaw rolled her eyes.

“Mordred, Julia. It’s Mordred.”

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Paul began, ignoring the other two’s byplay, “Thou art lovelier and promises more explosions. Rough winds will shake the darling buds of May, For you’ll call hurricanes and other windy rotations—”

Hermione laughed. “Why, thank you. I’ve never been complimented with explosions and rotations before.”

Paul shrugged, still grinning widely. “Yes, the last line still needs some work, but hey, I came up with it on the spot! That’s still something.”

Casimir snorted. “At least he didn’t say gyrations.”

Four people turned to him and the Hufflepuff reddened. “What? He’s the one who implied it!”

“Yeah, but none of us said it, did we?” Patil murmured.

“Huh. It would fit better, though, you have a point. Thank you, Casimir,” Paul thought out loud, barely budging even when Ceres swatted the back of her Housemate’s head.

Casimir himself just covered his face with his hands once more with an exasperated sound. “That was not feedback…”

“Well, at least it sounds like it’s worth writing down now—”

“No—” Mordred cut in,

“—You’re not going to dedicate that to Hermione, right?” Julia cut in before Mordred said more. “We don’t need Mr. Paranoid Slytherin here getting twitchy.”

“It’s not paranoia, since I have a perfectly rational reason to…”

“Sacre bleu.” Ceres cursed even as she cast another Smokescreen spell outward.

Hermione didn’t hide her continued chuckle. “I think it’s time we get back to our Smokescreen casting, everyone.”

“And nobody tells this to Tom.” Mordred insisted. “And I mean nobody.”

“Well, yes,” Paul agreed, his expression was somehow completely serious now, even if she could still see the way his eyes twinkle. “I’m not going to write and show it yet. ’Tis half-done still—a raggedy piece. I still have more work ahead of me; hadn’t modified the entire sonnet.”

Julia let out a frustrated huff and Hermione was already laughing again before she realised it.

’-

Ceres had considered all angles and chose to divide their team into two. Hermione agreed with her. None of them knew what plans Philippe’s team had, and at least three people in each team would help with flexibility in reaction. They had a somewhat rough plan of action, but the main plan wasn’t complicated, really. Distract, confuse and speed over the field as fast as possible.
Ceres lead the half-team with Paul being her second. Hermione lead the other one because...well, Mordred was more comfortable following than leading, once he realised that he was in the same half-team as her.

They moved slowly at roughly the same rate to the edge of the first ditch. Mordred and Paul glanced at each other, and with a nod, they each threw their first two transfigured bottles to different points on the ground. The smoke from Smokescreen Spell rose and started to cover the ground. Hermione heard a muffled curse from somewhere ahead and a little upward. She could hear that Ceres and her team had started moving, as planned. Hermione and hers moved farther along the ditch for now, putting some distance between them and her hand had started moving for her next spell.

"Carpe Retractum."

A rope of light shot out from her wand and she aimed at a tree across the ditch from her; it coiled tightly around the bark and when she heaved, inertia meant that she was the one that was pulled across the chasm. She cancelled the spell before it brought her crashing all the way into the tree—there was no need to land too close. Hermione sneak farther ahead while half-crouched, almost to the edge of the next ditch, to scatter two more bottled smoke before running back. While she did that, Mordred cast Seize-and-Pull as well, but to a different anchor—a boulder the size of a pony.

Stray bolts of light occasionally cut through the gloom, here and there, along with some yells. She was sure she could hear Peter loudly complaining that this was really not fun, but neither Hermione nor Mordred was inclined to answer his hails. The smoke had spread far enough that it was not easy to guess where exactly their half-teams had decided to cross.

A nod from Hermione and then it was Mordred’s turn to look ahead, and perhaps sneak farther forward to cast some distractions if necessary. Hermione’s task now was to cast the Seize and Pull Charm to Julia and pulled her across the ditch. The Ravenclaw prefect made a small sound when she landed. It was hardly audible when both of them had to hit the ground as Hermione saw the movement in the smoke first and tackled her down—a giant green ball flew over them.

“Keep your head down,” Hermione whispered. She hissed the same thing to Mordred too when he returned. He nodded to show understanding and they moved together with him as point.

With that, their half-team had crossed the first ditch with no trouble and continued on.

‘-

“I am so bloody glad I didn’t join you guys at all!” Julia’s Ravenclaw chase friend announced as she saw everyone’s mess.

“Oh, come on, Celeste. It wasn’t that bad and it was fun.” Julia disagreed.

She was eating through a bag of crisps as she shook her head vigorously. Celeste Sykes had mostly stayed out of the way and from her expression, she clearly did not regret her decision at all. “Not at all, no. Getting shot at, iced, almost burnt and repeatedly slimed or dunked isn’t my idea of fun at all. You guys are nuts.”

“Oh, relax Sykes, nobody’s going to drag you into anything you don’t want to. You do realise that these are all Advanced Defence nuts?” Lysandra asked. She ignored the multitude of ‘Hey!’ ‘Oh, really, Burke?’ and the quieter huffs easily. The Gryffindor in black and with red silk flowers in her hair was holding a scroll and a quill now.
“Now, time to tally this round’s losses,” Lysandra announced. Paul did a quick count.

“That’s…six people.”

Hermione looked around. “Yes, that would be about it.”

“That should’ve been five,” Balthazar muttered, not quite under his breath.

“Well, Jelly-legs jinx isn’t fatal, so technically, Casimir is still alive,” Patil pointed out. “So, me casting a Feather-light Charm on him and just legging it counts as both of us passing.”

“I wasn’t talking about you, Patil, but those nicely splattered fellows over there.” He pointed at Ceres and Paul. Paul had green slimes from the knee down while Ceres was splashed mostly over her left arm.

“If it was an explosion, that’s certainly close enough,” Lysandra opined, while the other uninvolved audience nodded vigorously between her crisps. Paul shrugged confidently.

“Eh, not a killing blow for either of us, old boy. Ceres certainly can get away with a wounded left arm.”

“But you can’t exactly do that without both legs, can you, Paul?”

Hermione nodded as she stared at how drenched with slime his lower trousers were. “Yes, if that was an acid pit, you’re not running anywhere until your calves and feet get fixed.”

“But who would fill the pit with acid in real life?” Paul groused.

“I would,”

“I certainly do,” were the answers from Peter as well as Balthazar. Their respective grin and smirk clearly demonstrated that they were sure that Paul had simply been wheedling instead of actually believing what he said.

“Nuts,” Sykes murmured, and the bystander’s comment was practically ignored by everyone else. “You’re all nuts. Yes, even you, Julia.”

Julia huffed, “you’re just not used to this. I don’t complain half as much about your crazy sky-drop broom club, do I?”

Most of everyone’s attention was still with Balthazar’s pointed attention at Paul Prewett’s slimed trousers.

Verrault shook his head, brows furrowed. “That’s not a hit you can limp away from. Crawling may work. Limping? You need at least one working leg to limp. That?” He pointed at the green-slime-covered calves. “No working calves mean no working legs.”

Hermione took a deep breath.

“Give it up, Paul, I don’t think you can get out of this one. Your mobility’s gone, and nobody had made an effort to carry you to the end. Not to mention that your half-team’s not the one with the healer either.”

“Aww, come on, Hermione. Are you on their side or ours? Is this a revenge for not finishing my sonnet for you?” Paul gave her puppy-dog eyes. She snorted even as Mordred was about to start his protest once more.
“Oh, don’t start now, Paul.” Hermione stopped him before he started on his ridiculous sonnet again.

“Who’s the other one down?” Ceres asked.

“Why, me of course—” that stopped Mordred’s complaints as he made a sound of disbelief at her instead, and Hermione continued only after she had his attention, “well, that’s what I wanted to say, and it would’ve been true if Mordred didn’t insist on taking my role as bait and played distraction on the last leg of the run. He’s the one down because he chose to be the distraction.”

Her gaze towards him was two parts peeved and three parts impressed (it was a close thing). Mordred didn’t blink when their team’s gaze moved to him.

“I did what I had to. Team wise, Hermione had a higher value than I do, so if anyone were to be waving a red flag in front of the bulls, I was the better choice.”

Hermione blinked. When Philippe’s team had figured out that Ventus would disperse the smoke faster, they were running low on the homemade smoke bombs too; she made the decision to split the team at that point. That Mordred passed a limping Julia to Hermione’s side and insisted that he be the bait instead had been unexpected. Now, it turned out that his reasoning was still just as surprising to her.

“That’s really nice of you,” Gervase, Gryffindor seeker, stared at him askance.

Lysandra scoffed loudly. “—said the naïve young man to the wolf.”

Gervase elbowed her a little for that and she merely returned it with a light shove back.

Mordred snorted; the blond was unimpressed with the two Gryffindors in front of him. “Hardly. The scores are counted by the number of successful escapes, yes? If it had been Julia and I, perhaps it was still plausible for both of us to make it. But if it was Julia and Hermione, success is almost certain. She’d be more prepared for any possible, unexpected challenges still ahead than I would, thus ensuring that my team has the higher score.”

“As you can see, we won and by a rather large margin, at that.” Mordred’s smile was professional, but even Hermione could detect the smugness in it and she had no doubt the Gryffindors he was facing could too.

“Morgana’s tits, Mordred, you’re still a pain even when you win.” Peter pinched the bridge of his nose, mumbling a little as his House’s prefect lightly jabbed his ribs with her elbow. “And here I thought that you were only an arse when you lose in Defence fights or duels. You’re an arse either way, eh?”

“I don’t—” he didn’t quite manage to finish that.

“You do.”

“Indubitably so.”

That was Paul and Balthazar’s rejoinder. They glanced at each other at that and exchanged a beaming smile and a smirk.

“Yeah, well, good thing that I’ve been mostly beating you in fights, eh?” Peter’s grin was back, and he was as laid back as he’d been before.
Mordred straightened up, looking for all intents like an indignant crow in his preferred outfit. “That’s because we’ve been forced to use a fair field. What’s the use of being fair against deadly enemies in real life, I ask you?”

Hermione rolled her eyes and stopped further complaints with a touch to his arm.

“I do agree with you, Mordred. If you have the terrain, alter it to be hostile to your enemies, that’s a basic principle for field operations. Well, this had been a great run, but our team’s advantage isn’t something that’s guaranteed to last, anyway,” The Ravenclaw said. Her raised hand stopped further words from anyone. “We had an edge because I figured out a creative application of transfiguration the other team hadn’t expected at all. Now that they know, they’ll take that into account in the next planning and that advantage would be gone.”

She gazed at Ceres, “We’re good, yes, but we’re lucky too.”

“Well, I wouldn’t argue about luck playing some part, but it does take some skill.”

“We also won the first time around,” Mordred pointed out.

Hermione shrugged. “It was good work, yes. Still, I’d be greatly impressed only if we managed to stop the entire team from passing. It’s easier to play defender than runner, you know? Theoretically, any decent teamwork should be able to take out at least three out of seven people.”

Balthazar was outright gaping before his sister pushed his lower jaw up. Lysandra only muttered something about how genius and madness were two sides of the same coin.

“Besides, Verrault hadn’t started to think outside the box of what he already knows either. It would’ve been very difficult if he’d started to do so,” Hermione pointed out.

Verrault was taken aback more than anything, his brows unstitched now, and he looked somewhat younger.

“What…are you talking about, Hermione?”

“You take Ancient Runes with me. You could’ve been more creative with that when it’s your turn to play defence.”

“Ah. I don’t see it yet, but perhaps…”

He seemed thoughtful at that. Balthazar, on the other hand, was the one who looked as if he’d been struck by lightning. He slapped his forehead, and for someone with shadows under his eyes, he actually looked sharp and awake.

“Oh, of all the demons in Malebolge…of course you’re right. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before.” He slammed his fist into his palm. Most of his friends just look confused. He merely shook his head at his friends’ inquiring expressions. “There are simply other possibilities to alter the field if you’ve taken Advanced Ancient Runes.”

“You’ve taken it?” Hermione asked.

“I’m taking the second advanced class right now.”

Hermione’s smile was more rueful now. She only gave a nudge for Verrault to start figuring out using runes for some embedded enchantment, but she wouldn’t say that she wanted to go against someone who’d figure out how to weaponise temporary wards. She hoped that wasn’t what
Balthazar had just realised he could do. That’s…the farthest thing from ideal for her as someone that might be on the opposite team from him. Well, it was all out of her hands now; and she did think that it would be more interesting if she had a more challenging opposition, didn’t she?

It was Peter who commented next as he shook his head.

“…You know that you have some pretty unrealistic standards, don’t you, Hermione? It’s really…wow. I thought I know it and yet I have no words.”

The brunette rolled her eyes. “I think it’s actually rather straightforward! I can explain the precise metrics that I use if you want to know.”

Julia was smiling for some reason, her tone fond. “It’s really not, Hermione. It really…not.”

“Well,” Verrault clapped his hands together with an oddly enthusiastic resolve. “Now that it’s completely done and over with, it’s certainly is time for the post-battle analysis.”

Before anyone could do anything, he’d summoned a spare table from the side to their spot and started unrolling some scrolls. The twins only exchanged glances once before shrugging and following suit, and everyone else had started drifting in that direction too.

‘-

“Alright, I think we’re all pretty spent now, aren’t we? I don’t think anyone can do two more rounds of that.” Ceres announced.

Julia groaned first, among others. “I don’t think I can do another round.”

Paul nodded. “Yes, it’s pretty different when you have to take turns in being the opposing side.”

“Well,” his brother said, “it’s time for the hardest part now, then.”

“And what would that be, brother mine?”

“Same thing we do every time, Paul—clean up.”

Now that ensured that practically everyone was moaning and groaning as if Kettleburn suddenly decided to release a horde of Hippogriffs after them.

“Nobody’s leaving early yet! Yes, that means you, Julia, Sykes,” Philippe warned with a voice that was much to cheerful for everyone’s preference.

“Well, Paul and Peter did the hard work of the initial prep and set up. It’s unfair to them if they have to tidy up as well.” Hermione agreed, even if she wasn’t looking forward to it either.

“Wait, I have this in hand,” Balthazar said. “You must’ve had help from your family’s house elfs too, correct?”

The twins nodded at that.

“Excellent. I’ll go ahead and call some of mine, then. You might as well call yours too, Mordred.”

His blond Housemate nodded. “Ah, yes. Any additional hands would help, right?”

“Yes. It would be easier for all of us.”
“The perks of being from an old family,” his sister agreed with relish. “What use is your ominous family name if it can’t make your life easier once in a while?”

It did actually finish at a far faster rate than Hermione expected. Then again, the army of house elves wearing tea cosies, towels and the like with different family liveries was a lot of help, even if their magic were less flashy than the students’.

“So, still in the mood to explode things?” One of the twins had sidled up to Ceres’ side.

“What do you mean?”

He waggled his eyebrows without saying anything. Realisation hit her as she thought over things a little further.

“Ah, I see…not so much anymore, no.” The corners of her lips curved up slightly.

“Great!” His smile was less of a joking one now. “I mean, we probably don’t know how to make you feel better, but we thought we can take your mind off things for a bit.”

She patted his shoulder. “Thank you. You’re not bad at that, Peter. Not bad at all.”

Hermione had been summoning several of the fake trees still standing into the twins’ mokeskin bag and she added what little she can when Peter had moved away and was stacking the cauldrons.

“You can talk to me anytime you want, Ceres.”

She was quiet and Hermione didn’t bother her for the next minute (she still had her part of the clean up to do). Her shoulder-length hair hid her face from the side when her head was lowered with the weight of her thoughts even as her back remained tall and unbowed. When the Gryffindor finally spoke up again, her voice was quiet and serious.

“I’ll probably take you up on that soon.”

The two Gryffindor prefects had just escorted a second year Slytherin back to the dungeons when the child stumbled upon them as they were discussing the results of the simulated fight arranged by the Prewett twins. Philippe had groaned when the young wizard had stumbled upon their corner seat by accident, seemingly still lost in Hogwarts even after a full year here.

“How you manage your classes with a hare’s memory like that, I have no idea.” Philippe stared at the literal snot-nosed brat, unimpressed. He couldn’t hide his wince when the kid wiped his nose with his sleeve.

“I tripped on my roommates’ sneezing powder.” The shorty said. He didn’t have to be a prefect to know a bullshit excuse when he heard one.

Ceres gave him a look for his tone. He sighed and knelt in front of the younger wizard, pulling his handkerchief out. “La vache. Come ‘ere, that sleeve needs cleaning, yes, that one. Scourgify. I presume you don’t have a handkerchief, then? Here, just take mine and please don’t use your sleeve again. That’s just horrible.”

She leaned forward next to him. “Come on, we’re both prefects. You’re lost, aren’t you? We can help you find your way.”
“Yeah. Where were you going, little rabbit?”

Now that the snot-nosed brat was back in the bosom of the serpents (and it didn’t surprise him that Ceres could perceive the shorty’s house before the child said anything), it was no longer their business and he could return to their previous topic.

“I’m a little surprised, actually,” Philippe opened conversationally, “that you punched me.”

Ceres seemed more amused than anything. “Is that even a surprise to you?”

“Pas du tout!” his grin was wide as he said this. “I just thought that you’d kick me! You’ve worked your legs out into rather dangerous limbs over the summer.”

Before he could remind himself not to look down, his eyes decided to ignore his brain and just flicker down anyway. He forced his gaze upwards just as he felt his inner idiot yell something about no regrets, and how great it was that he was partnered with one of the few witches who wore trousers.

She was shrugging and didn’t seem to notice his momentary distraction.

“Well, I had just tackled you down. That’s not exactly kicking distance, is it?”

Pip turned his head to stare down the hall before he did something more stupid like stare at her sizeable chest. *Melusine*, now was not the time to remember how soft they felt pressed down against his back, even if the memory came with him eating dust at the same time. *Worth it—no, think of something else! Now!*

“Oh, Mignonette, I just remembered! What do you think if we spar now?”

“Don’t you think we’ve practised enough today, Pip?”

He could almost hear the raised eyebrow in her tone, but he still didn’t turn. He wouldn’t be thinking straight enough if his blood flowed south. “No, no…not the magical way. We haven’t boxed in a while, have we? And it would be unfair to most of our Hogwarts friends if we were too physical in our attacks.”

“Ah, savate practice! Yes, we haven’t practised in…hmm, at least two weeks. Eager to get the stuffing kicked out of you?”

“Heh. In your dreams, certainly not if I can beat you first.”

If their grins would seem a tad bloodthirsty to other people, it wasn’t a concern of theirs as the corridors were mostly empty anyway.

“To professor Merrythought, then, to borrow the keys to one of her classrooms?”

“Certainly.”

The two of them went off to do their best in kicking the stuffing out of each other for a bit, before moving on to the slower, more methodical practise of making sure their forms were actually correct. Pip only got out one complaint about that, and how he’d much prefer sparring. Then, Ceres’ pointed remark of how he couldn’t even punch a wall properly the last time around was a direct hit to the ego. As much as he didn’t like that, he couldn’t even complain because he certainly messed up then.
While she said it with a wide smile on her face, her aura of steel certainly ensured that she did not consider said practise optional. Not if he knew what was good for him. Pip had enough brains to back away from an argument he wasn’t going to win.

Besides, when he was spotting for Ceres seriously, he had an acceptable reason to stare. That was certainly less stressful than having to remind himself from time-to-time to stop bloody ogling.

“Pip?”

“That high kick looks too risky…too easy to unbalance.” He said without thinking. It was true. On the other hand, he certainly had no plans in enlightening her just why he was rather distracted at staring at her legs.

“Still a good move if I managed a direct hit to the head. That would be a quite close to knocking someone out.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think it’s worth it…never mind, let’s settle this argument with another spar.”

Ceres sighed. “Sure thing.”

It was certainly a lot more convenient to be a wizard than a muggle, Pip thought. Other than some padding for the head and the quick arrangement of mats on the floor, they didn’t need to bother with gloves or arm and leg guards because a healing spell would’ve taken care of any bruises or cuts that they could inflict to each other. They took their distance, their preferred stances, and on a silent count to three they begun. Ceres went on the offensive first while his left leg had guarded against her first kick easily. After that, a flurry of movements was exchanged.

Hook, jab, duck, kick. She evaded sideways and kicked again, but his reach was longer and his kick hit her ribs when hers only grazed his. Heh. Ceres cursed and moved, he had to parry or counter a few more blows by instinct as her speed was faster than his. A feint to the left he didn’t fall for, then she went for a body hit. He’d turned enough to reduce the impact and she’d jumped back before he can trap her arm. A deep cleavage—

Wait, when did she—

Merde!

He didn’t manage to voice that as her heel had just hit his nose. The pain was blinding as he staggered. Pretty sure it cracked there, if not outright broke.

Ceres hopped back, as light on her feet as any dancer before she realised how bad the hit was.

“Pip! I’m sorry!”

“Nah, it’s fine.” He wiped the blood running down his nose. “Will probably need an Episkey and…what’s that bone-fixing spell again.”

She easily cast Episkey at his nose before staring at his nose for a while. “That’s the one that’s best supported with a small dose of Skele-Gro drunk alongside, isn’t it? Shouldn’t we go to the infirmary first?”

He shook his head. “This isn’t anything as serious as a concussion. We can just wait until the end of our practice.”
Philippe didn’t even bother to distract himself this time as his gaze zeroed in quickly to Ceres’ now visible collarbones and lower. When he met her gaze, his tone was all-too casual. “You know, this is a month before Noël, in winter. And you have three buttons off your shirt.”

“Two.”

“Aha!”

Her cheeks were ruddy, which unfortunately for his concentration just made her more attractive. He narrowed his eyes before she can distract him further.

“The heater is a bit too much after we started exercising for a bit!” she replied. “Look, you’re also sweating!” she accused right back.

“Are you pretty sure you’re not trying to distract me—”

“Pip!”

They stared each other down for a while, almost glaring at each other before one of them started laughing and the other followed suit.

“Alright, this is ridiculous,” she said. “I’ll try to find the damned valve for the thing and then we can start again.”

“And no trying to trip my stupid wizard head.”

“I don’t think your brain’s doing any thinking for me to trip,” her counter was swift even when the colour had yet to fully subside from her face.

“My brain isn’t my stupid wizard head,” he muttered.

He had been sure that she didn’t hear that until she suddenly froze near the heater and gave him a look when she understood what he meant. That was oddly slow of her.

“It is a known weakness, alright? That’s what Professor Merrythought keeps telling us about, isn’t it? To be aware of our own weaknesses so we could fix them or go around them.” His reply was a little defensive. “So, if you’re trying to get me to fight on even ground with you, hitting me right there isn’t going to do it.”

She was staring at him for a bit, for what he couldn’t figure out before she sighed.

“Yes, noted.”

Melchior had just walked out of the infirmary with a complicated feeling in his chest, even if none of his turmoil showed on his placid expression. Errant petals of yellow rose and lavender dotted his left sleeve, but he wasn’t paying much attention to care about it much—his suit and robes were perfect otherwise. Just because he had to wear the Hogwarts’ uniform doesn’t mean that he couldn’t put together an impeccable outfit that fit the school’s requirements. Choosing a fabric that’s far above what’s required was only the first step.

He’d only found out that Hermione had a healer’s apprenticeship when he’d finally gathered his sense of duty together to visit Jemima—and ended up encountering Hermione there. Being taken off-guard wasn’t exactly his idea of fun, but the fact that he’d always found her company pleasant
helped. His reaction wasn’t anything too embarrassing because of that.

Her easy dismissal of Jemima’s potential threat, though, piqued something in his memory. Something about a prior conversation with Mordred (yesterday, no, that was last Sunday evening) where he met the Twin Troubles from Gryffindor? The details escaped him, though. Never mind, it would come to him sooner or later.

She was a powerful witch—Melchior wasn’t even going to pretend otherwise—but he didn’t think she’d accept it herself so soon. Perhaps her getting seriously hurt made a difference? He shook his thoughts away. It doesn’t really matter; as long as she was more willing to use force against those who tried to harm her, the less Tom was going to need to be concerned about her wellbeing. A win for everyone all around. He hoped Jemima was going to learn her lesson from this point on too, but if she hadn’t, well…he was sure Hermione could keep her in line.

(A part of him he’d pushed down and ignored for long was simply glad that Hermione was merciful).

Everyone else, on the other hand, hmm…

There were…arrangements to be made. Melchior found himself humming a pleasant tune as he made his way back to the Slytherin common room. Supper was not going to start for another two hours or so, so most people were free. Well, they could choose to be too busy to meet him, but if they couldn’t even spare some time for him, then he can hardly be blamed afterwards if he didn’t take into account their concerns or interest later on.

This was why he’d taken over Tom’s usual seat at one of the corners of the Slytherin common room. It was his for the duration of the evening. The house elf of Slytherin House had prepared for tea too, from the white table cloth with a trimming of green ribbons and silver lace. He was not as precise as Abraxas, he knew. His friend would’ve known exactly what he wanted for the cakes and petit fours; instead, he amicably settled with the house elves with whatever the kitchen was cooking for the professors’ own tea. Whatever the house elves’ planned menu was, it was good enough for him.

He was a better tea connoisseur than a dessert enthusiast.

His first guest had approached him. Melchior stood up and smiled.

“Please, sit. I’m usually more of a Scottish Breakfast man myself, but Pendleton had deigned to share some interesting blend he’d received with from Miss Lee—after much cajoling from my side —so we’ll be having lotus green tea today.”

He was sure that Pendleton had the even rarer Osmanthus tea, but there was no way the blond was going to part with some of that without bloodletting involved; Pendleton might be level-headed, but it didn’t mean he was a pushover for the things he actually cared about. Besides, it wasn’t as if he himself was going to waste something that nice on Avery, even if he somehow managed the miracle of getting some.

“You’re…” the seventh-year started.

“Yes?”

Irwin Avery stared at him with some degree of disbelief, the shadows under his eyes seemed to be even darker than Balthazar’s. It was quite an accomplishment, as Balthazar was prone to staying awake all night simply to read books and then attending classes the next day with nary a rest.
“Is it not to your preference at all? Would you rather have some other tea?” he asked back.

Melchior could see exhaustion creeping at the corner of the seventh-year’s eyes. If the house elves had not been responsible with his wardrobe, he would bet that the other wizard would’ve been more unkempt.

“You *invited me* to have tea?”

“Why should I not?”

“…”

He rounded the table easily when it seemed that his guest was too unsettled to have taken a seat yet. With the quick movements of the feather-light charm memorised all too well, he cast it with a whisper and a quick tap to the nearest wing-backed chair before pulling it back for Avery.

“Please, make yourself comfortable.”

The other Slytherin stared at him for a while—looking for what, he had no idea. He merely blinked a few times and waited, and when Irwin finally sighed and sat down, Melchior pushed the seat a little inwards before cancelling the last charm. He was back in his seat in no time and was pouring tea for both of them. He took pot of sugar and removed the lid.

“Sugar?”

“…please.”

With that, the light tinkling of spoon against fine china and the pleasantries of tea and cakes occupied them for a while. Melchior had closed his eyes to savour the tea’s fragrance with the first sip before he set his teacup down. His tone was warm as he spoke up next.

“So, how have you been, Irwin?”

He could see the flicker of tension over the blond’s jaw. “…fine.”

“Are you really, though? It looks to me that you still have things on your mind. Not to mention that you’ve only visited your sister once or twice.”

“Have you been *watching me*?”

Melchior’s smile was amused now, “*Please*, why would I waste my time that way? I’ve just visited her this afternoon and had a nice long chat with Madam Edelstein’s apprentice. I heard then that you’re not one of her regular visitors. You surprise me, really. I thought you cared for your sister more than that.”

His mildly disappointed tone triggered a flush of colour over pale cheeks, and a look so cold it would’ve struck him down on the spot if it was made of pure magic.

“And whose fault is that?”

“Me?” His eyebrows rose and he feigned a little surprise. “*Why*, I’m certainly not forbidding you from visiting—why would I even do that?”

“But…”

He shook his head. “*Nobody* forbids you from visiting, Irwin. We all have more important things to
do than to be senselessly petty like that. Besides, I do wish for Jemima to recover quickly.” He poured more tea to Irwin’s almost-empty teacup as well as his own. “It would be better for us all if she were to come to her senses than not. That’s why I was asking you about your visitations. It might help her to hear a familiar voice regularly.”

“You would not want me to be too near to…her.”

Irwin used no name, but the restrained loathing in his voice informed the Knight just as easily. He shook his head.

“She’s a professional, Irwin, she’d understand. Even Tom would understand. After all, you’re just a brother concerned with the well-being of his sister, aren’t you? I certainly find that admirable. What I would have a problem with is any attempts at sabotage or harm—all quite normal concerns, I assure you.” He picked up a tiny bird confection with liquorice eyes that lay in its own little nest of spun caramel.

“Then again, I’m sure you’re not such a stupid or senseless person, right?”

Hmm, marzipan. The house elves are certainly putting some practice in for their Christmas menu.

“What is it to you?” Irwin’s tone had more belligerence than he’d expected.

Melchior’s smile was entirely cordial.

“Well, I’m sure Jemima would be sad if she had to be an only child. Though the Sussex Averys may perhaps be more…enthusiastic of the prospect of being the main house instead of a cadet branch that they may cheer you on to any foolishness you might be inclined to do. Their son is, what, a second or third year now?”

“First year,” Irwin corrected, even if he sounded as if he said it through gritted teeth.

“Ah, well, my apologies. My memory isn’t perfect.” he said, outright lying without blinking.

“I won’t forget this threat, Melchior.”

He chuckled and easily met the blond’s glare head on. “What threat? I’m making a simple observation. We’re living in dangerous times, Irwin. Who knows who would survive Grindelwald’s madness and who wouldn’t? No need to worry about Jemima, though, I can take care of her if you can’t, and Tom is fair in his considerations that he’d listen.”

That last part was said on purpose, and considering that the other wizard’s sudden heightening of colour yet again, Melchior had made a hit with the precision of a sharpshooter. After all, Irwin had completely failed to protect his sister, hadn’t he?

“Now, I was just about to inform Clytemnestra that I am free to receive her now; though I’d be thankful if you could pass the word along from me if you happened to meet her after this.”

When Mordred entered the Slytherin common room, Melchior made a point to wave him from where he currently sat. The sixth-year prefect approached him out of curiosity. The moment that Clytemnestra leaned out from the winged-back chair that she was using was something he found entertaining, as both of them leaned back from each other with the expression of people who’d smelled something rotten.
“Montmorency.” Her tone could curdle milk.

“Gamp.” He spat her name like a curse.

Melchior smiled. “Well, well. Since we might as well be done now, Clytemnestra. I’m sure a lady such as you have more important things to do than to entertain little old me. Besides, I do have things I’d like to discuss with Mordred too.” He stood up just as she did out of simple courtesy.

She practically leaped out of her seat at his announcement, taking the side farther from Mordred to enact her departure (escape) as if her skin couldn’t even bear to be too close to him.

The blond wizard sniffed and cast *Scourgify* on the seat, in a volume that Melchior was certain was a little louder than necessary, especially with the medusa-level glare that Clytemnestra levelled back to her prefect partner from her dorm’s entrance.

The dark-haired wizard was laughing when Mordred took his seat.

“Well, what business do you have that you need to deal with that witch?”

It was clear that only his sense of politeness was stopping him from using a different word. “Ah, well, simply a reminder and perhaps a word of warning or two. I had to let her read some of Pendleton and Ves’ work on Hermione’s background to stop her from being obstructive in the future.”

It entailed admitting that they all knew Tom was the likeliest Heir of Slytherin this century. At least that stopped her from being too concerned about the necessity for Tom to marry upwards.

The blond nodded in understanding. “Ah, I see. Yes, I find that an early and clear warning saves you a lot of grief when dealing with her. Better that she knows the cost of crossing you than not.”

His mouth twitched at the corners; the mutual dislike between the two had always been a bit of a mystery in Slytherin. His curiosity was eager to be satisfied right now, but he was unsure of how acceptable a question would be when Mordred was still on his guard.

“Well, anyway, we had an interesting conversation of your…participation with one of the Troublesome Twins’ indoor jungles and adventure last Sunday, but we were just getting started then before we had our own affairs to tend to.”

The blond nodded. “Oh, yes. Half of the participants were from my Advanced Defence class, you see, which was what made it worth it, and half were also prefects. Both categories combined easily covers some 2/3 or 3/4 of them all.”

“I only caught the part where you said the other half were Gryffindors.”

Mordred waved it away easily. “Well, they have to fill the rest from somewhere, right? And considering that both the twins as well as Ceres and Philippe are Gryffindors, it’s not surprising that they would end up dragging their Housemates with them to plug the gaps.”

“I see,” he nodded as he flipped open his journal to check.

“You were speaking of Hermione’s involvement since she was friends with…” Melchior glanced down. “Julia Goldstein, Ravenclaw’s sixth-year prefect?”

Mordred clarified that Hermione was present, but she came later and seem to come to chat with Ceres, so it was plausible that Ceres was the one who had invited her instead. Hermione seemed to
be friends with both Gryffindor prefects, after all. Melchior made some clarifying notes himself, in case it was relevant later, but it was mostly the blond prefect providing more details to how it was setup and what happened.

There were two teams of seven each, with an observer-cum-memory-keeper in the form of Lysandra Burke. Ceres Victorinus and Philippe Bernadotte lead one team each, though the original plan seemed to have been for the Twins to lead each (Mordred had no idea what caused the change, it was probably something trivial, he’d mused aloud).

“She’s a great fighter, isn’t she?” Melchior asked at one point, quill tapping against the Nott signet ring in thought.

“I’ve seen the memory of her duel with Tom, so I’m not surprised at that,” The straight-backed blond replied. “Trust me, once you’ve reached the Second Advanced Defence class, you’d start facing great fighters too. That wasn’t what caused me to start wondering deeper about who she is.”

“What is it, then?”

“She doesn’t think like a fighter.”

He paused. “Excuse me?”

Mordred shook his head slowly, his left hand holding his chin in thought as his gaze drifted away. “No, that’s not exactly accurate. How shall I put it? She doesn’t think just like a fighter. She’s more. I’m sure she helped her team extensively in planning their run, but it feels less like a fight and more like…well, as crass as it might be to say, like war, really. Not that I’d know that much about it.”

The prefect remembered that Verrault actually copied his sketches of the fields and the meeting notes on the post-fight analysis that they made together. He’d copied it for anyone interested, and Mordred was certainly interested. It was a flurry of paper once more as he tried to recover where the scroll was.

“Hold on, let me get it from my dorms.”

Melchior nodded and let him get on with it. Five minutes later, he came back down and the fifth-year temporarily moved the tea things to a spare stool. There were more papers than expected.

“That…doesn’t look like just the post-fight analysis.”

“I know. These are the notes of the post-Hogsmeade Crisis meeting that Emma generated with verbatim quills.”

His voice was filled with disbelief. “You had a prefect meeting, then?”

Suddenly he was never more thankful that Tom was the Slytherin prefect from their year instead of him if this was what he had to deal with. *Wasn’t Tom shot with a muggle weapon, then?*

Mordred waved his right hand impatiently. “Irrelevant right now. What’s interesting is that we also noted down all the prefects’ encounters with their attackers to save us all the effort of being interviewed—Emma’s excellent initiative, as always. Now, where’s Hermione’s account and Tom’s among all this…”

He found what he was looking for and started skimming down.
“Immediate use of Smokescreen Spell to reduce visibility. The similarities are clear; yes, the strategy is clearly mainly hers.” The sixth-year shook his head with disappointment in his voice. “I should’ve studied these earlier.”

“Well, no use crying over spilt milk.”

“I suppose…”

Mordred pushed two different scrolls across the table to Melchior’s. He skimmed the first and read the second as quickly as he could before he began comparing the two. When he finished, he saw that the blond wizard had his hands steepled together in front of his face, lost in his own musing before his pointed gaze met Melchior’s.

“Her tactics…it’s clear that she’s not inexperienced in an actual, life-threatening fight, and not merely once or twice. She’s good at it and this isn’t from a class or a book, Melchior. Our class still doesn’t exactly teach us much for larger-scale fights, battles. Oh, there are lessons on observing the field and ensuring that it advantages you more than your enemy, but many students will fail to integrate that with the fighting itself.”

But she knew how to do it anyway, Melchior could hear the conclusion himself, even if Mordred didn’t say it out loud. How? Where? When Melchior spoke up next, his voice was measured, as he wasn’t sure that he could guess all that Mordred wanted to ask.

“What do you want me to say, Mordred?”

“Where did she come from, exactly? What happened in Norway?” Urgency gripped his tone.

“We both know that Grindelwald-allied forces had occupied Norway.” Melchior pointed out.

“And yet she’d only arrived recently, long after the invasion occurred.” He countered. “She stayed there for two years. Well, perhaps only one year, if she’d lived in an obscure corner that took time for the invading forces to reach. Still, why?”

To fight, neither of them said, even if Melchior was certain that Mordred was thinking it as much as he did. What he said instead was what he knew would advance the Knight’s interest.

“Do you understand now why we wanted to know about the wizarding circles of Kopervik, Mordred?”

The other wizard leaned back as realisation lit his face. “Ah, so it is Kopervik, then?”

“She made no secret of it, and perhaps for a good reason.” He shrugged, palms open and helpless. “We could hardly find any news about what happened there from public sources—merely an unspecified ‘accident’ and ‘explosion’. I bet she realises this too.”

“That was why you were asking about where in the Ministry is my family and Emma’s, and Oswin’s as well.”

“Yes. If you find that out, perhaps you will find the answers to your questions too.”

“I see,” he nodded in thought.

“With that said, you understand why I offered you to join the Knights of Walpurgis, don’t you?”

“I…no, not really.”
“You’re observant, and you would investigate something that interests you yourself without relying on someone else to ask that of you beforehand. That level of initiative is rare when coupled with intelligence. You already know who Tom is; you don’t think that reclaiming his ancestral position would be easy, do you?”

Mordred shook his head slowly, “Ah, I see. Yes, I can’t imagine that it would be easy. Still I…I’m not sure how acceptable I would be for Tom—for your Knights.”

“Why not?”

He sighed, long fingers tapping the armrests at the speed of his thoughts. With his lean and tall frame, he was reminiscent of a scarecrow. Melchior had to stop himself from telling him that the cut of his current Hogwarts blazer was completely unflattering and that it would be better for him to find a new and better skilled tailor. *Now’s not exactly the right moment to give sartorial input,* he thought to himself.

“I’m just someone who wishes to get into the Ministry and gain a stable position, to live a steady, if mundane, life. Hogwarts is one of the premier magical schools in Europe and there are many geniuses here. I’m quite aware that I’m not one of them, Melchior, nor am I so adventurous a person that others will think to send on great quests derring-do.”

The fifth-year held back the urge to snort. Mordred wasn’t anywhere near mediocre either.

“You do realise that Abraxas pulled Mulciber and Parkinson into the Knights with him, don’t you?”

Mordred let out a surprised bark of laughter at that, before he stared in amazement when Melchior’s face didn’t change at all.

“You’re serious.”

He ran his hand through black curls and nodded. “I am. So, if inadequate intelligence was your concern, trust me, you’re far, far from the worst possible.”

“I’m still only an administrator at heart, Melchior.”

“Do you think that’s not part of what I do?” Melchior retorted. “We need people of diverse talents, Mordred, not simply…fighters. A government is constructed of many kinds of people. And even on the topic of fights your record speaks for itself.”

He gestured at the post-fight notes that the other Slytherin had provided. The expressions crossing the sixth-year face made it clear that Melchior was making some headway and crumbling his resistance.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you, that’s all I ask of you.” There really was no need to keep pushing right now when he had the upper hand.

Melchior rolled the scrolls on the table automatically with a few spells cast and handed them to the prefect. After that, he moved the tea set back on the table. Casting a warming charm on the pot, he waited for two seconds before he started pouring tea for both of them. He picked up his by holding the saucer and he waited until Mordred started drinking.

“Now, I have to ask, did you and Clytemnestra have a disastrous attempt at sex with each other or
something?"

The other Slytherin choked on his drink. Melchior had a wide, unapologetic grin even as Mordred glared at him across the table while coughing liquid out of his airway.

"Merlin’s sake, Melchior!"

"Well, it’s not like I have a better idea."

"Her family estate is only two hills away from mine, to my everlasting regret. I keep seeing her smug, conceited face in every other occasion. That she had a bunch of admirers later on didn’t help with her ego either."

"Ah, I see."

"No, you don’t. She doesn’t sneer at you if you get too close to her when you’re not of the Sacred 28."

Melchior blinked. “…Gamp isn’t a Sacred 28 name either.”

"I never said the woman was rational, did I?"

Well, it was a more ordinary reason than Melchior had expected, but he did not really mind much listening to Mordred complain. It was always a good thing to know more about other people. It informs you of what they care about and what sort of offers you can give that might interest them. He found it funny that he’d heard Clytemnestra air her grievance about her prefect partner earlier, and her complaints had been how he’d always had that ‘judging expression’ on his face even from when he was a child, and how she always felt that he doubted her ability (‘he actually said ‘don’t worry your pretty head about it’ to me once, Melchior!’).

Inwardly, he shrugged. Their disagreement or fight wasn’t exactly any of his business. It wasn’t as if it affected their ability to cooperate as needed either, if Tom’s stories of how they usually did their prefect duties when forced to work together was a good enough reflection.

It was a while later as their easy conversation was winding down and Mordred thanked him for the lotus tea and agreed that it was excellent. As the dark-haired wizard stood up, he ensured that important things were still kept in mind.

“So, do you think you can help find out more about Kopervik?”

The blond paused, mulling over it carefully. “I think I can. I’m not sure how fast it would be, since it would be up to my mother, but I think I have better odds than Emma or even Oswin on this.”

Melchior grasped Mordred’s forearm before the other wizard moved any farther. He clasped it firmly in the old way instead of a mere handshake, and the blond reciprocated even if the choice confused him slightly. It was important that the weight of his, the Knights’, trust and expectation was conveyed in more than just words.

“Excellent. Thank you and take your time. I’m looking forward to see whatever you’ll find.”

Chapter End Notes
Paul is obviously creatively editing Shakespeare's sonnet there.

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

Lotus tea: Green tea infused with the fragrance of lotus flower petals.

Malebolge: (Literature) From Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*, the name he gave for the eighth circle of hell.

Osmanthus tea: Tea made from the flowers of *Osmanthus fragrans*.

Additional Notes:

“How you manage your classes with a hare’s memory like that, I have no idea.”: Philippe was referring to the phrase ‘avoir une mémoire de lièvre’, ‘to have a hare’s memory’, which implies to have poor memory.

Irwin Avery (OC): Seventh-year Slytherin pureblood, the Averys are part of the Sacred 28. He shares Advanced Charms with Tom Riddle. Solidly built, he's one of the beaters on the Slytherin House's quidditch team. Irwin is not one of the louder wizards of his House (or year). Older brother to Jemima Avery and heir to the Averys. He has enough sense to adjust his plan when new information comes to light.

The name 'Irwin' is from an Old English given name 'Eoforwine', where the individual elements *eofor* means 'boar' and *wine* means 'friend'.

Lysandra Burke (OC): Fifth-year Gryffindor witch. Lysandra Burke is not easily impressed with the average pureblood because she’s part of the Sacred 28, still related to the Blacks and descendant of one of Hogwarts’ headmasters (Phineas Nigellus Black). The Burkes run the largest private lending library in England. She loves books as much as other Burke family members, and woe betide any fool that gets in her way. Her impatience to almost everything else unrelated to books might be a contribution as to why she ended up in Gryffindor. That, and she really does not like being intimidated by anyone and would rather fight back, whatever the odds are.

If one has to classify her, Lysandra is actually a politically apathetic misanthrope. Her opinion on purebloods is that they are ‘inbred prats’. Her opinion on muggleborns is that they ‘clueless twats’. While halfbloods are ‘walking identity crises waiting to happen’.
Chapter Summary

Invitations from Tom. An unexpected acquaintance last seen in the future. A dance. In which Hermione notices something she thought she should’ve sooner. Hermione attends a meeting with the Knights for the first time. On the subject of the Slytherin prefect pro tempore.

Chapter Notes

Not feeling too bad about this chapter and the next, a nice change of pace. This should've been up last week, but I was still sanding down the edges, so I didn't think it was worth uploading yet as I keep editing and writing on. The next chapter's 92% done too because of that, which is why the next update is planned for next week. I'm doing my best to get through my backlog of comments/reviews due to real life running away from me like wild horses.

Got a throat infection, but it's mild/I'm still at subfebrile temp anyway. Feels like my body's fighting it off just fine, except that I feel like eating a lot and sleeping a lot regardless how weird the schedule is. I'm struggling against sleepiness even now. I'll just update this before I give up the fight and sleep again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

68 Flavours of Guilt and Forgetting

Hermione would like to say that she had been reading, but in the last ten minutes, she was more distracted watching the snow slowly fall outside the window than reading the book she was holding.

She thought she’d enjoy her Sunday break, the occasional weekend where she didn’t have to be at St. Mungo’s. Apparently, her mind does not always appreciate the stillness well.

The forest and Hogwarts’ grounds looked almost peaceful underneath the freshly fallen snow shrouding the land, soundless and still; Winter was undoubtedly here and making the world her kingdom. Hermione’s meeting with Emma this morning had been interesting enough and had given her food for thoughts, even if not results would be obvious for a while yet.

The seasonal snow made her wonder, though, if the world would not somehow always find its way into the future. One can barely see the marks that humanity left on the landscape. Such landscape of endless white was similar to the world that sabre-toothed cats roamed over during the last ice age. What does the earth care for humans? We are not the first apex species and we won't be the last. Why does she put so much effort to reverse a magical world that seemed intent on self-imploding across several generations?
One cheerful Hattie Perks excitedly bounding up the stairs of Ravenclaw Tower dorms pulled her out of her more morbid thoughts. Hermione herself couldn’t quite imagine how one has the energy to run uphill for more than one flight of stairs.

“Hermione, Hermioneeee!”

The door opened with enough force to whack anyone who’d been standing behind it. Luckily, Hattie had been loud enough that it would’ve been enough of a warning for anyone in the room. Light brown wavy hair streamed behind the miniature hurricane in the form of a young girl.

“First knock, then enter, Hattie.” Hermione reminded her. Blackbeard raised his head to peek at the noise that had disturbed his sleep. Scherezade, Lakshmi’s long-limbed kneazle let out a low growl of warning before she rolled over to continue her sleep, lilac ears twitching in annoyance.

“Yes, yes, I’ll remember,” the first-year said in a rush. “Look what I have! I don’t recognise the Slytherin that passed me the message, but I think this is from Tom.”

“Mmm, thank you.”

Hermione took the scroll from her small hand before retrieving an assortment of Honeydukes candies from a nearby drawer. Hattie wavered among the meringues, caramels, chocolates and candied fruits. She finally settled on two Summer-Day flavoured meringues (one was the orange-gold-yellow of ‘Sunset Sunburst’ and the other was the shades of light blue ‘Windy Wednesday’).

Hattie immediately opened the wrapping of the bluish one and popped it into her mouth. Instead of leaving, she climbed up the foot of the bed, right across from Hermione’s stockinged feet.

“So?”

“So?” Hermione asked back.

“What does it say?”

The brunette raised her eyebrow. “I don’t think a messenger is supposed to be nosy.”

“I wouldn’t to anyone else, but come on, I want to know too…” Hattie wheedled.

She snorted. “It’s probably just another meeting. Now, how far has your Potion class progressed?”

Hermione pushed her book aside. Hattie froze for a moment before mumbling something about how newt and frogs are surprisingly touchy ingredients when they meet each other, before she scrambled down the bed again.

“I thought you had some problem with some of your previous brews?” the fifth-year asked.

“I can work on it with my friends!”

It was with some amusement that Hermione watched the first-year steadily making her way towards the door before she waved her goodbye and dashed out again. *Funny how the first hint of studying gets most children to run.* She didn’t think Tom wrote anything secret, she simply had become too used to not sharing any of her papers unless it had been planned beforehand or if it was necessary. It was a habit she acquired as an Unspeakable, working with documents with various degrees of classifications.

If Hattie had been a little more stubborn, she would’ve relented in the end anyway. It’s simply too
bad that she’d left already. Hermione unsealed the small scroll and scanned the message within.

*Ah, a meeting. Exactly as I thought.*

The dress code was something fit for a dinner with friends…which, if her skills in parsing social etiquette of the era was right, meant a day dress, sans gloves. She was sure that it would be something that’s probably overkill for a mere eating out with friends in the 21st century, but she’d come to terms with the fact that she wasn’t in her own time. It was why that she relented to her dormmates insistence on helping her fill out her wardrobe last week. It was how she ended up buying several ready-to-wear dresses and even visited a *seamstress* of all things, in Diagon Alley.

The establishment didn’t even look like one from the outside, and one glance at Lucretia had the shop girls being all polite and helpful—she was a well-recognised patron, Hermione supposed. Lakshmi nodded in agreement with Lucretia’s choice and declared that it was a pretty affordable place. Hermione doubted that when she couldn’t even see a single price tag displayed anywhere. That was *not* the sign of any place affordable, and Eugenie’s wide-eyed interests at the fabrics shown was also another clue.

That was when she held her forehead, took a deep breath, and came to terms with the sort of outfits needed for various outings and engagements of pureblood standard. *I’ll just consider this an expense for social costume and acquiring plumage of appropriate colour and flashiness to blend in with the flock.* It was easier thinking of it in terms of biological camouflage like a leopard’s spots…or for purposes of intimidation and fighting one’s way up the social ladder like the flashy feathers of various birds of paradise.

She bought pieces of outfit that was a multiple of five; it would be easier to spread the bills among the five Knights that she’d considered to be Tom’s inner circle and let that be done with.

‘-

Hermione was only slightly surprised when one of the younger years (not Hattie) carried a message that Tom Riddle was waiting for her. The message runner then ran down again in no time as Hermione picked up a small satchel to carry with her. She’d changed for a while now, merely waiting for the time to leave. Her dress was well-fitted for her in navy blue and she had a half-cape of grey with green floral pattern worn over it. She picked a silver owl brooch to complete it.

Really, if the old Hermione saw the outfit, she’d do a double take. It had an understated elegance that if one were to add a pair of gloves, it would be good enough to attend Sunday church…if it happened to be in Westminster Abbey, on Easter, three rows behind the King.

The dress and half-cape was one of the things she bought last week and it hadn’t been anything expensive—she’d always kept an eye on the price. It didn’t matter if she was billing the results to some of the Knights (that middle-class habit was one she felt was good to keep). As Daphne would say, though, style is a matter of taste, not merely purse strings; and Daphne had passed on a lot on that front to Hermione. Given enough time and incentive, Hermione could wrack her brains enough to channel that.

Eugenie’s surprise, the amazed look that Lakshmi gave her and Lucretia’s raised eyebrows were on the unexpected side.

“That’s actually an excellent outfit,” Lakshmi murmured. “And so is the one before that, and that one.”

“Isn’t that the purpose of this whole endeavour?” Hermione asked as she made an encompassing
gesture with an arm, “So that I have enough dresses for a variety of occasions, from the casual to the formal?”

“Yes, but I didn’t think that the woman who wore pyjamas with doodles of cats, deranged fruits and orange fur slippers actually had good taste,” Lakshmi retorted.

Eugenie winced a little, while Lucretia nodded calmly.

“It does seem that your taste is more…subdued than what can be expected from your sleepwear preferences.”

It wasn’t her fault that not many people can appreciate Hello Kitty right now, or Bananas in Pyjamas. She had no regrets in adding a variety of odd, cheerful prints to several of her pyjamas once she had figured out the right printing/fabric pattern spell to use and its requirements. Drawing the patterns out on paper first ensured that she’d visualise it perfectly; having fabric ink at hand meant that the patterns would be permanent than temporary.

It might seem so silly (and perhaps that was true), but it was also a piece of her old life that she could reclaim. The nostalgia and the attendant foolishness were oddly comforting. Her slippers, for that matter, was the same colour as Crookshanks’ fur.

Now, she knew that she was the farthest thing from that as she crossed the common room. A few of the younger students stared at her in a mix of awe and something that seemed a little too close to hero worship. There were a few older students that she didn’t recognise, whispering among themselves while occasionally glancing her way, but none of them even attempted to approach her.

…actually, one of the students casually lounging around on one of the floor pillows scrabbled away from her, even when she fully intended on going around the Persian carpet areas.

“Excuse me. Really, no need to get up at all…”

I hope Tom didn’t come up with yet another outlandish article somewhere, she thought with a sense of resignation.

Then again, that might just be Blackbeard prowling in front of her like a half-size shaggy panther. If it had been any other season, she would’ve walked the grounds with him on every Sunday, and even explore the Forbidden Forest a little. In Winter, though? The falling snow made that a challenge than anything. She’d have to settle with simply going around Hogwarts and this meeting provided an excellent opportunity for that.

The interlocked door of the Ravenclaw common room opened from the inside with a touch, the sound of stones grinding could be heard as the two halves slid apart. She found Tom leaning against the wall when she stepped out, as fashionably carefree as a young lord in parliament.

Moss green coat and robe that fit him like a glove, a dove grey waistcoat and a splash of yellow for his boutonniere. The reason why she recognised it was because he’d given her bouquets with that flower before. **Bird’s-foot Trefoil.** The meaning wasn’t something she remembered in particular, though, and she dismissed the thought easily.

“Hermione.” His smile lit his face like the sun. “You look wonderful.”

“Thank you, Tom.”

She could only meet his eyes head on for three seconds before she had to look away. Sure, she could choose to not look away…and then her face would look like it was competing for ‘ripest
tomato of the year’ award. She had no idea why his appearance was particularly blinding this afternoon.

“No comments on how I turn out today?”

“You don’t exactly need little old me to sing your praises, do you? From how you’re turned out, I’m sure you’ve heard a multitude from your Housemates just before you leave. One more compliment your way and one would be fooled into thinking that a choir of angels was about to start an aria right behind you.” Yes, that was snippier than was warranted, but she really hated being distracted.

Even a glance was enough for her to notice the way the passing witches turned their heads to stare at him (and the occasional wizard). One or two Ravenclaws who were returning to the tower also sent Hermione looks of envy. She wasn’t the most perceptive among her friends, but Merlin’s sake, she wasn’t blind.

“A choir of angels, Hermione?” The corners of his lips turned up slightly. “That is most flattering.”

A Ravenclaw witch had actually came to a stop as she exited the Tower, too dazed by Tom’s presence. It didn’t help that the bespectacled witch seemed to have absentmindedly nodded at that.

“Head of the choir, Morningstar,” she breathed out.

Hermione wanted to thump her head on the nearest wall and held back the urge, barely, and channelled it into a groan. *Tom is going to be even more insufferable now.*

His lips twitched and she knew he was holding back the urge to actually smirk, even if the shift in the way he stood was a subtle way of preening. He still managed a tone of politeness, somehow, his smile was still as carefree and charismatic as the devil.

“Thank you, Miss Warren, for your compliment. That is the most flattering thing I’ve heard of my appearance.”

The other student squeaked when she realised what she’d just said, her cheeks now a ruddy colour. Her clothing was rather drab in colour, and even her vivid red sweater under her robes seemed ill-fitting while her large glasses drooped slightly over her nose; Hermione felt a pang of sympathy.

“Off to the library, now?” Tom asked, apparently making conversation.

“Library, yes! Homework to do.” Warren babbled.

“It’s always a good idea to do homework early than to rush it near the end, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely,” it was a mix between a word and a sigh.

Hermione winced a little at the second-hand embarrassment. Whatever she was feeling, she knew the other witch felt worse considering her face was fully red by now.

“Well, I hope you have a good time in the library,” Hermione replied, hoping that by giving another person that’s not Tom to focus on, she could help Warren with her composure.

“Um, yes. You too, Curie. I’ll just…goofffornow, bye!”

With a last garbled goodbye, the bespectacled Ravenclaw fled from the vicinity of the doorway. As she disappeared at hallway’s turn, Tom broke out into a chuckle.
“Merlin, Morgana, Mnemosyne! That was awful of you, Tom!” Hermione slapped his arm, and as it was nothing serious, he easily ignored it. He linked her arm with his instead.

“What are you saying, Hermione? I was merely greeting a classmate. It would be rather impolite of me if I didn’t.”

“Yet trapping her into a prolonged dialogue was completely unnecessary.” Hermione said this with a sigh. “She seems like she had a crush on you.”

“Really? I wouldn’t know.”

She raised her eyebrow at him but said nothing because his self-satisfied tone was all the answer she needed.

“I’m sure you’re just too polite to point it out,” the brunette answered instead. “Which would’ve been nice if you hadn’t toyed with her.”

“It was mere small talk, Hermione.”

She snorted. “I’m sure it was.”

They had only moved a couple of steps from where they’d stood initially. She’d noticed then that, like her, he hadn’t come alone.

“Mreow.”

“…ss”

A gigantic black snake had curled up on the stone floor and was now quietly approaching Blackbeard. It had stopped right in front of the kneazle-cat, who was sitting calmly even if his expression was curious. He was inquisitive, tasting the air with his tongue for longer and longer periods. Hermione did a double take when she realised that she could read his serpentine body language somewhat.

And that greeting was hello, on both sides. Hello was such a simple Parseltongue word to remember.

“Ah, you’ve met each other. Typhon, meet Blackbeard, Hermione’s familiar. Blackbeard, this is Typhon, my familiar. Do get along with each other.”

Blackbeard meowed and did one of his shrugs. Typhon seemed to decide at that point that he’d had enough of the colder floor and promptly climbed up Tom—if Hermione knew nothing of the wizarding world, it would’ve been a frightening sight to see such a large snake coiling upwards around his torso. The melanistic python raised his head not too far over Tom’s right shoulder, meeting the wizard’s gaze easily when he spoke.

“Don’t be lazy, Typhon, it’s not that cold.”

“Sss SSss.” The snake was...shaking his head? Really?

“I can cast a warming charm on you.”

“Sss. sssSSsss. Hisssss.”

Typhon was mostly curled around his shoulders and held partly up by his left arm like some oversized scarf, though his tail dangled down Tom’s back. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one
who thought that weekends were the perfect time to exercise their familiars.

“I’ll carry you to the end of this corridor, then. Then, you’ll have to move on your own, otherwise I’m not giving you bonus treats today without enough exercise.”

The last hiss sounded more like a resigned sigh.

Hermione silently cast a charm to augment her hearing, not hiding the wand movements from Tom at all. She turned around, only cancelling it once she was sure that the last passing student was nowhere near.

“I thought you’d have spoken to him in Parseltongue.”

Tom let out a surprised bark of laughter at that. It took him another moment before he spoke. “Sometimes, I forget that you know things.”

The brunette was quite aware that she did not enjoy cloak-and-dagger much, nor was she that talented in it.

“He understands well enough if I speak normally as long as I make eye contact. It’s less of legilimency when I do that and more akin to sending my message explicitly. That it helps him be familiar with some human words is an added bonus.” He explained.

She nodded. It made more sense that way, and she understood his unsaid discretion on not speaking Parseltongue unless it was somewhere private or truly necessary—no need to scare the masses when you don’t need to. Soon, they reached the end of the corridor and Tom cajoled his python to climb down yet again, casting two warming charms as he did so. She had the distinct impression that Typhon’s hisses at that point were complaints even if he did slither along with them.

“Who was she?”

“Who?”

“The poor Ravenclaw student you teased. She seemed somewhat familiar, but I don’t think I recalled her name.”

Amusement unfurled across his face. “You really don’t know her?”

“Should I?”

“She’s in our Advanced Potions and Charms and your House member, Hermione; a fifth-year student by the name of Myrtle Warren. Not to mention that she’s from a muggle household.”

And that was when Hermione’s embarrassment warred with guilt, as she had realised that she didn’t even remember about the poor girl in the few months of her arrival. She’d been too carried away with her own ambition to change the wizarding world, to retread her old career(s) even as she was drawn further in by the unavoidable rising tide of the war, pulled into the grand chess game that Tom Riddle was playing as he climbed up society.

She had lost track of the individuals she’d known before would be victims, of the unfortunate people from this period.

*Here we have two specimens of homo sapiens magia, with the refined plumage distinctive of the ruling caste. Watch others nodding with respect as they pass if they know them! Watch the lower*
Watch one witch forget the hapless once she had transformed to be far from what she once was. How different was she from a flashy animal trying to climb its way up in the jungle, if it was ambition that she put forward first before her fellow students?

Hermione’s froze for a moment before she covered her face with her hands, her steps coming to a complete stop. It was a testament to how Tom had woken up twice to her screaming out of her nightmares that what he did now was to slowly approach her from the front with his arms open. She could avoid his hug if she wanted to; she leaned forward and placed her face, hands and all, over his shoulder.

“What’s wrong?”

She had always found it convenient for brainstorming that she can set the voices in her head as different aspects of her, or to represent different characters. They make her arguments more robust in the end. The downside of that was how if she was not careful, her own scepticism and self-doubt could easily coalesce into a distinct voice of its own, as loud as her own thoughts instead of merely passing in the background.

“It’s nothing.”

He huffed, and she could hear the disbelief in it.

“I… I forget, Tom, things I shouldn’t have. How many muggleborns and halfbloods do I actually know in Hogwarts?”

“Me?” His tone was dry.

She chuckled for a moment, before slumping forward against his shoulder. His presence was more solid than she’d expected, unwavering even as he held her.

“You’ve always been transforming into something else; a wizard in metamorphosis. It is nearing completion now, and I think even the most prejudiced of Slytherins would need to actively remind themselves that you’re ‘muggleborn’ to remember that instead of treating you as a pureblood by reflex. You’re better at being pureblood wizard than most of them.”

“Really?”

His question was asked partly because he wanted to humour her and partly because he was just that vain. She pulled back now, simply because she wanted to be able to talk face-to-face, to truly see him. Tom loosened his hold on her, his hands slipping down naturally to her waist. With both of her hands over his shoulders, it was almost as if they were in the middle of a dance, both suspended in an unplanned pause.

“Before I know it, you’ve started mine too. I’m changing along with you.”

“As if I could ever change your heart if you did not wish it.” His tone was more amused than frustrated. “Anything you did, you did because it also happened to suit you to.”

He was right, really. Perhaps it was more than she actually wanted to acknowledge, but she did not make it a habit of hers to run away from reality.

“I wasn’t as careful as I should have.”
“Oh?” His tone was sly, “are you saying that I’ve seduced you away?”

That would be too easy, isn’t it? To throw all responsibility to him and denounce even her own agency. But she had never seen herself as a damsel in distress and she wasn’t about to start.

Her own lips quirked slightly. “No, not truly. If what you did could be called seducing, then I would’ve been able to claim the same in that case, wouldn’t I?”

She’d begun to change him too—it was a deep truth that she knew not just in her mind, but in her gut. Hermione took a step to the left, and he followed suit. When she moved one step back, he stepped forward in time to keep her within the circle of his arms.

“So, whose fault is it, then?” Tom asked, idly.

“Mine. I was too busy with my own grief earlier, and you had been busy with your own plans. To be fair, I don’t fault you for that either—it’s your right to live your own life as you wish. It is merely that I’ve been hitting the ground running for a while that I forget to step back to think, to calm down and decide, to actively and consciously choose the paths I want.”

He pulled her closer and now they were moving to a soundless waltz.

“I thought you’ve chosen to accompany me.”

Tom’s voice was smooth, as always, but she thought she could detect minute fluctuation in it, an echo of a bite…or was it just her feeling? She shrugged.

“I did. But there is more space in my life than only for that.”

“You have your healing interests.” He pointed out.

“Certainly, but they still do not require my full attention even now.” Her smile was clearer now. Tom actually pulled his right hand away for a moment, slipped his wand down and then cast a… music box spell?

She could hear an amorphous violin playing Blue Danube. He left momentarily to cast more warming charm in the direction of Typhon who was curling up in circular carpet within an empty nook, right next to a laidback Blackbeard. The hisses that he was making certainly sounded like a complaint or whine. Then, Tom returned to her before asking for her hand properly.

“Shall we?”

Hermione placed her hand in his open palm and let him whirl her away across the corridor. She had asked him half-seriously if he wasn’t worried that he was breaking any rules, and he merely shook his head and said that there were no rules against dancing in corridors. He’d checked before (for what, he didn’t clarify).

“What’s bothering you, Hermione?”

“I should’ve remembered about the muggleborn students and the half-blood ones. Neither of us count as the average muggleborn because we’re too…unusual, Tom. Not everyone has extraordinary circumstances. Some muggleborns are merely normal students instead of a genius, or a secret heir of a major house. Without the support of a wizarding house or even wizarding parents, without an unprecedented mind, there are clearly things they’ll miss while in Hogwarts. These things can even hobble their progress out of Hogwarts in the workplace.”
"I...forgot that, too carried away with hobnobbing among the pureblood." She spared him a glare, even if it was half-hearted.

"Ah, like I do." His smirk was all confidence.

"Exactly."

"And yet that’s where power is concentrated at and who holds the most power and the most straightforward path for us to take...unless if I were to subjugate most people as a dark lord?"

"I know." She sighed. "I know all the pragmatic reasons of why we have to do that. And you know that I’ve said already of how the dark arts itself has a high enough risk that it’s not really worth delving too deeply into it."

The Ravenclaw knew that her moral concerns were something strange to him, an alien concern and foreign patterns of thought. It was why she didn’t mind that his efforts to distract her as he led her to dance further, gliding across the stones of Hogwarts’ corridors, deftly dodging several surprised students that were passing. They easily ignored anyone pausing to watch, as most people wouldn’t spend too long even then. It was admittedly amusing how most people thought that Typhon and Blackbeard were some sort of odd taxidermy project.

As the hallways emptied again, Tom tilted his head to the left, opening their conversation once more.

"Then what do you want me to say, Hermione?"

His dark blue eyes were focused on her. She knew what he was; he’d say any lie she asked him to if it would make her happy. The only reason he didn’t lie to her was because he’d known that she could tell and it will only ruin her mood when she figured it out. Which was the reason he didn’t bother.

"Nothing untrue," she finally said. "I only wished that I remembered about the challenges most muggleborns face earlier, to talk to them."

"You can still start now."

"Yes," she nodded in agreement, her mood a little better. "I certainly can."

"Then what are you even concerned about? It’s not too late. The other muggleborns of Hogwarts haven’t gone anywhere in the last months."

His baffled expression was genuine and she laughed out of sheer relief with a dash of actual humour.

"I was...I was blaming myself for not remembering earlier, I suppose."

"Why would you? You were busy." Tom shook his head. "Blaming yourself is a rather useless feeling, isn’t it? And it’s not even a pleasant one like happiness or pleasure. Why would you want to blame yourself?"

"Guilt, perhaps, for forgetting what I was, where I come from."

His brows creased in thought. "It is not even your fault that muggleborn students are born from muggleborn families. You did not cause them to be born. Your feelings of ‘guilt’ wouldn’t even help the other muggleborns."
“Guilt for having forgotten, perhaps, for not remembering about it earlier,” she answered him.

“Well, now that you’ve remembered, you can create reminders for yourself to not forget again.”

Even as he said this, she was all-too-aware that he was merely providing possible solutions since he cared about her good mood. That hint of confusion colouring his expression hadn’t gone anywhere, though. Guilt was still as foreign to him as the dark depths of the ocean is to an eagle, as unknowable as colour is to the blind. He did not know why she was even worried in the first place. He was crippled by his inability to understand its roots; he can only address their second-order effects and how they concerned her.

Hermione remembered for a moment something that someone had said in a different life. *If a bird falls in love with a fish, where would they live?*

That metaphor was not wrong for both of them either. For all their similarities, she was well aware that their differences were just as stark. They did not have love, but she thought that determination was a close thing. It was a good thing that they were both too stubborn about the things they want to achieve, then, that putting all their efforts to make their association work was just another day in life for them.

“Hermione?”

His hand was warm over her back, curling in a possessive manner as he closed the distance between them imperceptibly. What does it say about her that she found his relentless effort to make her feel better endearing, especially when he did so even if truly understanding her problem was beyond him? She had provided him with an answer once she realised that she’d been quiet for a while.

“You have a point about how guilt isn’t helping anyone,” she said.

He could not even understand the source of her own dismay, but he did his best to help. The brunette thought she saw his expression change to relief for a fleeting moment before he was once again as calm as the placid waters of a spring lake.

“The feeling is not going to disappear immediately, but I suppose I can always fight it when it shows up again and again.”

“That’s good, then.” A pause, of words weighed with some consideration. *He seemed to be... restraining himself?* “Between the two of us it can be managed quite well as long as you don’t try to keep it inside to yourself instead.”

Hermione did not miss the gladness in his voice and she did not even realise that a smile had bloomed on her face. It was the unadulterated joy and the strength of her spirit that allowed her to transcend being merely pretty into a radiant splendour. She did miss the way Tom deftly turned them around when a passing wizard was staring at her for too long, conveniently blocking him with his body. The passing Gryffindor merely sighed at the lost opportunity, unaware that it was not accidental, and moved on.

*If a bird falls in love with a fish...* she mused, *then I'll learn to swim while he’ll learn to fly.*

‘-

The Walpurgis Knights were apparently using the Room of Requirement again today.

Hermione placed her hand over his shoulder to stop Tom from moving forward and he paused. She
pulled his tie out of his waistcoat instead. It was mostly dark green brocade with a subtle tracery of vines. The tie pin was surprisingly a silver cat. It would work as an anchor, she inwardly nodded to herself. A twirl of her wand, a series of twists and she cast the colour-change charm.

“Colovaria.”

Now, his tie was the exact shade of her dress. Tom seemed amused as she started to tuck the tie back but said nothing.

“Ah, you’re both here! Thank goodness.”

Hermione and Tom turned towards the greeting and saw a blond head from less than half a corridor down. Abraxas had been just turned not long before he spotted them; he quickly crossed the distance between them with a brisk jog as Hermione finished straightening Tom’s tie. Abraxas himself was in a black coat and robe, with green waistcoat—she noticed that his tie pin was actually an emerald snake.

She held back from commenting that she didn’t think gemstones were within a stone’s throw of usual daywear for lunch with friends and just sighed inwardly. Her current friends were the heirs of wizarding noble houses, she really should’ve expected this.

“You’ve just arrived?” Hermione asked.

“Of course not. I was looking for you, just in case something held you up. I might be able to assist then.”

Tom did not clarify, his smile inscrutable as he nodded his greeting.

Abraxas did a double take when he saw her kneazle hybrid. Hermione smiled. “Ah, that’s my familiar, Blackbeard. Blackbeard, this is Abraxas, a friend.”

The cat proceeded to headbutt him on the knee. The blond laughed in surprise at the sheer size (Blackbeard had caused him to stumble back slightly).

“I see. Any reason why I’m seeing him and Typhon out today?”

“Exercise,” Tom replied, succinct. “Well, I can let Typhon make his way through the castle and kitchen on his own—he’s not a half bad mouser himself—but generally, that would count as terrorising the younger years, and is generally frowned upon by all Heads of Houses.”

Abraxas didn’t hide his grimace at that while Tom’s smile grew wider.

“Um, yes, that’s rather unadvised.”

The dark-haired Slytherin gestured for Hermione to precede him and she easily did so. The door opened under her hand.

The fireplace was large this time, filled with firewood and roaring with warmth—it was a welcome change. The place was now a large drawing room, tall classical windows lined one side with sumptuous brocade curtains that seemed to stretch for miles, a ceiling with detailed painting of blue sky with cherubs on the corners and two crystal candelabras heavy with candles. On the other end of the room was a grand piano. The wooden floor was so perfectly polished that she could see her reflection.

Neither she nor Harry would ever make a room of this grandeur by reflex, that’s for sure. She half-
expected to see the royalty of old Europe to wander in next with a head full of wig.

“Well, this is an interesting change,” she mused out loud.

She saw that there were three tables draped with white tablecloth. The tea service on the side was expected, but the trays filled with blank scrolls and the stand of spare quills and ink bottles were new. Pendleton was about to leave his when he saw them enter and sat back down. Abraxas approached the same table, his seat between Melchior and Ves.

This was the table with the Slytherins she considered to be her friends.

“Oh, don’t mind it, Hermy. Brax is just flashin’ like some cock of the walk, the usual,” Ves commented from Pendleton’s left. Abraxas snorted and punched his shoulder. “What? Who else would’ve chosen wallpaper gilded with gold? Same with the curtains, ye nob.”

*Hmm, I didn’t even notice that.* It was a subtle accent, not as garish as Ves made it sound like. She no longer took note that other than Pendleton and Ves, the other three on the table wore cravats, though Abraxas’ was the most intricate—she didn’t think she knew anyone who still wore it that way other than *Lord Byron*.

“You act like your family don’t have their own *castle*,” Gallus muttered from Pendleton’s other side.

“A castle’s still *functional* a’right?”

She was sure that Ves still had a lot more to say, and would’ve said more if it wasn’t for him noticing that Tom had entered right behind her. Ves shut his mouth and sat up, though he didn’t take his newspaper boy cap off.

“Welcome, Hermione,” Melchior greeted, his smile warm. His eyes widened slightly when he saw Blackbeard and Typhon following in behind them but he said nothing.

“Thanks. I’m sure I’ll enjoy my time here.”

Tom closed the door after all of them are in.

The second table held the Knights that she was less familiar with, such as two of Abraxas’ minions (or as Tom pithily put some times, *Boulder 1* and *Boulder 2*). There was Rowle the lecher, who still pale when he saw her even as he tried to surreptitiously duck—the other two people she couldn’t quite remember. One of them seems like he hadn’t expected her presence at all; he was smart enough to shut his mouth up immediately when his gaze wavered between Abraxas and Melchior and he realised that no one else complained or was even surprised about it.

Hermione had mentally thought of them as the second-string Knights, and considering that they were taking their behavioural cues from the first table, she didn’t think she was wrong.

Hermione had mentally thought of them as the second-string Knights, and considering that they were taking their behavioural cues from the first table, she didn’t think she was wrong.

The last table was still empty; she supposed that was where they’d sit. Her guess was confirmed as Tom moved in that direction and pulled out a chair for her to sit. Typhon slithered his way in the direction of the fireplace instead of their table and curled up to sleep in front of it. Blackbeard was more interested in checking out the new room, going from one surprised Knight to another. She could even hear his snort of amusement when a Knight with yellow waistcoat yelped when the black cat put his nose down his pocket in curiosity.

*“Whose cat was that?”* she’d heard being asked or muttered in passing.
Abraxas took a particular delight in clarifying to the others. “Ah, that’s Blackbeard, Hermione’s familiar.”

Soon enough, everyone was settled in their respective seats.

“Alright, let’s start with what you’ve all been up to, shall we?” Tom casually opened.

One weaselly-faced Slytherin in mustard-coloured waistcoat raised his hand from the second table. “Um, is Miss Curie going to attend this entire meeting?”

Hermione didn’t have the time to answer as Tom spoke up in tones as smooth as silk covering steel. “For what other reason would she come in with me, Tybalt?”

Gallus was staring the other wizard down and making rapid gestures up-and-down with his left arm. Even Hermione could figure out that it meant something like ‘get down’.

“Uh, nothing! Nothing else, yes.” Tybalt’s eyes wandered around the room frantically before he gazed back at Tom. “I was just…slow on the uptake, that’s all.”

Tom stared him down but didn’t deign him with an answer. From the way Tybalt flinched and shrank into himself a little further, she guessed that he was probably trying to fillet the poor guy with a look.

“Now that we’ve settled that, it’s time to move on to the usual reports…”

Between all that, Blackbeard had decided that he’d had enough of the room and padded off to the rug in front of the fireplace, next to Typhon.

“...And what about you, Rufus?”

“...but my lord, my news is rather particular. Wouldn’t it be more convenient if—”

Tom placed his teacup on its saucer with a distinct click. She thought she could see tension flickering past Gallus’ jaw. Abraxas’ eyebrows had lowered now.

“We can sit here and talk about this like civilised beings, or, I can ask you to sit on a separate chair and get Hermione here to take your blood and use that to paint an array designed to extract your knowledge on the floor.”

Tom smiled. “Now, which one would you prefer?”

“Is isn’t that blood magic?” His Adam’s apple bobbed.

“Well, if you’d like to put it that way,” he said, offhand, taking a professorial tone as he explained. “Unlike my own rituals which are rooted in the Hittite and Luwian traditions, she studies more of the Germanic and Celtic ones. Not as structurally sound for large-scale workings, but what can you do? Sometimes the primary sources you can access are limited that way.”

From the number of people whose eyes were widening around their table, she can see that this particular skill of her wasn’t quite public knowledge among the Knights before.

Pendleton was still calmly drinking his tea before he took up the opportunity Tom had provided to add his own clarification.
“Her wards are solid. Do you know that she can offer constructive criticism on my blood wards? I’m sure that her sanguinary arrays are just as excellent—the Germanic tribes are fully capable of performing small-scale human sacrifices after all, as do the Celts.” he offered his opinion. His compatriot did not look assuaged at all.

“I’m sure that a one-person ritual is no trouble for Hermione, Rufus. A child’s play, even,” Melchior added. He still managed a friendly smile. Somehow.

Hermione had mixed feelings at being used as bogeyman, though considering that Tom didn’t shy away from putting himself out there at the same time, she supposed that it was still fair. Not to mention that he was still offering a choice.

“So, would you like some demonstration?” Tom asked again.

The brunet swallowed further words.

“W-well, if I were to begin…”

“So, who’s the next candidate for Slytherin prefect pro tempore?” Hermione asked. “Jemima Avery isn’t going to be filling that position for a while yet and I’m sure you’d have a better idea of your Housemates’ aptitude and potential.”

“Well, there’s Patricia,” Abraxas suggested.

“Patricia?” Melchior asked with a huff. “She’s too similar to Jemima.”

The blond’s forehead creased, “I thought that was the point?”

“I thought we were going take the opportunity for a fresh start, find someone on the more diligent side,”

“We already have Emma,” this came from the wizard who’d been threatened with blood magic earlier, Rufus.

“I’m sure it would be easier on the other prefects, including Tom, if we have another prefect that’s just as hardworking,” the dark-haired wizard answered.

Gallus’s shoulders tensed momentarily and she could guess that he was repressing a shudder. “I don’t think most Slytherins would like to face two Emmas.”

“I second that,” Abraxas nodded earnestly.

Melchior rubbed the bridge of his nose and let out a long-suffering sigh. Before the back-and-forth can start again, Tom’s voice cut through the chatter.

“Give me the potential candidates, gentlemen.”

“There’s Patricia Parkinson, which I’ll note down just to be thorough about this,” Abraxas threw out. He said this as he was unrolling a new parchment, doing exactly as he had stated.

“…Violetta Carrow, Prudence Thicknesse.” The auburn-haired Slytherin from Table 2 suggested. He accepted the looks his fellow Housemates sent easily. “Look, she might be my sister, but before Jemima was eventually chosen, she was also under consideration, you know? I also know that she’d put in more effort into it than Patricia.”
Hermione noticed that he did dodge her gaze. It amused her slightly, considering that it took her some effort to remember who on earth was Violetta Carrow—part of Jemima’s posse, same with Thicknesse. Ah, Stooge #2 and #3, is it? A bored Ves took the opportunity to wave his wand around and threw more fire wood into the fireplace in a display of Seize-and-Pull charm mastery.

“Uh, Beatrix or Wilhelmina?” Tybalt mused out loud as he fidgeted.

Abraxas shook his head from the next table over. “I did think that, but I don’t think it would work. They’re our chasers, remember? Them and Sigmund. Practice already takes a lot of time outside of class—I can’t imagine that either of them would be enthusiastic to pile on more prefect hours on top of that.”

Melchior was more definite in his opinion, his cravat glimmered with the subtlety of stars on a night sky with the fire’s glow—the faint dots of crystal there hadn’t been visible by daylight. “Not at all. Though I’d take that bet if anyone would like to bet otherwise?”

He gazed around the room, but no one took it. His nod was firm.

“Just as I thought, then.”

“What about, err, Davis, then?” Tybalt asked again. Abraxas stared at him blankly.

“Davis?”

“Martine Davis, our year? You know, twin to Thorstein Davis?”

“Well, I guess,” Abraxas murmured while glancing to the right. Ves met his eyes and saw the unsaid question in them. He shook his head, his grin lopsided with a touch of challenge.

“Nah, they aren’t Sacred 28, if that’s what you’re wonderin’. ‘Twould explain your memory lapse, eh?”

The blond scratched the back of his head “…ehh, Slytherin House has a lot of students.”

One of his minions voiced the next suggestion.

“…Greengrass.”

“Who’s that?”

“Ah, that’s probably Ursula Greengrass,” Melchior answered Abraxas’ question, “younger sister of Bernard Greengrass.”

His smile was somewhat sardonic instead of his usual charming or friendly one. Hermione realised that something was up when she saw Gallus shaking his head slowly, even as the rest was still trying to recall who she was.

“Bernard Greengrass?” Ves asked. He was grinning with a sense of humour that was not completely benign. Hermione could almost imagine a pair of horns popping up among his curly hair.

Tybalt fidgeted in his seat in a way that was starting to annoy Rufus next to him.

“Oh no,” Abraxas muttered.

“Oh, yes.” Ves chuckled to himself. Right, because that was not ominous at all, Hermione thought.
“The one who caused Tom to get locked in a broken potions dungeon for a night and a day, right? Back at the end of third year.”

“Broken potions dungeon?”

Vespasian shrugged, his expression back to one of boredom. “The usual disappointment one gets from a sinkin’ ship. That one had a heater that just happened to be stalling when Tom was there. Funny thing about the ceiling, it also just happened to leak more than a drunk would piss...um, pardon my French.”

“It was starting to flood something fierce too at the end of the day,” Gallus added.

“That too. But in the end Tom was just...there. So what? Not much creativity on his part, is there it? Well, at least the accident after that was a lark—I had fun, lemme tell you.”

“Accident?” Rufus asked.

“Ursula Greengrass broke one of leg in three places and sprained the other from an accident in Care of Magical Creatures,” Pendleton answered bluntly. Hermione narrowed her eyes.

“Professor Kettleburn isn’t that careless.”

“She checked one of the stables outside class hours ‘to get some practice in’ was her excuse. Which, as many people know, is particularly ill-advised, especially if you were to try approaching creatures beyond what is taught in your class.” Pendleton replied, as sombre as his brown coat and robes. He continued.

“It is not really a surprising result if you fill a young girl’s head with just how much more wonderful a hippogriff is compared to a pony.”

“Hippogriffs kick really well.” Gallus deadpanned.

Hermione winced, she thought she could see Tybalt twitch at the same time that she did. Pendleton closed his eyes longer than a moment or two.

“Ouch,” she murmured.

“And that’s when Bernard no longer kept bashing his head against the wall,” Ves finished.

“A wall?” the other Malfoy minion asked the wizard next to him. Rufus sighed and rubbed his temples.

“Means he no longer did something as useless as putting himself in Tom’s way, alright? It’s just going to hurt ‘im and not affect Tom at all, see?”

“Ah...”

While this conversation was going on, someone else had been thinking. An errant curl fell over Melchior’s left eye as he bowed his head in thought, his voice was deliberate when he spoke up again.

“It’s too bad, though. The Greengrasses are one of the leaders of a sizeable neutral faction.”

“Technically, the Zabinis are too,” Abraxas commented.

Gallus scoffed, slender fingers rapping on the table with impatience. “Right. As if anyone had
managed to make them commit. Not even the previous wars of dark lords and ladies managed that. I remember reading that once they even chose to go up the Italian Alps than be involved at all.”

Tom turned to Melchior this time.

“Regarding the Greengrasses…you were considering of trying to shift them to our position?”

Melchior nodded. “Precisely. With that in mind, it would be a great idea to offer the prefect position, even if it might be temporary, to the Greengrasses—Ursula in this case.”

“Because Bernard will be so enthusiastic to work with us,” Abraxas said with a sigh.

“Why not?”

Tom’s question stilled several others into silence and even Abraxas couldn’t find the words to answer him. Only Ves was dense enough to blunder in blindly like a bull.

“Because you kicked him in the nads before and now he doesn’t want to get his nads kicked again, right?”

Tybalt (the weasel-face a part of Hermione cheekily noted) snorted out loud before he realised what he did; he bit his lip and knocked his forehead on the table with a groan. Abraxas was rubbernecking with the zeal of a passer-by at a five-carriage pile up.

“Well, I almost caught pneumonia and I couldn’t really care less about Bernard now,” Tom pointed out. “It was all merely business as usual in Slytherin House, isn’t it?”

“True, true.” Ves nodded. “‘Twas nowt but House business.”

Hermione thought she could hear Abraxas muttering under his breath. “Your feet were blue and it was infected.” That couldn’t be true, right? That sounds like cyanosis...

“See? No hard feelings.” Tom smiled, as if no one else but Ves had said anything much.

Hermione thought that she saw Gallus inching away from their table and she couldn’t blame him. Probably because he’s concerned that insanity might be contagious. “I still think it’s a worthwhile offer to make. What do you think, Hermione?”

For her, his question came out of nowhere. She did not even feel that she had a solid enough grasp of Slytherin House politics!

“Do the Greengrasses truly lead a neutral faction? Are there no other houses of similar position?”

She looked around, searching for answers from anyone present.

Abraxas gave her a reluctant nod. “Do they lead the largest neutral faction? Yes, unfortunately. Are there other Houses of similar standing in that faction? Well, the Zabinis have been mentioned before, the Fawleys are there too, the Mendozas are distant fourth compared to the others.”

An English family with a Spanish last name, she thought with interest. It really shouldn’t surprise her at this point. After all, wasn’t Slytherin’s maternal family the Castilian Salazars? Hence its use as his first name? As she had noted earlier, the people of the wizarding world travelled freely and farther than those of the nonmagical world, with the contrast being especially notable in the previous centuries.

“So…they’re truly the best choice.” Hermione tried not to sound disappointed.

“Now that the entire House already knows of my open claim as Slytherin’s Heir, I’d expect to meet less obstacles even if we’re not completely public with it yet.” Tom said. “Hermione, I think you should be the one to talk about the possibility with Ursula.”

Rowle had somehow choked on his tea. Abraxas was blinking in the way of someone who was still…processing things. Melchior’s expression was one of mild interest.

“I’m a Ravenclaw,” Hermione deadpanned.

“Yes, I’m aware,” Tom nodded.

“Why would she expect me to deliver the offer of being the next Slytherin prefect?”

Tom carefully laid his hand over her right, underneath the table. “Because our association is relatively public at this point. She’d know, and besides, she’d feel less threatened if you were the one making the offer than, say, Vespasian over there.”

Ves looked as if he dearly wanted to complain. As his mouth opened, Pendleton levelled a stare in his direction, as did Gallus and a mildly amused Melchior. He shut it again wordlessly and sulked.

“Not just Vespasian. I’m sure Abraxas or Melchior is just as memorable to her, or any of the others.”

Hermione rubbed her forehead with her free hand. Just because she realised that Tom was speaking sense didn’t mean that she had to like it. Why me?

“I’ll find out the general information about her first before I even try,” the Ravenclaw said. “I don’t want to accidentally hit a sore spot and set her off in the first encounter. Once I get that down, I’ll try to find a way to say it.”

She thought his smile reached his eyes this time. “Excellent. Thank you.”

“Oh, don’t thank me yet,” she groused, quite aware of the challenge ahead.

What was she supposed to say? ‘Oh, you remember that time when your leg was broken? Well guess what, the people behind it want to offer you the prefect position! Wait, no, come back! I wasn’t done yet! There are possible rewards, honest!’ She’d be lucky if Ursula Greengrass decided to only start running. For all her complaints, she still owed it to Daphne, though. There was just no way around it; she certainly didn’t think any of the other boys would’ve done it better than her.

Chapter End Notes

List of Stuff One Might Try to Look Up:

**Cyanosis:** (Medicine) Discoloration of the skin into bluish or purplish tones occurring when the tissues near the surface has low oxygen saturation.

**Mnemosyne:** (Greek Mythology) One of the Titanides in Greek mythology, daughter
of Uranus and Gaia and the mother of the nine muses. The root of her name is the Greek word mnēmē, meaning memory, remembrance.

**Pro tempore:** (Latin) for the time being.

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**Additional Notes:**

“*Here we have two specimens of homo sapiens magia, with the refined plumage distinctive of the ruling caste.*”: Hermione is using the word ‘caste’ in the physical, biological sense. You know, like how ants and bees have polymorphism within the same species? There’s the worker caste, soldier caste, etc. Not that she thinks magic-users are a different hominin species, she’s just being really sarcastic.

“*...she didn’t think she knew anyone who still wore it that way other than Lord Byron.*”: She might not know it, but there is actually a cravat not known as Byron knot. And yes, it was popularised by Lord Byron.

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69 A Break on a Beach

Chapter Summary

Plans. News of a corner of Norway. Blackbeard and Typhon hang out. Beach episode! (Or what passes for one here). In which Tom actually relents to provide fragments of his past. Hermione does realise she’s remarkably calm about all this. Pendleton recalls a piece of the past.

Chapter Notes

Another update! A pretty chill chapter, mostly. Have fun folks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

69 A Break on a Beach

“And so, regarding Kopervik, we’re still waiting for further update from Mordred.”

Hermione raised her head from her half-distracted scribbling, ignoring several bored or half-asleep faces on Table 2. She had more important things to focus on; Kopervik was her theoretical home town here.

“Excuse me? Kopervik?”

Tom didn’t seem the slightest bit fazed, so there had to be an explanation for all this. The sound of wood crackling in the fireplace made the chamber a little cosier than its grand appearance suggested at first.

Melchior merely blinked back at her. “Well, yes, Kopervik. I thought you’d want to know what happened there. It has been brought to my knowledge that—”

“There’s been no news,” Abraxas cut in. His friend gave him the side-eye but the blond was undeterred. He threw his hands in the air. Ves yelped and pulled his teacup away from Abraxas’ grand sweep and gave him the stink eye. The blond was more focused on his other side that he didn’t notice.

“Oh, come on, Melchior, we don’t need you giving us the summary of who-knows-how-many reports you’ve read in the same dry language. It was Hermione’s home, of course she was devastated at its destruction! You don’t need to go through the chaff and go straight to the heart of the news—what do you know?”

Hermione lowered her head for a moment and closed her eyes before meeting Melchior’s gaze again. He seemed sheepish, and she thought she could see colour over his cheekbones even on his olive skin. Her own behaviour could’ve been construed as sadness and guilt, but it was the second that was mostly true—she had no memory of that and she felt guilty that she hadn’t tried to figure
out sooner.

What if she wasn’t the sole survivor of whatever event it was? What if there had been someone else? How bad were their health condition?

She might not know any of them personally, but they deserved a chance to survive too.

The solid pressure and warmth of Tom’s hand holding hers pulled her out of her mind. She grasped back like a climber would a lifesaving rope thrown at them from over the cliffs top. Even a rope burn would be a welcome sensation right now that could help to ground her.

“Yes, what do you know, Melchior?” she asked.

“That there’s been something more than meets the eye. I started looking for news about it once Tom pointed it out to me, but there was practically none, you know? Only a brief summary on the third page of the Daily Prophet, once, and what I suppose was a short obituary on Seeress of London.” He sighed, and she could see that it had tired him mentally.

“For an entire wizarding circle, even if it had been small, to only have one known survivor and yet have no news written about it…it’s highly unusual. I apologize that our search hadn’t gone farther, but we’re only now trying alternate channels.”

“It’s alright…it’s not your fault. I wish I could help you, but my memory is shot to hell.” Hermione couldn’t help the slight laughter that escaped her, nor did she manage to fully suppress the edge of hysteria there. The brunette cleared her throat.

“I have absolutely no memory of whatever happened. I’ve been waiting all this time; they say that memory loss due to physical trauma to the brain can sometimes recover on their own. Yet it’s been a few months. At this rate, let’s just say that I’m not optimistic that it would ever recover—this is my healer’s opinion on it, by the way.”

Her memory of whatever happened before she woke up in 1942 was still non-existent, and so was whatever her memory she should’ve had in this time period. Nil. Zilch. Nada.

She took a long, long sigh to steady herself.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

Melchior vehemently shook his head. “No! It’s not your fault at all! Really, don’t blame yourself, Hermione. I’ll feel really bad that I’ve caused this otherwise…”

Before she knew it, Tom had moved his chair right next to hers and shifted hers slightly. He’d gently redirected her head to his shoulder, and she took his offer of support to lean her forehead against and close her eyes. She wasn’t quite in tears. The Ravenclaw didn’t have quite enough memories for that, even if the emptiness in the pit of her stomach was gut wrenching in a different way—yet with no precise words or images, it was not difficult to ignore.

It didn’t stop it from being tiring, though.

Tom had continued his inquiries at Melchior, instead, smoothly continuing the discussion as he asked for what information they actually have. The basics of it all seemed to be that the settlement, the British wizarding circle at Kopervik, had burned down. Considering how thorough it was, Pendleton had opined that he doubted it was natural fire at all. If all the houses and towers were made of wood and tar with thatched roof while having zero protective charms, then yes, it might have been possible for a freak lightning strike to burn the entire village down.
“That’s my current gut instinct about it. Of course, if you wish for a more detailed analysis of it, I’ll have to find one of my father’s old teammates and get their take on it.” She could recognise Pendleton’s calm and unperturbed tone easily now.

“See to it, Pendleton. Melchior, pass any documents that Pendleton might need.”

Two voices affirmed Tom’s order.

Hermione let the conversation wash over her as she pulled herself together. When she sat back up again, eyes dry.

“So, the next phase of information collection would be to wait on Mordred’s results?”

Melchior nodded. “Mordred and Emma, yes. Oswin’s parents are in positions unrelated to this. He asked me to pass on his apologies.”

Tom rattled off several other names, all presumably Slytherin, and Melchior either confirmed that yes, he’d been subtly asking them though he’d been careful so far not to push too far, or he would shake his head and say that the person mentioned was unable to or had hit a wall somehow or was not too close to the subject they were trying to find out about. She would’ve been impressed with his memory if she was a little less emotionally spent.

The wizard next to her turned to Pendleton after hearing all of Melchior’s answers.

“What’s your preliminary assessment, Pendleton?”

The pale Slytherin shook his head. “I don’t have enough data yet.”

“There’s no need to be perfect, but even a rough impression can help,” Tom replied.

“Considering the degree of destruction on the place, and how there’d been no mention of how many people had been victims, even in passing… It had been an organised attack, and the place may have been a Ministry special projects site.”

Gallus frowned, “Special projects?”

Pendleton shrugged in reply. “That’s what people in the DMLE referred to certain, low-profile locations for… projects. Yes, that’s as much as I know now. Further details about them are not in my purview, as their operation or maintenance aren’t exactly the domain of Aurors.”

She thought she caught him muttering something about how he wasn’t even an Auror yet right now.

A part of her mind stirred at his explanation, though, a hint that she may have known more, once, that the answer was not far from recall. Yet for someone whose past were as particles of sand falling through her fingers, whose recollections were as solid as Swiss cheese, that feeling of familiarity gave her no assurance whatsoever.

The meeting was winding up, Tom had officially closed it and everyone was tidying up their belongings and were either leaving or preparing to leave.

Abraxas’ two minions had stood up and helped him with his stuff. The other Slytherins from the second table had mostly stood up and left already; Rowle being the fastest of them all, putting in
distance between him and Hermione as if the hounds of hell were on his heels. It might be petty of her, but it amused her enough compared to his previous harassment. She still hadn’t tried to stop him from treating her as his own particular demon.

Hermione stood up and approached one of them to speak at one point.

“Pendleton, if I may… A word with you?”

Pale grey eyes met hers when he raised his head, only the slightest hint of surprise flickered past his face. “Certainly, Hermione.”

“I had something to talk about the Auror corps, mostly,” she clarified.

“Ah, I see. It will only be a few minutes, then.”

Melchior was tidying up his scrolls and papers (she’d just realised that he carried a noticeable number of them), sweeping them into a mokeskin bag. *That was certainly a lot more convenient than a briefcase.* It was really nice to be from a well-off wizarding family, wasn’t it? Even Abraxas had a notable amount; there was a time when he led the explanation on the currents and leanings in Wizengamot so far and the results of his discussions with his father about it, with the others occasionally chiming in when they had a perspective he didn’t.

She had to admit that he wasn’t as foolish as he sometimes seemed. She mused about it while walking back to her table.

This entire gathering was closer to an organisational meeting than she thought it would be. She’d noticed that the dress code for today didn’t consists of hooded robes, and a mask was nowhere on that list, so playing up the secret society shtick to the hilt wasn’t on the agenda. Yet she’d expected…

*What, really? Some sort of nascent Death Eaters?* It was clear that they weren’t that yet, not with Tom still being *sane* in general. Perhaps they would never be that with her interference.

*I’d expected them to be more Slytherin, somehow…* yes, that was it. Perhaps something that echoed her encounter in the forest with Tom, Ves and Pendleton. Tom demonstrating his power with casual cruelty as well as the iron grip that he held the Knights in.

“Hermione?”

The Ravenclaw looked up. She’d been mulling over her thoughts for a while that she’d missed arriving back at her table. Tom had stood up and pulled her chair back before she knew it.

“What *are* we going to discuss with Pendleton?”

Her mood lightened. “The Society’s Search…and our need for a contact person among the Aurors.”

“Ah, that.”

“Yes, *that.*”

The corners of her lips twitched as she saw the first inkling of annoyance almost forming on his face before it was smoothed out yet again by his control over his expression. In that span of time, she’d glanced to the side towards the approaching footsteps, as Pendleton came to a stop in front of them. His gaze moved between her and Tom.
“What did you need to discuss, Hermione?”

“First, I need to know what your plans are after Hogwarts. Do you intend to be an Auror?”

“I do, I still do.”

“Directly, or…?”

“Well, I’d intended to take the Grand Tour first, but I’m not sure how viable that is with a war going on in the continent.”

“So, two or three years at the soonest.”

He nodded in agreement, and that was when she turned to Tom.

“That’s the fastest that you can have someone from your inner circle into the DMLE. The war continues on regardless, and so does Grindelwald’s movements.” She paused to take a breath. “I don’t think we can wait.”

Pendleton’s forehead creased slightly and she could see that questions were rising in his mind. He had no grasp of the thread of their conversation because he hadn’t been too involved with the Society’s concerns. She turned to him now to clarify.

“There was some information we needed to know that the DMLE has. We need a contact person for the Society.”

“Ah…I see.”

Her focus returned to Tom once more. “Alastor Moody is really our best chance for an insider’s view if we need the information soon.”

Tom exhaled lightly before speaking up again. “What do you know of him, Pendleton?”

“He only came in near the end of my pater’s tenure at the DMLE, but he seems competent enough as far as I know. I haven’t heard anything too critical of him from my father’s old colleagues, though some notes that he can be…brash.” Pendleton replied.

Tom didn’t immediately reply, perhaps contemplating a few thoughts over before he did so.

“I suppose you can mention the idea to him, Hermione, and see how he’ll take it.”

“I will,” she agreed.

With that, Tom thanked Pendleton for his input, the latter nodded his acceptance before he soon took his leave as well. The last of the Knights was Gallus, who had almost as many papers as the others—she wondered a little about what his responsibilities probably are. After that, there was only the napping presences of both Blackbeard and Typhon near the fireplace.

Hermione was only too pleased by the progress, even if she stayed mostly calm. Perhaps it hadn’t been as contained as she thought it was, as soon Tom let out a soft chuckle.

“You must be happy at the prospect of meeting an old friend.”

She raised an eyebrow. “An old friend?”

“You wouldn’t have been so pleased with the prospect if Moody had been a mere acquaintance.”
Perhaps it had been fruitless to even try hiding her reaction in the company of one who would read body language as easily as others would an open book. Still, she’d be more embarrassed about herself if she didn’t at least try; she could tell she was getting better. No matter how mediocre her abilities may be, it certainly wasn’t going to improve if she just sat on it. Of course, Tom was simply on another scale when it came to that; he was the last person she’d use as a yardstick to measure her progress here.

The Ravenclaw sighed.

“You have a point. When he wasn’t crazy with paranoia, he was a competent teacher and a great Auror. I guess I do want to see some familiar faces, even if it doesn’t mean anything to the other party and would just seem to be the fruits of my own imagination.”

“If he is as competent as you say, it would be a good idea to have a working relationship with him quite early.”

Hermione didn’t know what it said about her that to see Tom being mostly sane and reasonable could still elicit feelings of pleasant surprise on her part. Perhaps Voldemort simply extended a long shadow from her past experience into the current present. It made watching him cajole his lazy snake to move feel like a rather surreal experience.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7WTAP5b9xw, "Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence" piano cover, loop until scene break)

“Where are you going now?” She asked.

“Me? You mean both of us,” he corrected.

“Us?”

“Well, our familiars hadn’t quite had their exercise today, have they?”

*Oh, shoot. He’s right about that.*

Blackbeard was less of a slowpoke from the cold and he ambled back when called. Yet the Ravenclaw was feeling a little sorry of Typhon; he was not a mammal and certainly couldn’t quite generate his own body heat. If he was feeling the urge to hibernate, she wasn’t surprised. The two of them exited the Room of Requirement along with their two familiars. With a little discussion, they agreed to imagine a place with some basic sort of obstacle course, not unlike the favourite playground of the Prewett twins.

Considering Typhon’s lethargy, she suggested to Tom that it would be better if they chose a beach as the location. Tom agreed quite readily, letting her imagine the actual place herself, since she had more memories of tropical beaches from several holidays than he did.

The door opened and a warm air with the scent of the sea greeted them, along with the sound of waves crashing on the beach and not a single seagull to be seen.

He didn’t say anything when they stepped in, but the way his eyes widened momentarily, she knew that he’d never been to the tropics.

Once inside, Tom had dropped his coat and outer robe, down to his waistcoat.

“Where should we put these…”
“Anywhere.”

To her surprise, he proceeded to dump his excess clothing over the yellow sand.

“You’d get sand everywhere,” she stared at his impulsive act.

Hermione didn’t think she’d saw Tom grin the way their fellow students do, easily and unweighted. Oh, his satisfied smirk manifested into a predator’s grin easily, and his society smile may be broad and charming. Yet neither of them had the vividness of sensation poured directly from the heart. This was…

Tom pulled her closer to give her lips a quick peck, but his actual motivation was clear when he came off with her half-cape. He dropped it straight away on top of his own pile of clothes.

“Tom.”

“We have magic, Hermione. What’s a little cleaning charm or two?”

Instead of replying, she shucked her boots and socks quickly; he followed in the blink of an eye and rolled his trousers up. They might look a little ridiculous right now, neither of them in a casual enough dress for a beach. Yet who would complain about that? There was no one to watch, and neither Hermione nor Tom cared. Besides, she relished the feeling of soft, warm sand under her feet too much to care.

“Come on, Typhon, up you go.”

“SssssSssSSS.”

Unlike his earlier, lazier movement, the python acted promptly. His next words were in Parseltongue, and most of their meanings escaped her. Yet she can recognise walk and run in them, and he easily cut across the sand with the snake on his heels.

(She remembered cajoling Harry for a basic primer on Parseltongue, once she’d figured out that it was an actual language, if a simple one, instead of some mystic mumbo-jumbo impenetrable to outsiders.)

There it was, the errant thought passed her mind, that expression of boyish glee she’d not seen before, shoulders no longer projecting solid strength, impressing the capability to carry the world on them. This was Tom Riddle without the gravity that he’d accrued in his Hogwarts persona, of the head prefect candidate of their year and the wizard who was the Heir of Slytherin to those who knew of such things.

This was just Tom.

The brunette been grinning too, before she noticed it, not that she cared to hold it back. She was determined to take her mind off more burdensome things, and focusing on Blackbeard and the present was a good way to do that. The air was warm and humid from the sea spray, while the water was a crystal blue that did not change in intensity towards the horizon, even if the colour deepened. She ran with ease over the sand, feel the water wend its cool fingers around her calves, skimming the coast line without a thought as she made her way inland once more.

Tom had climbed and then walked up the trunk of several heavily tilted coconut trees (usually the result of heavy storm) already while challenging Typhon to catch up with him.

Hermione was more intent on finding large enough mangrove trees that can not only support her
weight but can survive being climbed upon by both her and Blackbeard. Her familiar did not immediately follow her when she set off to find a comfortable perch somewhere high up, having too much fun chasing crabs and trying to paw at other skittering beach life for the moment. He followed only sometime later when he was getting bored with them.

The tree swayed slightly as the black cat begun to reach the higher branches, but it was stable enough compared to many other types of trees. Where most trees are mostly supported by its main trunk and the related roots, mangrove trees constantly extend new aerial roots along its branches, clutching firmly into intertidal land over a wider area.

Instead of a single trunk, older mangrove trees have a curtain of trunks.

Hermione thought she could hear the low murmurs that sounded close to complaints from her familiar. She leaned back to locate him.

“Yeah, sorry. I didn’t think how large the average mangrove tree is. The next time we come here, I’ll try to imagine bigger trees.”

“Mreow, mreeooow.”

There just weren’t enough branches upwards—or if there were, they didn’t go high enough, or were not large enough. She could understand the sense of disappointment that had Blackbeard leaping down not long after, and he set off across the sand once more. He’d even entered the surf, perhaps to chase some of the fishes he’d seen there. Hermione followed mainly because she was curious to see what he would do.

The warm water lapped at her ankles and the sand as soft as a mattress under bare feet. She turned right, pulling her gaze away from the blue (fake) horizon in the distance and saw him walking following the coastline towards her. It was a little weird to realise that Typhon was alongside him on the sea’s side, swimming. When Tom arrived two steps away from her, he didn’t stop Typhon from lazily climbing up his leg and around his shoulders again, trailing sea water everywhere, particularly down his white shirt.

Hermione’s lips twitched in amusement even as he rolled his eyes. Tom’s left hand directed the python’s head to meet his gaze.

“No, down boy. You need to move and it’s not even cold here, you have no excuse.”

That was probably some hissy complaints following, but the Slytherin lifted the great coils of muscle with what seemed to be effortless ease and dropped his familiar on the sand. Blackbeard padded up on Hermione’s right and dropped a fish in the sand before he stared up at her.

“Good boy!” She cooed. She crouched to pet him, scratching him behind his ears the way he liked it and he purred with pride. “You can take the fish for yourself.”

“What’s the plan now?” Tom asked her idly.

“Oh, walk back towards the treeline, I guess. I’m going to see if I can pick coconuts with the flame whip spell. I was planning on drinking some coconut water and eating the soft white flesh—that is, as long as we can find ones whose ripeness is to the degree.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

They wandered back side-by-side, with all the carefree air of errant children who had managed to escape from school.
Tom mused out loud where the edible objects come from when the room was simulating a more natural environment instead of a chamber where one can easily request food that can be supplied from the Hogwarts kitchens. Hermione guessed that if the food were too exotic—for example some local, edible type of cactus in the New World—it would just be a magical illusion, or a construct out of air. The Hogwarts larder wouldn’t have such an object ready at hand, after all.

“What about the fish or our coconuts, then?” He gestured to Blackbeard who was still happily finishing his fish and towards the line of coconut trees and other kinds.

“Perhaps the fish would turn out to be a different type of ocean fish. Such a thing still exists in Hogwarts’ larder and the illusion would merely be in the taste.”

“You can’t suppose that you can apply the same reasoning to the coconut.”

“Not really,” she replied, happily diverted with the topic. “Though I’m sure there are a few coconut trees in one of the greenhouses.”

“I don’t think Spore would put them into the Hogwarts’ pantry, though.”

“Probably not. We’ll just be eating air, then,” she concluded without care.

She could see the laughter in his eyes, even if he seemed to manage to restrain himself well enough otherwise. Hermione located the shorter coconut trees, or the ones leaning to an extreme angle to provide her with an easy-to-reach target. She cast flame whip and started cracking it upwards.

Tom tilted his head to the side as he watched her first few attempts; he’d kept a good distance between them since one of her misdirected moves had cracked a coconut in half, its coconut water spilling from above. Then, he wandered off somewhere, possibly to find other random things he found interesting and mostly to get his familiar to walk with him.

The next time Hermione laid her coconut bounty in a row, she felt a light touch falling over her hair. There was a garland of white flowers with golden hearts on her head, their scent intense with notes of sandalwood and myrrh. The name of the tropical flower escaped her, but they were beautiful in their simplicity all the same. She fingered one of the flower’s petals, soft as velvet. She thought she could still see the hidden mirth in his eyes.

“I don’t know who you’re doing this for. There’s no one else watching, Tom.”

“I simply wanted to.” His answer was as effortless as his smile, light as the breeze themselves and yet somehow still true. It made her scrutinise him harder, even if his dark eyes were never completely readable to her.

(King of air and darkness—)

“Nothing projected by this room would last outside it,” she told him.

“Well, that’s why I took a handful of these flowers, observe their details well, then transfigure a dozen of them from paper in close imitation. These ones would last.”

The brunette didn’t see that as an answer, not really. Tom’s peculiarities could drive her up a wall sometimes, this one among them. There were times when he was intentionally inscrutable, but other times, his mind was just twisted oddly. This current bend was one of the latter. She rubbed her forehead with a sigh. Blackbeard had finished his fish and decided to lie down on the sand to sleep not far to her left. Typhon was still happily sunning himself a few metres from them.
Tom sat down on a fallen trunk of a coconut tree and she sat some distance away on the same trunk.

“What do you think of the meeting?” The Slytherin asked, offhand.

“The meeting?” She eyed him oddly. Hermione had started knocking on the coconuts with her knuckles, listening to the sound they make.

“Yes, the meeting. As it was your first time attending one with the Walpurgis Knights, your viewpoint would be interesting.”

“It was…more mundane that I thought it would be. It’s not that different from one of the Society’s meetings, isn’t it? Or a prefect one.”

The brunette wasn’t sure why he would be asking, or why he seemed mildly amused by her answer. He had more papers in hand, probably provided by the room. He was…folding them into more of the same flowers? Why?

“You found that strange, didn’t you?” Tom stated one of her thoughts so easily.

“I…I’m not sure. Maybe.”

She kicked away one coconut that sounded too hollow. Its coconut water would’ve run low. (She remembered being told that it would be a great source for coconut milk now, as its flesh would’ve matured, but that’s not what she needed).

“Why? What did you expect?”

The Ravenclaw had expected cloak and dagger meetings, perhaps; the lighting choices of a broke community theatre or edgy vampire groupies. A secret society with their own password or catch-phrases and enough robes to outfit a Gregorian chorus. There might also be the promiscuous and often frankly unnecessary use of blood magic or oaths. He was still waiting for her answer and she chose the least insulting one she thought could mention.

“Well, I’d have expected that there’d be more torture and screaming.”

He snorted and amusement played in the corners of his mouth. “That would only make sense if someone had been making a huge mess of their tasks or responsibilities.”

She finally picked two coconuts, all based on her amateurish experience in choosing them on a holiday or two that she can remember. She’d cut the top of, removing them almost like lids, before she realised that they had no spoon to scoop out the flesh with. That was when Tom summoned his tie-pin while recommending her to do the same for the brooch that she pinned on her cape. With metal trinkets as a basis, a little transfiguration provided them with an eating utensil easily (and a finite would easily fix them afterwards).

“You have something on your mind.” Tom stated. She snorted at that.

“When do I not?”

“Well, I thought we were going to be honest with each other,” he raised an eyebrow at her, and she had to admit that he was right.

“I can’t say that I agree with torture in general, but…”
“But?”

“I wouldn’t interfere in the moment if you were doing that to your Knights. I wouldn’t help anything if I undermine your authority in front of your men. I disagree, of course, but saying that in the moment doesn’t help anyone. Hammering our disagreement outside, behind the curtains from them, would’ve worked better.”

She raised the coconut to drink a bit of the water. She was not foolish enough to not realise that in such a situation, Tom’s followers would certainly agree with his decision and back him up rather than her—it didn’t matter even if she was trying to save one of them from him. Hermione saw the surprised look on his face as his spoon stopped mid-air for a second before he controlled it away.

The brunette huffed. “Oh, come on, Tom. I’m not stupid. I know how your Knights work. They may not start out that way, but right now, they’re yours, aren’t they? Every single bloody one of them. Yours, body and soul. I’m the outsider in the equation.”

Hermione would like to think that she’s quite decently read on cult psychology—and the Knights were a cult of personality even if not a religious one. The linchpin of everything was the cult leader, not the members. Right now, she was neither.

“You’re not an outsider,” he corrected.

“I’m not?” It was her turn to be amused.

“No, you’re mine and still above them—and they all know that now.”

Something about his voice made her shiver. His tone was casual, but perhaps it was the certainty in them that was uncanny. She didn’t exactly have a lot of opportunity to witness religious fervour—his faith in himself was as strong as a saint was to their god.

“I’m only yours if you’re completely mine,” she threw back, if only to stop herself from being unsettled. It was not a completely satisfactory answer for herself; it was too reactionary.

“Of course.”

His expression was bored, though, as if she was merely saying the obvious. She hadn’t managed to think of anything else to say when Tom spoke up.

“Do you know when I truly noticed Abraxas’ presence?”

“When?”

“During our second year, it was in Potions class. I felt that there was something damp in my bag, and I was worried that an ink bottle wasn’t tightly secured inside. I opened my bag and in my utmost idiocy, simply jammed my hand in and started groping around. Something collapsed in my hands, and I didn’t pay attention to the little stabs of pain I felt as I was more concerned about getting it—and the spill—out and saving my books and scrolls.”

Tom had placed his spoon in his coconut and was miming the gesture of someone searching into their bag and pulling something out.

“What did you find?” She asked.

“What I pulled out was an ink bottle—cracked open like an egg. My hand was wet with blood and ink, shards of glass embedded in my palm. For some reason, Abraxas turned around not a moment
too soon, saw that, and laughed his head off. I remembered that because every single person in the class room turned their head in my direction. He wasn’t the only one that ended up laughing then.”

Hermione could feel her jaw tightening as she answered. “Ink bottles are thick.”

He nodded, agreeing with her easily. “Of course. It doesn’t mean it couldn’t be tampered with, though. Magic is such a wonderful thing, isn’t it? So versatile. It’s a good thing as it meant that it hadn’t been so difficult to restore the scrolls and save the books, though Madam Meige was rather livid when she saw the mess that was my hand.”

“Madam Meige?”

“The Head Nurse before Madam Edelstein.”

Tom offered his right palm to her, and she took it with confusion before he leaned forward and pointed at a line in the middle of his palm, just an inch below his fingers.

“That’s the largest scar, the rest are there if you look.”

It wasn’t quite what most muggles would call a scar—it wasn’t even raised, for one, the texture barely any different from the surrounding skin. The lighter colouring was nonetheless a clue. Once she knew what she was looking for, she started to see other faint lines. There were at least dozens of them, probably twice more if she counted the fainter, barely-there ones too.

They spread across his right palm like fine fractures spiderwebbing on porcelain.

“Gallus was more nonchalant about working with muggleborns. I didn’t think after the first few times he’d offered me food. One particular hot cocoa drink was laced might have been light food poisoning, considering how frequent I went to the bathroom. I missed class the entire day.”

“He what?”

“He said I owed him a favour for it. He thought that it was better than if my cauldron were to meltdown that day, getting into scuffles in Care of Magical Creatures, fights in corridors and who-knows-what else had been planned.”

“Who on earth…”

“He was right, though. A scholarship student cannot afford to attract that degree of scrutiny. Not if they want to stay in Hogwarts. You already know about Ves, so, let’s see who’s next…”

Tom glided smoothly over to his next explanation.

“Melchior was friendly even at the beginning. He actually enjoys being nice from time to time to other people, and probably random little old ladies he encounters on the street. I talked with him every other day or so from first year. We’ve partnered together in Potions rather often too.”

He’d moved his seat closer, which made sense, because he wouldn’t be able to let her observe his palm so easily otherwise.

“There was a time when I had to fight back against three second years in the corridor just outside the Slytherin dungeon. My sides hurt like hell. Melchior was coming from one end and I recognised who he was once he was close. When he realised who it was, well, he bowed his head down again and walked on to the dorms without turning even once.”
“He…”

Tom shrugged. “Why would he want to get beaten by a couple of second-years for someone he doesn’t know?”

“You’re his classmate, his class partner,” his friend, she didn’t say, because he wouldn’t care for it, even if she did.

“And nobody his parents’ knew, and it certainly doesn’t mean he was willing to be dragged down with me,” Tom said, his voice softer simply because their heads were now so close to each other’s. The ebb and flow of his words were almost as soothing as the sound of waves breaking on the shore. “The second time he passed, I was making sure a second year was vomiting leeches—rather nasty to get one or more stuck in your throat, I’ll say. He walked as if there was no one else in that particular corridor but him.”

“The third time he did, I snapped at him to stop pretending that he was blind. Especially since he could’ve told me where the stupid thugs were going next some of the time—I’ve seen them talk on occasion.”

The air of his exhale caressed her right cheek.

“He said he’d do that if I’d stop being so stupid to wage an open war on two fronts.”

“Who was he talking about?”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it, Hermione?” To her surprise, he chuckled.

She pressed her cheek to his, her right hand around the back of his neck, because she didn’t want him to see the near-murderous expression she couldn’t contain. It didn’t make sense, she knew, but it didn’t mean she could stop the feeling of sympathetic pain. The brunette closed her eyes; she could feel his fingers sliding across her jugular lightly, playing with her curls. The wind sighing through the palm fronds and mangrove trees lent a dreamy air to everything.

“If I kill everyone who had crossed me, I’d be running out of useful minions and even pawns too quickly—it’s more fun to occasionally torture them when I have a reason to. Besides, weren’t you the one warning me about accidenting too many people?”

Hermione leaned back. Beneath his confident smile and perfectly-polished grace was the roiling shadow she was now observant enough to see. If she could see deep enough, she suspected that she would even see it tied methodically and strung up with his own strings like a marionette. The defining mark of Tom Riddle, she decided, was not that he had a darkness in him—many people can claim that easily. It was not that he had his own spark of genius to go with it, no.

What made him distinct was how he’d bound his violence and cruelty under his iron control, to ensure it served his goals instead of allowing himself be enslaved by his wants and tendencies.

She sighed. “You’re right. Less accidents would leave less traces for other people to find.”

“Of course I’m right.” He said it as if it was obvious.

The time-stuck witch snorted. As if she didn’t still need to hold him back several times already. “It doesn’t mean your patience is perfect.”

“Perfection is impossible, Hermione. I thought you know this.”
Hermione rolled her eyes but didn’t jab back at his patronising tone. She knew very well by now that he did it only to bait her.

“Still…”

She eyed him wordlessly, and she saw him slowly sitting straighter as he eyed her back.

Still, the balance did not seem to be easily held—even something as temporary as Amortentia could tilt the scales. If one were to upend that control, her conclusion was that it would result in the persona she knew as Voldemort. The current him was...like that particular medicinal-slash-poisonous orchid Neville got from Kalimantan that he’d showed-off once. A rare specimen that she didn’t think she’d even encounter, to be honest. She’d thought he’d gone all dark lord already at this point in history and all she’d need to do was a straightforward fight or clean-up of a newly rising evil wizard.

Sometimes she wished it was not so easy for her to empathise with him.

“Tom, be honest with me. Do you actually get enough sleep in the Slytherin dungeons?”

He was blinking in rapid succession in the next few seconds. She was slightly distracted by his eyelashes (it wasn’t fair for a guy to have eyelashes that long, really).

“Oh, pardon me?”

She drew back, if only to be able to observe him fully.

“Sleep? If you’ve never really trusted your Housemates, do you actually manage to have enough sleep in your dorms? I can’t imagine that to be comfortable. Do you sleep better when you’re in the royal suite? I mean, I don’t think I can escape from my dorms every single night without arousing my dormmates curiosity about where I go, but every other night or so is possible and I can keep you company.”

He was still staring at her before suddenly dropping his face into his palms, his shoulders subtly shaking. She would’ve asked if something was wrong if she didn’t hear laughter quietly bubbling through him. Tom raised his head again; his smile was now wry.

“You’re...not wrong. You’re completely not wrong, but that had been years ago, Hermione. I sleep quite well now, thank you, it’s just,” he chuckled again. “On the other hand, that was a turn of conversation I did not expect.”

“Well, sleep is important,” she stated primly.

“And you’re risking discovery with every night you spend out of the dorms,” he pointed out in return.

“It’s just sleep. As long as I get enough sleep, I can pay enough attention in class, keep up with my schoolwork and apprenticeship, and manage the Society on top of that. Where I sleep does not really matter much.”

Tom’s attention was on her once more, undivided. It was unnerving enough that she was getting goosebumps. With the sounds of the ocean rising and falling in the background, the impression that they were the only two people in an isolated island in the Pacific was never stronger.

“...what is it?”
He blinked and his eyes were less the fathomless dark at the bottom of the sea and a more mundane blue before he seemed content to spoon more coconut, the tension between them broken.

“I actually thought you were going to be more concerned about the rules and all.”

“If I have to choose between some technical rules and your health, your health obviously comes on top,” she said with a huff. The Ravenclaw explained further when she saw that he was unusually quiet.

“I’m a field healer here, give me some credit. I might’ve been that student who cared about the rules so much, because it’s so much easier to understand and remember than the fuzzy…” her hands made vague, wavy shapes in the air, “…constantly changing rules of social interaction. Getting to see my friends being almost dead a few times too many would change a person. You’d get to realise what’s truly important in life.”

The brunette noticed when he took the coconut from her hands and placed it on the sand between her feet. The fervent kiss came out of nowhere to her. She would’ve slipped off the log if he hadn’t held her waist, touch burning the skin under the fabric. The heat of his kiss lured her in. The thoroughness and immediacy she could almost taste in his tongue, as if he wished to take her into him and hold her inside forever.

“Tom?”

Lips parted reluctantly, and not just on his part. His skin was pale enough that the colour over his cheekbones were obvious—as were the same lovely shade down his neck.

“Whenever I came to think that you were another Hogwarts student, you would do something to remind me that such a narrow definition will never fit you.”

She toyed with the buttons of his shirt, not quite picking them open.

“You’re right, though. I’m not, even if sometimes I’d like to pretend that’s all I am. Life’s much simpler when you’re just a student.” It was an admission that costs her nothing to say.

“And you’re mine, aren’t you, Hermione? Would you be with me until the end of time?” Well, she cared about him, certainly, and his sheer possessiveness still twinged her annoyance from time to time, but, in a way…

“I don’t know how things go beyond death, but I can do that until your death or mine, whichever comes first.”

His hand was on her cheek, carefully tilting her face upwards towards his. On his face was a perfectly indistinguishable replica of tenderness.

“Would you?”

“Yes, Tom, unless things beyond my power separates us before that,” she wasn’t going to discount the low, low probability that she might somehow be thrown back to a future. “As long as we both live, I will do my best to stay by your side.”

“Till death do us part.”

The finality with which he said that would certainly frighten a younger Hermione, and she wouldn’t have begrudged her younger self that emotion either. She wouldn’t have begrudged anyone for running for the hills right now. Tom’s intensity in all he did and in all he asked of
others was frankly too much for most people to handle on a regular basis. Yet she had a gut feeling that she’d saw a world near its end before; he was, under her completely out-of-whacked definition now, quite normal*.

(*for a given value of normal).

Hermione even smiled back at him, even if it was one that was more ironic than smitten though she didn’t try to hide the fondness she held either.

“Till death takes one of us.”

She did not lie—it was the truth that she had said. The young witch would be with him until his death; either naturally, if he were to keep his reason and level mind to the end, or until she ended him by her own hands if he fell all the same. It would probably rip her heart in two, if it ever came to that years from now, when they had even more years together. Yet now, she didn’t doubt that she would do it.

Harry was not the only one who let themselves to be bound by duty.

'B-

**Bonus – Memories of Younger Days – Pendleton**

Pendleton had a habit of arriving early on the Slytherin table for breakfast to avoid the morning crush. The only reason he would change that is if Tom requested it, so that most of the Knights would be at the table together when he spoke to them of one issue or another.

Today, he was ten minutes later than his usual time, which he excused himself easily as it was Monday.

He was, on the other hand, not surprised to see Tom already there, reading one newspaper from the several he had on the pile to his right hand. Pendleton only blinked before seating himself across them even when he saw Hermione was there. Brown curly hair held loosely with one ribbon of dark grey, a dark purple rose behind her ear.

“Ah, Pendleton! Good morning.”

“Good morning,” he replied, a little taken aback at her enthusiastic greeting.

“I was waiting for you, actually. Tom was really spot on when he said that you’re an early riser.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Some things I want to ask about, and—” Hermione stopped, her mind seemingly recalling something as she turned to Tom. “You know, I’ve just realised that you didn’t mention anything about Pendleton.”

“I didn’t?”

“Yesterday, when we were at the beach?”

*When did they even go to the beach?* Pendleton wondered but didn’t say. Considering their combined skill, he didn’t think anyone in Hogwarts would notice if they decided to just decided to visit Sandwich or Dover on a Sunday evening, anyway. He started taking some baked-beans, bacon, and the usual collection of fry-ups, reasoning that he’d take a full fruit platter after this to
even it out.

“You didn’t seem to have a less-than-pleasant memory about him compared to the others.” Hermione clarified.

…Pendleton really didn’t want to know what they were talking about, though it sounded as if he came out ahead? Somehow? The Slytherin across from him nodded.

“Ah, second and third years. Well, Pendleton mostly kept to himself, isn’t that right?”

“More-or-less,” Tom answered easily, “though that also meant he assisted me on class matters less than Melchior.”

“I can’t argue with that,” he replied.

Tom had been that muggleborn who didn’t know how to keep his head down (unlike Annabelle). It was the sort of cauldron explosion that would happen when you throw in salamander heart with winter aconite. He certainly didn’t want to be on the front rows of that…though it brought him to a pause as he carefully glanced up. Tom doesn’t still have issue with that, does he?

“But he’s really unremarkable otherwise, Hermione, no offence Pendleton.”

“None taken, Tom.”

Being described as unremarkable can still cause him to feel dismayed sometimes, even if it had been his own preference to not stand out too much. Yet the only thing replacing the tension in his shoulders was an overwhelming sense of relief. He wanted to be certain, though.

“You…remember when I suggested that you partner with Ves in class, right?”

Tom mulled over it a little. “Yes. So? That doesn’t count as an assistance. If anything, that’s on Ves.”

“True, that.” Pendleton slowly nodded, mainly because he didn’t want Tom to change his mind. His memories of that time seemed to be better than Tom, though he’s certainly not complaining about that flaw of Tom’s.

Slughorn was going to make them pair up again tomorrow. Their Head of House had said it in passing last week, but Pendleton had written it down quickly in case he forgot, and now the scribbles he left on his Potions class note stood out as he finished his homework in the common room.

Pendleton sighed, dropping his quill in boredom.

There were good odds that he was going to end up with Ves again—mostly because they’ve known each other for ages. It wasn’t such a bad deal since Ves was pretty good at Potions. The thing was, sometimes he doesn’t know when to shut up. He’d complained about getting paired with a slow Gryffindor in Transfigurations, he’d whined about some fourth-years hogging the Mint Tea jug, he went on rants about something in their House…wait, what was it?

Oh, whatever. Pendleton’s attention had started to drift at that point and he couldn’t care the slightest about whichever Housemate his friend had been complaining about last time. It was a pain and he wanted to work with someone else…

…he spied Melchior rolling up his scrolls from one of the tables in the corner. Ah, there was that
noticeable muggleborn he’d been studying with.

Melchior wasn’t half bad at Potions. Not as good as Ves, but he didn’t care and didn’t need him to be. It’s kinda unfortunate that he’s been partnered up with Riddle for a while…

Hmm. He could do something about this.

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“Improve my knowledge of Potions?” Riddle asked back. He might seem calm, but his sceptical gaze came across alright.

“Ves has the highest Potions score last year.” Pendleton said.

“Wasn’t that Abraxas?”

“Well, the term before that, then. It’s usually one of them.” he said easily. It’s not like he kept track of them that much, he doesn’t really care about Potions. “So, what if you partner with him for Potions this time? It would certainly push your grades higher, right?”

He didn’t think his observations were wrong. Riddle was someone who was really determined to be on top of all their classes. Riddle proved that he used his sharp brain outside class too by asking his next question.

“What’s in it for you?”

“I don’t need to deal with Ves anymore. I grow up with him—he just talks on and on and on if you don’t stop him, and sometimes even if you stop him. Just want to have the occasional peace.”

“Fair enough, but you’d be the one telling him.”

“Sure. I’ll do that.”

He’d do that, right after he partnered up with Melchior.

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“You want to pair up with me for Potions?” The Nott heir stared at him askance, probably surprised that Pendleton noticed him, considering that they’d rarely talked.

“Yes.” Pendleton nodded.

“I was planning on working with Tom, you know?” That wasn’t an outright rejection and Pendleton saw that his chance was still open.

“I told him that he can partner up with Starkey, because I’m the one who usually ends up with him. It would’ve been good for studying—Ves is one of the people with the highest Potions score.”

Melchior shrugged at that explanation. He probably didn’t want to be hassled with having to give an explanation to Riddle.

“Well, why not? It’s not my loss.”

With that settled, all Pendleton had to do was tell Ves. He just had to do it somewhere far from Riddle and without an excess of throwable things. He managed that sometime in Care of Magical Creatures, after which he’d easily dodged his friend’s diatribe about the troublesome muggleborn
by striding in the direction of Kettleburn. As Ves was too dense to realise the professor was close, he got an earful of lecture in return for judging your Housemates based on their background.

(Not that that was what Ves was complaining about, but the longer Ves argued back, the easier it was for him to slip away).

It was only when they were in Potions class the next time that Melchior actually realised the deal he was offering.

“Wait, you said you suggested to Tom to pair up with Starkey.”

“I did.”

“Starkey. Starkey yelled at him in first year for using muggle pens!”

“Well, I can see that Riddle’s not using muggle pens anymore,” Pendleton replied casually.

“That’s not what I---dammit.” Melchior was rubbing his eyes at this point and exhaling so hard his cheeks were round with air at times. “He’s going to notice on of Riddle’s notebooks and blow his top, isn’t he?”

Pendleton made sure that he didn’t glance anywhere in the direction of where Riddle was sitting at, though he’d seen the other boy’s notebooks. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“…fine. Fine. This doesn’t have to have anything to do with us. We’re just going to work on our Potions.”

“That’s the spirit Melchior.”

He ignored the Nott heir’s glare with ease, checking up the list of ingredients that they’d have to pick up for their current potion.

Melchior’s fears were pretty accurate. Ves and Riddle did seem to be running an argument, even if it was mostly hissed and under their breath, while they were working on their potions well enough to stay underneath the surface of Slughorn’s awareness. If Riddle had stomach pains two days after the Potions class, so much that he couldn’t go to class at all, well, that was surely coincidence, right? And definitely none of his business either.

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Chapter End Notes

A beach episode pops up out of nowhere! Oh well, at least this was more fun to write, even if my perfectionist side is still unsatisfied with the execution of the idea. It feels like I can make this much better, but let’s ignore that for now in favour of just kicking the story forward.

The flowers that Tom found on the beach in the frangipani. Considering that Hermione doesn’t remember the name even if she remembers the flowers and Tom had certainly never seen them before, it remains unnamed in the chapter.

As for Tom’s recollections…well, that’s Slytherin House friendship for you,
especially if you’re a muggleborn who not only stands out, but could be pretty stubborn about adapting…

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